

WHAT IS IN A NAME: DESCRIPTIVE PLACE NAMES IN GOJJAM

Waleign Melak (with Desalegn Hagos & Mulugeta Tarekegn)

Abstract

This paper explores the naming practices, meanings, and grammatical structures of descriptive settlement place names, in Gojjam. It examines how natural and socio-cultural factors influence the naming of places. Natural factors include elements like the presence of spring water, proximity to the seashore, the function of rivers, and the local flora, fauna, soil color, land use patterns, and climate conditions. Socio-Cultural Causes involve aspects like speech patterns of residents, frequent activities held in the area, and the historical presence of settlements. The meanings of these names can be both literal (referential) and suggestive (connotative).

The grammar of place names exhibits internally a range of grammatical features. Their form may indicate grammatical functions like diminutive, accusative, purposive, possessive), locative), and conditional. Their internal structure may have inflectional morphemes, and they can be compounds, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and postpositional phrases.

KEY WORDS: Descriptive names; meanings; names systems; structure of names

1. Introduction

The study examines place names in Gojjam, Ethiopia. Gojjam has four administrative Zones (East and West Gojjam Zone, Bahir Dar special Zone and Agew Awi Zone). According to the National Population and Housing Census (2007:62-64), the population of Gojjam were 5,461,320. Less than five percent of the population are followers of Islam and protestant religions while the big majority are Orthodox Christians (ibid.).

The majority of the Gojjam people are native speakers of Amharic and Awiing. The latter is mainly spoken by the Awi people of the Agew family. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people. Cereals, pulses, oil crops, spices, and vegetables are cultivated. According to Amhara region Agriculture Bureau (1999), teff is predominantly cultivated staple crop, and it covers 32% of cultivated cereals. Animal husbandry and trading is the other socio-economic source of the people.

In Ethiopia, there is no concept of a family name. People go by their first names. The second name used in IDs and other official documentation is typically their father's name. Some official documents may also include the grandfather's name. Ethiopians may trace their lineage by including names of even more ancestors, up to seven generations, or as far back as they can trace their lineage.

The Gojjam region has a unique proper noun naming system, where the first and second names can sometimes be creatively combined to resemble sentences. This paper explores the naming practices of place names in the Gojjam region, where people place significant emphasis on personal names. It investigates whether the creative approach to personal name construction in Gojjam also applies to place naming in the region.

There is not much work on Gojjam place names. Solomon & Liuzzo (2018) attempted to produce the historical annotation of a few place names. Their study is limited to popular ancient place names that are speculated to be abundant in political or religious histories at a certain time in Ethiopia. Little (1978) examined the internal grammar of water, river, lake, religion and mountain place names that have two-word constituents. Rural place names and place names made from less or more than two constituent words were not examined in Little. The present study differs from Little and Solomon & Liuzzo in its scope addressing both rural and urban descriptive settlement place names.

2. Research Methodology

The study used qualitative-descriptive method as it enables researchers to study the "social and cultural phenomena" (Marshall and Rossman, 2006:2). The researcher used purposive sampling technique to select informants and research locations.¹ Accordingly, Culture and Tourism

1 Ritchie, Lewis and Elam (2003:78) state that sample size in qualitative study does not consider "statistical representation of the total population."

office experts, senior citizens and clergy men were selected through purposive criterion sampling as informants to fulfill some specific predetermined significant information. Culture and Tourism Office experts were anticipated as data center of the sociolinguistic history in their geographical places in wereda level. On the other side, clergy men were purposively selected to obtain ample data from Ge'ez or Amharic-Ge'ez code-mixing place names. Senior Citizens who reside in the research location were also selected to obtain available data from their life experience of the past era. Regarding the location of the study, East and west Gojjam as well as Bahir Dar Special Zone were taken purposively due to similar sociolinguistic features. In such conditions, most rural or urban raw data of descriptive based place names were taken from Agriculture Office. However, very remote areas of descriptive place names were ignored due to lack of transportation and the on-going armed struggle.

The study employed in-depth interview and consultation of documents. In-depth interview was chosen to seek deeper understanding of naming practices in a flexible manner. In-depth interview is “sufficiently flexible” to probe full responses from contextual boundaries of some lived cultural experience of the interviewees (Johnson, 2002:106). Documents were consulted to arrive at the right conclusion either in opposing or supporting the idea of names phenomenology.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study uses Evans (1973) Causal Theory of Names, and Fillmore (1982) Frame Semantics and Prototype Theory as a theoretical framework. It is particularly used to categorize place names systems or practices against the dominant causal source of informants' information in the study area.

The Causal Theory of Names focuses on the analysis of naming by examining the dominant causal chain through which a community associates a name with a particular referent. The theory helps to view place names from its anthropological concept to get the cultural understandings of naming. It is believed that place names concept cannot be understood without the intention of name-givers or the social or cultural institutions and behavior in which the action, state or thing is situated (Croft and Cruse, 2004:11).

In this paper, Fillmore's Frame Semantics Theory (Fillmore, 1982) is also employed to analyze the meaning of place names. This theory helps us understand how place names relate to the real world by considering the mental frameworks (frames) that people use to categorize and interpret information. Frames can connect to each other, forming a network that allows for the generation of rich and multifaceted meanings when encountering place names. By leveraging Frame Semantics, we aim to uncover the meaning of place names by drawing on both linguistic knowledge (words) and extra-linguistic knowledge (experiences).

Additionally, Prototype Theory (Ungerer & Schmid, 2001) is used in this study to categorize the structure of place names. It is particularly used to group structurally similar place names together and analyze their morphological components and grammatical relationships, specifically focusing on descriptive settlement names. This theory posits that categorization is a mental process of grouping things together based on similarities. In the context of cognitive grammar (Barsalou, 1992), categorization applies to all levels of language, including sound (phonology), word structure (morphology), phrases, and clauses. This allows humans to differentiate between various types of place names, such as single words, descriptive phrases, and even clauses.

4. Naming Practices/systems

Naming practices/systems that connect to a set of contexts of naming convention around the world differ in many ways due to natural or social conditions. This study looks at some categories of name systems and practices of descriptive place names on the base of people's dominant causal theory of names in their socio-cultural belief.

4.1. Soil Feature based Place Names

These names are connected to the topography of soil color. The examples in (1a-d) below display the manner of getting their names.

- (1) a. *dima* red 'red'
 b. *borəbor* red 'red'
 c. *nəʃʃ'ʃ' ʔaʃə* white soil 'white soil'
 d. *nəʃʃ'ʃ' ʔj -e* white -POSS 'My white'

/dima/ in (1a) was given in Afan-Oromo to describe the red and fanciful nature of the soil in the past era, but this feature of soil has changed recently. Contrary, Admasu Jembere (1961:4) cited by Sergew Hable Selassie (1989: 5 & 31-32) states that the former name of the place was called */d̥imab/* 'center of head' in Ge'ez by referring a text: */gibrə bimam/* 'service of the suffering' to describe the concentric of the whole local area.

In relation to this, recent local clergy men have believed that the name */dima/* 'red' derives from the reduction of final voiceless glottal sound /h/ of the Ge'ez name */d̥imab/*. However, Desta Tekle-Wold (1972:357) states that *dima* is an Afan Oromo word, and it means 'red.' This is with the assumption that the soil color of the area was red during the 16 century Oromo migration.

The naming of the names in (1b, c and d) was causally connected with the red and white color of soil respectively. In frame semantics, the place name */nəf'ɨ'ije/* further designates that the area would be the proprietorship of somebody whereas other areas are non-proprietorship.

4.2. Physical Feature-based Place Names

The physical features such as attraction can be a base for naming a place. Consider the examples in (2a-c) below:

- (2) a. *səde* look.good 'looks good'
 b. *jə- d̥ʒub -e* POSS- hand -POSS 'beauty of my hand'
 c. *lumame* verdant 'verdant'

The dominant causes for such naming seem the adorable features of topographies. The physical feature of */səde/* in (2a) consists of forest, meadow as well as high and lowland areas. For this reason, the chief of the area (Azañ Marqos) settled at the bivouac of the high land in the reign of Yost'os (1711-1716) and named it */sədi̯ə/* 'look good' in Ge'ez. Nowadays, the name becomes */səde/*.

In (2b), the name */jə- d̥ʒube/*, was derived from its former derogatory name */jə- id̥ʒə wabi/* 'guarantor for hand' since the name was dominantly connected with the involvement of slave trade in the mid 17th century. Later on, princess Wolete Israel was made a bit causal modification (the change of */wabi/* 'guarantor' into */wube/* 'to be */jə-*

idʒdʒ wube/ 'beauty of my hand' in its adorable physical feature. She found the place attractive in the mid of 18th century. The area enables people to produce excessive and a variety of crops are grown. People have also own a variety of domestic animals. Now, the name becomes */jə- dʒube/* through clipping-blending morphological process. There are deletion of /i/ and /w/ in the second and third lexical constituents of the name */jə- idʒdʒ wube/*, and /dʒ/ is degeminated from the middle lexical item. Finally, the remaining sounds of the two lexical items are blended.

Similarly, the name */lumame/* in (2c) is causally connected with physical feature adorability. It is surrounded by Bogena and Yekayt rivers. However, the place was formerly called */lumlame/* to say 'verdant' in Amharic. In time evolution, the second syllable onset consonant sound /l/ of the name */lumlame/* was deleted and it became */lumame/*. Beyond the aforementioned conceptual meaning of these place names, the name */jə- dʒube/* 'beauty of my hand' in (2b) expresses to whom the geographical place belongs to.

4.3. Flora-based Place Names

Other descriptive place names are also assigned by plant names. Some examples are given in (3a-c).

- (3) a. *k'ut'k'wat'* shrubbery 'small sized plants'
 b. *wəjra* Olive 'strong evergreen tree'
 c. *k'il meda* Calabash field 'field of calabash'
 d. *wəjr -am -it* olive -QUANT -DIM 'a small place where olive growth excessively'

The above place names are causally connected with local plants which were growing profusely in the geographical place. In the present time, the various plants (shrub, olive and calabash field) in each surrounding are destroyed for farming. In frame semantics, all names have referential meaning to refer to plants. Particularly, the name */wəjr -am -it/* in (3d) above has connotative meaning to express the 'strengthen' of the community in comparable to the strength of olive trees. Beyond displaying strengthen; the name also expresses the smallness of geographical places with too much olives.

4.4. Zoonym based Place Names

Place names in the study area are also manifested with proper names of animals (Zoonyms). Observe the examples in (4a-d) below:

- (4) a. *tora med* deer field 'Field of deer'
 b. *ʔamora gədəl* raven gorge 'Gorge of raven'
 c. *jə-təmən* possessive marker python 'Python of'
 d. *ʔanbəs-it* lion -3FSG 'lioness'

The naming practices of the above place names are causally associated with type of animals found in the area. In the previous time, place names in (4a-d) were inhabitable of deer, raven, python and lion in the forest. Gradually, people started to settle in the area. Then, the places retained their names from animals lived their primarily. As a result, names in (4a-d) have referential meaning to refer to wild animals, but the name /*ʔanbəs-it*/ in (4d) connotes the diminution of geographical places in a feminine feature, but not people's courageousness in the frame semantics of human experience.

4.5. Water-based Place Names

Names of natural water bodies were other manifestation of descriptive settlement place names. Consider the examples in (5a-c):

- (5) a. *jə-ʔid wuba*
 PURP –hand water
 'Water for hand'
 b. *babir dar*
 sea shore
 'sea shore'
 c. *Wəjn wuba*
 wine water
 'Wine water'

The water-based place names in (5a-c) were caused by the dominant use of Birr river, settlement of people at the sea shore and expedience of spring water for drinking. However, the emanation of the name /*jə-ʔid wuba*/ in (5a) has two hypotheses: Some informants state that the name was formerly called /*jə-duʔa*/ 'place of invocation' by Muslim

fathers when they first came to the area. Then, the name changes to */jə-ʔidwuba/*. Few informants told the re-researcher that Abune Selama, the first Ethiopian Orthodox Church bishop, called the area */jə-ʔidwuba/* (Geez-Amharic codes) to mean 'water for hand.' Whatever it is, in the narrative of informants both Muslims and Abune Selama were motivated to name the place due to the purpose of pour cold water that the communities called Birr river today.

In document consultation, Taddesse (1972:54) demonstrates that Gojjam was neither Muslim nor Christian people in the early 14th century. On the other hand, Trimmingham (1952:64) states that in the reign of Amde Tsion (1314-1344), Gojjam was transformed into Christian Province. In this historical event of Gojjam people, the name */jə-ʔidwuba/* might not be given in the reign of Abune Selama who existed in the 4th century. It may be afforded in the early medieval period of Solomon Dynasty since the place became part of Christian Kingdom. Contrary, the name, */jə-duʔa/* 'place of invocation' can be an exonym, a name given to a place by secondary persons other than the people it refers to. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, there were self conflict between Christian Kingdom and Muslim Sultanate led by Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. This conflict resulted in the interaction and mingling of Muslim society with Gojjam. Within this historical context, the name */jə-duʔa/* might have been adopted as a secondary name for Gojjam by Muslim migrants, particularly referring to */jə-ʔidwuba/* in the sixteenth century. However, the dominant theory for the origin of the name */jə-ʔidwuba/* is likely connected to the Birr River in the area. This is based on information gathered from informants and the historical evidence discussed above.

The name */babir dar/* 'sea shore' in (5b) is connected to the establishment of church and village at the south direction of lake Tana. The reason to make their village in the south direction of lake Tana was facilitated with the establishment of */kidanə miḥirət/* 'graced promised' church at the current place of Saint George at the edge of Lake Tana. Yaregal (2016:6) stated that the name */babir dar/* was bestowed in the reign of Amade Tsion when people were started to settle around */kidanə miḥarət/* church that the present Saint George church exists. The nomenclature of */babir dar/* is, therefore, associated with settlement of people at the sea shore to refer to the proximity of people and Lake Tana.

The dominant socio-cultural cause to name the place /wəjn wuba/ in (5c) is connected with the expedient nature of spring water found between Mamat and Ginbara rivers in the east and west directions of the district respectively. In the frame of semantics, the name /wəjn wuba/ has connotative meaning to express the expedient nature of the spring water whereas /jə- ʔid wuba/ and /babir dar/ have referential meanings to refer to the service of Birr river and people's settlement at the edge of the sea shore.

4.6. Climate-based Place Names

Climate basically refers to the weather condition of a place or geographical space. It can also a base for place names. consider the examples in (6a- b) below:

(6) a. *dəga səjɲi -n*

Highland Monday -ACC

'Highland Monday that market takes place'

b. *Wa birr*

INTER. birr

'wa birr'

The place name, /dəga səjɲin/ in (6a) was nomenclature by *Dejjazimach* (commander or general of the gate) Wole who was the chief of the area in the reign of Adiam Seged around (1682-1706). During the time, Wole observed that the local people were fussed for getting place of transaction. People moved a long journey across a river for marketing. Because of this condition, some people lost their life when they cross Kemed River. Dejjazimach Wole established market center before Kemed river called /dəga səjɲin/ to refer to the highland climate and marketing process held on Monday. The name *dəga səjɲin* was dominantly connected with the existing of highland climate condition and the time that transaction is taking place on Monday.

The name place called /wa birr/ in (6b) was formerly known with the name Dore market as it was used as market center of buckthorn. On the basis of informants' narration, the environment was so cold and rainy most of the time. Thus, a person who came for shopping knocked with heavy rain. Where upon, Haile Selase's legal tender dropped from shopper's hand and could not pick it up due to the effect of chill. Because of this, the shopper said /wa birr/. Then, the speech of the

shopper, /*wa b̥irr*/, is the main or dominant source of naming to reflect the degree of coldness that prohibits him to bring up the legal tender. As a result, the place name /*wa b̥irr*/ brings affective meaning to express shopper's remorse speech, but the names in /*dəga s̥əj̥ni*/ have conceptual meaning in terms of the frame semantic knowledge stored in the mind of individuals.

5. Structures Associated with Descriptive place Names

In this session, morphological and phrasal descriptive settlement place names are categorized in the theory of categorization or prototype theory as simple nominal, inflectional, compounding, noun phrases, postpositional and prepositional phrases.

5.1. Simple Nominal Descriptive Place Names

There are descriptive place names derived from nouns which do not show any type of inflectional or derivational morphological process. Among the examples discussed above, consider /*m̥əsi*/ 'land of irrigation', /*dima*/ 'red', and /*borəbor*/ 'red.'

5.2. Inflectional Descriptive Place Names

On the other hand, descriptive place names are derived through inflectional morphological process. consider the examples in (8a-c) below:

- (8) a. *godg^wad-it*
 dimple -DIM
 'A small dimple place'
- b. *gundif-it*
 stumpy -DIM
 'A small stumpy place'
- c. *f^om-it*
 meaty -DIM
 'A small place that animals grow there are meaty'

The above descriptive place names in (8a-c) are complex words. They consist of the free morpheme (/*godg^wada*/, /*gundif*/, /*f^oma*/) and the bound morpheme /-it/. /-it/ is a common feminine marker that appends with nouns and adjectives. In frame semantics, the names

denote that the places are small in size since the gender marker suffix /-it/ functions as a diminutive marker as well.

5.3. Noun-Noun Nominal Compound Descriptive Place Names

Nominal compounds have nominal heads which represent the core meaning of the compound (Matthews, 1974:72). There are place names derived from compounding. Consider the examples in (9a-c) below:

- (9) a. *wəjn wuba*
 wine water
 ‘Water of wine’ (tasty water)
- b. *gədəl wuba*
 gorge water
 ‘A place where water stems from the gorge’
- c. *gīnd-ə wəjn*
 Stem -COND wine
 ‘Stem of wine’

The nominal compound names in (9a-c) are all constituted from simple nouns in the categorization (prototype) theory of lexical items. The first constituents of names in (9a and b) are modifiers while the second constituents are heads of the modifiers. /*wəjn*/ and /*gədəl*/ modifies the taste of water and the location of spring that it gets in the area. Contrary, the name in (9c) is given in Ge’ez. The first constituent /*gīnd*/ is a noun modified by the second constituent noun /*wəjn*/. The middle suffix morpheme /-ə/ is the linker of the two constituents. In frame semantics theory of relationships between the parts, the names /*gīndə wəjn*/ and /*gədəl wuba*/ are endocentric compounds since the meaning of names can share the meaning of individual lexemes. /*wəjn wuba*/ in the other context is exocentric compound. The meaning of the name differs from the meanings of the individual words since the name ties to the taste or expedience nature of spring water for drinking. It has connotative meaning to say tasty water.

5.4. Noun Phrase Place Names

5.4.1. /jə-/ Plus Simple Nouns

Most place names in the study area are made from /*jə*-/ plus simple nouns. The examples in (10a-c) manifest the situation below:

- (10) a. *jə- məxəl*
 COND- center
 'Of center'
- b. *jə- t' idʒɔʒa -n*
 POSS- t'eje -ACC
 'Of T'eje'
- c. *jə- ʔid nuha*
 PURP- hand water
 'Water for hand'

Prototypically, these names are noun phrases. Peculiarly, the name in (10c) is given in Amharic-Ge'ez code mixing, but others are given in Amharic only. Names in (10a and b) are constituted from bound morpheme /*jə-*/ and the head nouns /*məxəl*/ and /*t' idʒɔʒan*/ that derives from personal name Teje whereas the names in (10c) is made from the noun phrase /*jə-ʔid*/ 'for hand' as modifier and the head word /*nuha*/ 'water'. In general, /*jə-*/ has the function to describe state of condition, genitive of source, possession, temporal, purpose and locative in Amharic. But, in these descriptive names, /*jə-*/ has the grammatical role to denote condition, possessive and purpose respectively in a frame semantics.

5.4.2. NP Plus Nominal head

In order to locate geographical places, names can be derived from NP and nominal heads of the larger unit NP. Observe the examples in (11a and b) below:

- (11) a. *laj bɪrr fələk'k'o*
 upper bɪrr valley
 'Upper bɪrr valley'
- b. *təf bɪrr fələk'k'o*
 lower bɪrr valley
 'Lower bɪrr valley'

In the prototype (categorization) theory, /*fələk'k'o*/ is the head noun of both noun phrases in the examples. The remaining noun phrase constituents such as /*laj bɪrr*/ and /*təf bɪrr*/ are modifiers of the head word /*fələk'k'o*/. A modifier in noun phrase structure may

serve to modify state, time, quality and quantity of something. In frame semantics, these names have referential meanings to denote the highland and lowland part of areas by using Birr Adama River gorge as land demarcation in communities' language use.

5.4.3. Adjective plus Noun

Descriptive place names are further driven from noun phrases constituted from adjective and simple nominals. Consider the examples in (12a and b):

- (12) a. *ʔaroge ʔamba*
 old village
 'old villag'
 b. *ʔaddis ʔamba*
 new village
 'New village'

In the above place names, the first constituent are adjectives that modify the head word /*ʔamba*/ in terms of the oldness and newness of settlement villages established in different eras. In the frame semantics, both names have referential meanings since place names linguistic expressions indicate the actual old and new villages of the community.

5.5. Postpositional and prepositional Phrase Descriptive Place Names

Based on the disposition of geographical places, descriptive place names are bestowed in both postpositional and prepositional phrase forms. Consider the examples in (13a and b) below:

- (13) a. *bərr laj*
 gate upper
 'Upper gate'
 b. *ʔamba laj*
 flat-topped land upper
 'Upper flat-topped land'

The above names are prototypically postpositional phrases. They are constituted from simple nouns and a preposition. The simple nouns /*bərr*/ and /*ʔamba*/ are complements while the preposition /*laj*/ is the head word of the postpositional phrase. There are also prepositional descriptive place names connected with the direction of geographical places. Consider the examples in (14a and b) below:

- (14) a. *laj babir*
 upper sea
 'Upper area of the sea'
 b. *təf babir*
 lower sea
 'Lower area of the sea'

In (14) the first constituents are prepositions whereas the second ones are simple nouns as complements of the head word. The prepositional phrase head words appear either before or after their complements.

Semantically, beyond the literary meaning of the name /*bərr laj*/ in (13a), it has connotative meaning 'strategically' in the community's knowledge of experience. Since the name is causally connected to its site to manage the movements of people towards other areas. On the other hand, the names /*ʔamba laj*/ in (13b) and /*laj babir*/ and /*təf babir*/ in (14a and b) have referential meanings to refer to the actual mountainous area and areas crossed by the calm sea.

6. Conclusion

In names, people used descriptive expressions to express natural conditions and socio-cultural circumstances. In a natural condition, people express topographic features such as floras and faunas of the past, weather conditions and soil color of geographical spaces. As socio-cultural circumstances, descriptive place names express the purpose of water bodies, expedience of spring water for drinking, people's settlement toward sea shore, disposition of land and remorse speeches of individuals. On the other hand, descriptive place names are able to address contextual meanings of thought. On top of this, names without context are a mere figment and stands for nothing by itself.

Descriptive place names in Gojjam involve aphaeresis (loss of word-initial sounds), syncope (loss of sounds within words), and degemination of consonants as phonological processes. Morphologically, these names exhibit diminutive, accusative, purposive, possessive, locative, and conditional case markers. While the examples provided here are limited, the noun phrase structure is a widely used feature of descriptive place names. Understanding the structure of these names is essentially like understanding the structure of the language itself.

Abbreviations

ACC- Accusative	PURP-Purpose
DIM-Diminutive	QUANT-Quantity
INTER- interjection	
3FSG-Third Person Feminine Singular	
POSS-Possessive	NP-noun phrase

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*Waleign Melak, Desalegn Hagos, & Mulugeta Tarekegn
Department of Linguistics and Philology,
Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa*