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*Research Paper*

# A place called home: Understanding Toponyms

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## Abstract

This paper is grounded in the concept of liveability, with the foundation that liveability considers the conditions of a decent life, including city inhabitants' physical and mental well-being. We argue that understanding and connecting with the meaning of city place names and finding representation in them instils a sense of place and identity among urbanites, thus contributing to urban liveability. Socio-nomastic concepts are used in this paper to reflect the power of names and how this feeds into people's perceptions of spaces. Colonial settlers named every place they landed in their language, according to their heritage, as memorabilia of their origins while simultaneously stripping African cities of their nature. South African cities are left disjointed as they are no longer purely African because of the colonial planning principles and names; on the other hand, they are not western because of the African social fabric, which is illustrated spatially. This paper considers the effect of the remnants of colonial names on post-colonial city dwellers' sense of place and liveability.

The exclusionary power of toponyms is not limited to existing colonial areas, as it continues to morph in a socio-economic form. Wealthy suburbs and luxury estates are predominantly named according to western languages. Conversely, townships and informal settlements have vernacular names, which further alludes to a socio-economic dimension to these toponyms. This paper thus analyses the link between toponyms and segregation, inferring that toponyms are symbols of power, which make the city feel like home only for the elect. By reviewing literature and contextual examples, this paper takes the reader on a journey considering if toponyms can aid in developing liveable cities that are cognisant of community well-being.

## Keywords

Toponymy, sense of place, belongingness, identity, environmental psychology, liveability

## 1. Introducing toponyms

Toponyms are place names; Ong and Perono Cacciafoco (2022) provide a beautifully poetic connection that equates toponyms to 'linguistic fossils' found throughout urban spaces. In this paper, we analyse these 'fossils', considering them in line with various planning concepts to ponder their influence in fostering cities with healthy people and increased urban liveability. We maintain that toponyms can be used to build local and national identity (Bucher et al. 2013), but where does that begin? Who needs to take the first step, and which direction should they take?

Every word has a meaning, and people have a unique way of connecting words with feelings and how they experience the world (Tausczik and Pennebaker 2010). While "*Alone*" may mean loneliness to some, it evokes feelings of serenity and bliss for others. Some words have global negative connotations, while others will only incite negative emotions for a select group. Place names thus play a critical role in how people experience the environment in which they live. Comfort comes with knowing the meaning behind



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the name of your street, suburb or town. The complex relationship between people, the places they live/interact with, and their subjective well-being is undeniable (McElroy et al. 2021). Establishing positive connections with the environment one lives in is critical for developing healthy people and maintaining liveable cities.

Toponymic inquiry in South Africa is well explored concerning the renaming and political context aligned to the significance of names. Conversations of race and ethnicity are at the forefront of South African toponymy. An eternal battle persists between colonial and apartheid names and the need for toponyms representing our 'rainbow nation' status. The same trend is found in other African countries. In Zimbabwe, where Mamvura (2021) argues that the political elites of each period have the power to direct national identity through the national heroes they chose to accentuate. This links with the question of representation in the ever-changing landscape of South African spaces. Place name changes hang on the boundary between spatial strategy and community representation (Guyot and Seethal 2007).

South African cities are decorated with names and symbols that a large proportion of the population cannot relate to or pronounce. This is affirmed by the many South African cities and towns with western names with a vernacular endonym ascribed by locals. The continuous phenomenon arising from the unformalised nature of these endonyms is that a place may have numerous nicknames prescribed by each tribe (Choi and Wong 2018). Louis Trichardt in Limpopo province, South Africa, is an excellent example of the tensions that arise from these varying endonyms, revealing the deep-rooted connection people have with the name of their homes.

The town was named commemorating Louis Tregardt, an early Voortrekker leader. In 2003, the town was renamed in honour of Makhado, the Venda king, known as the '*Lion of the North*' because he assertively resisted the trekkers (Thotse, 2010). Other groups objected that the new name was tribalistic and reflected on the prevalent ethnic supremacy of the town, as it is located in an area known as Vendlan because the Venda tribe is the most prevalent there. The name was subsequently revised as the name was already allocated to another town in the area. Numerous discussions and negotiations followed, considering renaming the existing Makhado town so that the title would be available; in the end however, the name Louis Trichardt was reinstated.

The ethnic and tribalistic contestations around the case of Louis Trichardt further revealed the power dynamic linked to toponymy (Mugovhani 2021). This dynamic incites the question; can toponymy be considered a passive-aggressive statement or memory of power? If toponyms instil identity in those who relate with them, do they isolate those who don't?

The most fundamental function of this paper is to incite a discussion on the identity and power dynamics at play in toponyms and to find ways to use toponymy as a tool for encouraging healthy people through cultivating place identity. The paper further explores the extent to which toponyms frame identity and how this phenomenon continues the segregated inheritance of urban South Africa. Inquiring about the colonial roots and abstruse future of toponymy, particularly in an African context, to commence discussion on the relevance of toponyms in igniting unity amongst urban dwellers.

## 2. Toponymy in South Africa

Throughout the history of the world, renaming has been proven as an activity primarily driven by political transition marked by a change of political power in a nation (Guyot and Seethal 2007). This phenomenon has also proven to be prevalent in the South African context. When the colonial settlers docked South



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African shores, they named all the cities, towns, mountains, rivers etc.; they came across. The apartheid government also embarked on a journey of renaming significant monuments and place names in their reign. The National Place Names Committee (NPNC) was established in 1987 to deal with place names and naming. It seemed, however, that the committee was an extension of the Apartheid government rule, as it was made up of white delegates responsible for all the languages used in South African place names, including native languages (Jenkins 2007). Since the dawn of the new democracy, multiple places have been renamed in South Africa. The phenomenon has since caught the attention of many South Africans, including scholars, media analysts, politicians and businesspeople.

While the discussion around place names in South Africa is often steered towards renaming, there is also scholarly interest in understanding the meanings and origins of existing toponyms. Neethling (2014) explores the relationship between toponyms and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within the Xhosa community. While the connections made are not definite, the enquiry does prove that the names we give to the places we live have a meaning beyond the word itself. Giraut, Guyot and Houssay-Holzschuch (2008) further note the influence of language on the toponymic tapestry of South Africa, proposing that the multilingual nature of the country has a significant role in the contestation of place names. Perceived superiority and hegemony are critical drivers in perceptions of place names in South Africa, as each ethnicity longs for language and cultural representation in the toponyms they see daily.

### 3. Place Naming

Cosgrove (1989) gave a poetic meaning to what place is "a physical location imbued with meaning" (Alasli 2019). *Place* in itself carries meaning connected to emotion and cognition. The study of Socio-onomastics proves that place names hint at significant historical, cultural, locational and societal occurrences in a specific location. Jenkins (2018) considers the typology of South African toponyms, providing a detailed list of categories and examples. His work exemplifies that the south African toponymic landscape is diverse, and indigenous names are knit together with this typology, unlike in other regions where indigenous terms are considered a separate typology. This is a critical perspective for this paper, that local endonyms, formalised or not, are a touchpoint of connectivity. Consider the table below with a list of some categories and examples of South African toponyms.

Typology	Names	Meaning
Descriptive	Tshikudini	Place not easily seen from afar
Associative	Dipompong	By the water taps
Occurrent	Clearance	The name of an informal settlement built after a forced removal
Subjective <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emotive</li> <li>Condemnatory</li> <li>Pride</li> </ul>	Sizamile Godverlaat Reagile	We have done our best Godforsaken We have built
Eponymous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Person(s)</li> <li>Vessel</li> </ul>	Harrismith Soetendalsvlei	Named after Sir Harry Smith The Zoetendal was wrecked nearby in 1673
Linguistic innovation	Soweto	From South-Western Townships

Table 1 South African Toponym Topologies

(Adapted from Jenkins 2018)

There is a reason behind the choice of toponyms in every location. The meanings connected to the words in Table 1 prove that place naming is not a disconnected haphazard activity. Humans care about names, personal names or placenames, so a sense of pride is connected to the naming process (Radding and Western 2010). Choosing the name that will represent a set location, monument or geographic feature is preceded by engagement with numerous spheres of human life, with the aim of leaving a reminder for generations to come.

#### 4. Toponyms as a mark of colonisation

Place names have been used throughout history as reminders of the racial, ethnic, economic or cultural divide. Mugovhani (2021) considers the 'divide-and-rule' tactics in the subcontinent of India, marked by the establishment of the two separate names of Pakistan and India, as an eternal reminder of their division. During colonisation, "newly discovered" places were allocated names with a complete disregard for the existing toponyms and the connections native communities had made with these names. Some of the areas were granted names which were derived from locals. Still, many of those were written in alignment with the English dialect, which meant they were misspelt and distorted the meaning associated with the original words (Muhammad, Isah, Banki and Ahmed 2020). Though the difference may seem small and insignificant, one letter changes the meaning of a word in many native South African languages. Considering that people attach community identity to toponyms, this mistake can be monumental. Consider a settlement on a mountaintop with a breathtaking view; the people name it Bheka (Look) as an optimistic sign to look ahead or focus on and observe the beauty. Without the "h", the settlement is referred to as Beka (Put down, set aside), which can raise a dejected community. It is most feasible that the people of Bheka and Beka will not carry the same sense of pride in their location or have equal place attachment. Below are other examples of misspelt words; some change meaning, some lose meaning, and some simply do not make grammatical sense.

<b>Misspelt</b>	<b>Corrected</b>
<i>Kwenele</i>	Kwenele
<i>Kwalubisi</i>	KwaLubisi
<i>Bisho</i>	Bhisho
<i>Dhlamini</i>	Dlamini
<i>Emkatini</i>	eMkhathini
<i>Isiphethweni</i>	Esiphethweni
<i>Khatamping</i>	Kgatlamping
<i>Sidakeni</i>	eSidakeni
<i>Bolotwa</i>	Bholothwa
<i>Messina</i>	Musina
<i>Allendal</i>	Landela

Table 2 Misspelt South African Toponyms

(Author 2022)

Place names play a critical role in preserving the cultural heritage of a nation, and they are crucial clues in understanding that nation's history (Raper, Moller and du Plessis 2014). Considering this, is it wise to wipe away all the negative reminders of injustice and oppression? Is it sufficient to change the toponyms without

adequately addressing the hurt that the names reflect? What role does reconciliation play in removing the traces of Afrikaans apartheid heads of state when Afrikaans people are a part of the rainbow nation?

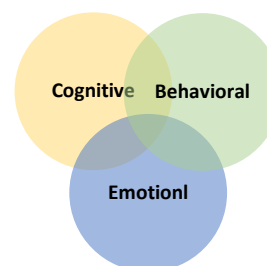
Colonial names preserve the legacy of the apartheid city, continuing the drive of segregation, not through physical exclusion but displacement and socio-cultural expulsion. Monuments, statues and placenames further reify the sense of placelessness for previously disadvantaged South Africans. These toponyms act as access control, a constant reminder of whose home it is and who is welcome only for a short stay, with the unspoken obligation to return to their own homes. Meiring (2012) proposes that place names reflect the heart and intent of those who named them. Considering that colonial settlers and apartheid leaders only had the goodwill of a select few in mind, should we still make room for these names in our new democratic South Africa? What can be said about protecting the heritage of those who aimed to segregate, alienate and oppress us as a nation?

## 5. Liveability and Sense of Place

People like to know their roots; that is why many apps today can show you the exact percentile of different ethnicities you are. Similarly, people whose families have moved around a lot like to track their heritage to a specific town or state. Human nature requires socio-physical attachment; we need to feel connected with the people we live around and the spaces we live in (Scannell and Gifford 2014). If we are to plan for liveable cities, the health and well-being of the people living in these cities cannot be ignored. As early as 1978, people were interested in understanding the relationship between physical space and well-being in psychology (see: Sadalla and Stea 1978). Planning is a multidisciplinary field that goes beyond physical space; as such, people's needs, perspectives and preferences should not be separated from urban planning (Churchman 2002)

Toponyms are a physical representation of non-planning, as the influence of place names touches on environmental psychology and place identifiers. Place names hold an immeasurable cultural value which builds belongingness and a sense of place. It is not surprising then that people hold names dear, whether it is their family name, favourite team name, school name or town name (Helleland 2012).

Place attachment is a crucial driver in establishing a sense of place. People interact and connect with space on three notable dimensions, as depicted in Figure 1. Cognitively humans relate to their environment through perceptions and effectively understanding it (Churchman 2002). When people perceive their homes as important, they have increased care for them, and the longer they stay in the community, the more valuable their surroundings become to them (Rowles 2005). The emotional connection is directly related to place attachment and satisfaction. Toponyms affect what Scannell and Gifford (2014) refer to as the cognitive and emotional connections we make with the world around us, whether building place attachment or detachment. Behavioural interactions include activities and relationships built interpersonally and with the environment (Hashemnezhad, Heidari and Mohammad Hoseini 2013). At the heart of these three dimensions is the opportunity to build place attachment that goes beyond the physical planned space. Toponyms have the potential to positively influence cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses when people find representation and community identity in the names they see throughout their neighbourhoods.



**Figure 1 Process of Human interactions with place**  
(Adapted from Hashemnezhad et al. 2013)

While place attachment is often perceived as directly related to time, i.e., the longer you live in an area, the more you become attached to it. Scannell and Gifford (2014) consider the influence of congruence

(compatibility/concord) in rapidly establishing a sense of place. People can feel an instant connection to the urban form, skyline, nature or toponyms of an area, making them feel at home on their first interaction with the space. There is a perfect space for toponymic intervention in this dimension; however, Figure 2 below reveals many components to place attachment, thus numerous opportunities to consider the intentional incorporation of place names in sense of place.

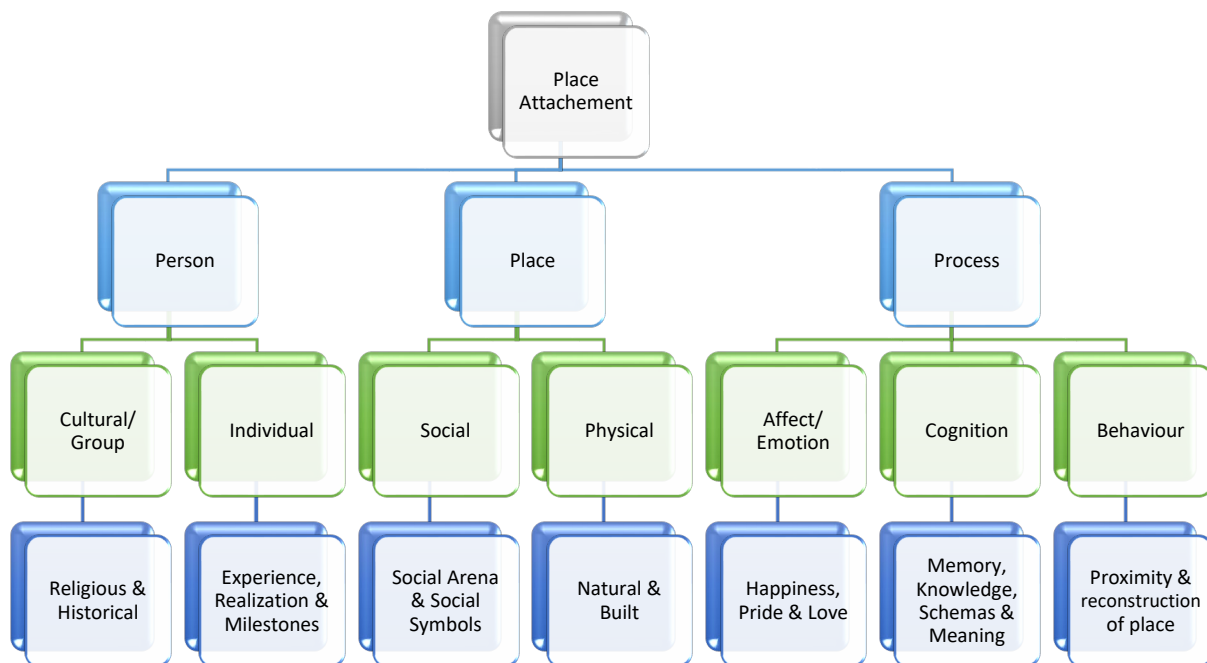


Figure 2 Mapping Place Attachment

(Adapted from Scannell and Gifford 2010)

Toponyms are part of people's first interactions with unfamiliar urban centres; the town name, welcome sign, monuments and street names are all toponyms people encounter upon entry (Adamus-Matuszyńska and Dzik 2019). What if the best way to increase liveability through toponymy is to remove contested historical, political or religious connotations from place names? What impact would this have on the residents whose community identity is directly attached to these names? Would this sufficiently level the playing fields for minorities to find identity and build place attachment?

### 6. Toponyms and socio-economic exclusion

Names are a proactive or reactive reflection of the community of locations; there is a clear link between the place names and the profile of the people who form part of a community (Ndletyana 2012). As depicted in Table 3, placenames in Bloemfontein are aligned with the language spoken within the sub-place. A predominantly Sotho township will be named in SeSotho (e.g. Phahameng) or aligned with South African struggle terminologies such as Freedom square or struggle heroes such as Chris Hani. Table 3 below presents Afrikaans and Sesotho place names in Bloemfontein and the predominant languages spoken. The dataset was trimmed to 10 suburbs, with the highest numbers ranging from 2000- 10 000, so the heat table would be optimal (with fewer outliers).



Place name	Afrikaans	English	IsiXhosa	IsiZulu	SeSotho	Setswana
Langenhoven Park	9018	1363	120	60	420	141
Wilgehof	3199	218	53	3	141	44
Hospitaalpark	2421	243	30	18	104	32
Generaal De Wet	2015	230	73	31	173	33
Fichardt Park	6788	667	84	29	411	124
Batho	774	678	1991	300	10232	6680
Bochabela	362	401	1375	187	5022	3211
Phahameng	291	417	3375	227	5470	2612
Kopanong	549	404	2795	139	9675	2108
Chris Hani	289	55	1135	35	4949	637

Table 3 Languages per suburb

(STATSSA 2011)

The shift of red to blue and Afrikaans to Sesotho language predominance in Table 1 is undeniable. It is clear that the link is there, but the source of the connection remains undefined. Are vernacular names allocated to places predominately occupied by native people? If this reflects the apartheid city, why has the demographic profile not changed? Would changing the toponyms in predominantly white suburbs change the power dynamic in these areas? What is the level of sense of place for minorities on either side of the language scale depicted in Table 3?

Viewing the toponymic landscape of Sandton City, Johannesburg, another consideration arises. What if toponyms are not a reflection of the people who occupy the place but who is most important in the space? Affluent suburbs are given English names which are internationally recognisable. Their toponyms and physical planning are geared toward accessibility, particularly for those who can afford that access. Urban areas for the poor (which also have a racial connotation) are named according to local languages or with toponyms reflective of the South African freedom fight. The toponyms reiterate that townships and outskirt areas are for those who 'fought the fight' and their heroes. Unlike the affluent suburbs, these areas are not meant for the international audience, and their residents continue to be contained there.

## 7. Conclusion

People's perceptions and interactions with their environment shape their attitudes towards it and the behaviours they exhibit within it (Lew 2006). Conversely, human behaviours affect the physical environment and shape the remnant for future generations as a symbol of the society before them. The age-old process of cause and effect is at play in the relationship between urban planning and well-being, and if we focus too long on the reason, we miss the opportunity to cause the change. Toponyms carry the power to shift identities and unite communities. Although this has more often been proved through activism against name changes and the decolonisation of urban toponyms, it remains. Collaborative enquiry through urban planning, environmental psychology and socio-onomastics is a crucial direction toward urban well-being and healthy people. The question is, what now? What do we do to make it better? How do we reach the goals of well-being? What changes and adjustments would make a significant change? Is renaming really the most feasible solution to such a complex phenomenon?

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