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The Syntactic analysis of *Koyo* compound toponyms



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Abstract: This paper presents a syntactic analysis of Koyo toponyms. It aims to identify the different categories of Koyo toponyms and to determine the syntactic patterns underlying their formation. Data were collected by questionnaire and interviews with native speakers of Koyo, and the analysis follows the Minimalist Program developed by Chomsky (1995 and subsequent work). The results show that Koyo toponyms share the same syntactic properties as other Determiner Phrases in the language in terms of collocation and merger, and that they fall into two basic types: phrasal toponyms and sentential toponyms. At the phrasal level, six patterns are attested: Noun+Noun, Noun+Preposition+Noun, Adjective+Noun, Noun+Number, Noun+Preposition+Adjective, and Quantifier+Noun. At the sentential level, Koyo toponyms take the form of simple sentences (imperative) or compound sentences (coordinate or subordinate clauses). These findings show that Koyo toponyms are not an isolated naming system but a crystallized subset of the ordinary phrase- and clause-structure of the language, in which syntax simultaneously encodes geographical reference and cultural memory.

Keywords: syntactic analysis, Koyo toponym, phrasal toponym, sentential toponym, merger.

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L'analyse syntaxique des toponymes composés du *koyo*



Résumé : Cet article propose une analyse syntaxique des toponymes Koyo. Il vise à identifier les différentes catégories de toponymes Koyo et à déterminer les modèles syntaxiques qui sous-tendent leur formation. Les données ont été recueillies par des questionnaires et par des entretiens avec des locuteurs natifs de la langue Koyo, et l'analyse est menée dans le cadre du Programme Minimaliste développé par Chomsky (1995 et après). Les résultats montrent que les toponymes Koyo partagent les mêmes propriétés syntaxiques que les autres syntagmes déterminants de cette langue en termes de collocation et de fusion, et qu'ils se répartissent en deux grandes catégories : les toponymes phrastiques et les toponymes propositionnels. Au niveau phrastique, six modèles sont attestés : Nom+Nom, Nom+Préposition+Nom, Adjectif+Nom, Nom+Nombre, Nom+Préposition+Adjectif et Quantificateur+Nom. Au niveau propositionnel, les toponymes Koyo prennent la forme de phrases simples (impératives) ou de phrases composées (propositions coordonnées ou subordonnées). Ces résultats montrent que les toponymes Koyo ne constituent pas un système de dénomination isolé, mais un sous-ensemble cristallisé de la syntaxe ordinaire de la langue, où la structure grammaticale codifie à la fois la référence géographique et la mémoire culturelle.

Mots clés: analyse syntactique, toponyme Koyo, toponyme phrastique, toponyme propositionnel, fusion.

Introduction

Koyo language has been subject to a number of studies related to its theoretical description (Ndinga-Oba 2003, Ganzania 1972, Ikemou 2010, Ndongo-Ibara 2018, Ondze 1999) and sociolinguistic study (Elenga 2019, Nguia Oniangue 2020, Idoukou 2000, 2001 et 2007, Lheyet Gaboka 1951, Aïssi et al. 1985). As things stand, there are very few studies on Mbosi onomastics: Obambe Mesmin (2023) deals with toponyms and anthroponyms drawing data from the Oyo district, Okoko (2020) analyses Akwa anthroponyms, Ndinga-Mbo (2004) provides an overview of Mbosi onomastics, and Nguia-Oniangue (2010) approaches Koyo anthroponyms compared with English nouns.

None of these studies, however, addresses the internal syntactic structure of Koyo toponyms as such: existing work is either descriptive-theoretical (phonology, morphology, nominal classes) or oriented toward anthroponyms and general onomastic overviews, leaving the constituent structure of Koyo place names largely undescribed. This gap constitutes the problem addressed in this paper: how is the syntax of Koyo toponyms organized, and to what extent does it draw on, or depart from, the ordinary phrase- and clause-structure of the language? More specifically, this paper asks the following research questions: (1) What are the different categories of Koyo toponyms? (2) What are the different syntactic patterns of Koyo toponyms?



The objective of this paper is twofold: firstly, to identify and categorize the different types of Koyo toponyms; secondly, to determine the syntactic patterns underlying their formation, in order to reveal, through language, the cultural identity of the Koyo people. Toponyms indeed carry cultural and linguistic heritage worthy of attention for safeguarding and promoting cultural values, and this study broadens the scope of onomastic studies conducted within the Mbosi linguistic community.

On the basis of the literature reviewed above and of a preliminary observation of the data, two hypotheses are formulated. Firstly, Koyo toponyms are not built on a distinct “toponymic grammar” but share the same syntactic features as other Determiner Phrases of the language in terms of collocation and merger. Secondly, Koyo toponyms fall into two structural types, phrasal and sentential: at the phrasal level, they are expected to instantiate patterns such as Noun+Noun, Noun+Preposition+Noun, Adjective+Noun, Noun+Number, Noun+Preposition+Adjective, and Quantifier+Noun; at the sentential level, they are expected to instantiate simple sentences (imperative) and compound sentences (coordinate or subordinate clauses).

To test these hypotheses, the analysis of the syntactic properties of Koyo toponyms will be carried out in two sections, focusing on phrasal toponyms and sentential toponyms respectively.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Chomsky’s Minimalist Program (MP) (Chomsky 1995 and subsequent work), a framework that reduces syntactic derivation to the operation Merge, which combines two syntactic objects lexical items or already-Merged constituents into a larger unit while preserving each element’s core properties. Within this framework, Determiner Phrases (DPs), Noun Phrases (NPs), and clauses are built bottom-up through successive applications of Merge, in accordance with the syntactic and selectional properties of their heads. This paper treats Koyo toponyms as regular products of this same combinatorial system: rather than instantiating a special “toponymic syntax,” they are ordinary NPs, QPs, PPs, or clauses of the language, which have undergone a process of nominalization, or crystallization, to become fixed proper names of geographical places.

Because a place name may originate either from a nominal constituent or from a full sentence, the analysis distinguishes two derivational types: phrasal toponyms, built through the Merge of a head noun with one or more modifiers (another noun, a prepositional phrase, an adjective, a numeral, or a quantifier), and sentential toponyms, built through the Merge of a verb with its arguments, forming an imperative, declarative, or coordinate clause subsequently reanalysed as a proper name. In both cases, the resulting expression retains the constituent order predicted by Koyo phrase structure, even though its function has shifted from a compositional description to a rigid designator.

This syntactic framework is complemented by an onomastic perspective, according to which toponyms are not neutral labels, but rather linguistic signs that encode memory, identity, and worldview (Di Méo 2001; Crystal 2010; Kadmon 2000; Tent and Blair 2009; Anderson 2007; Ainiala, Saarelma, and Sjöblom 2012). Combining these two perspectives makes it possible to describe, for each Koyo toponym, both its

syntactic derivation within the Minimalist Program and the cultural or historical motivation underlying its formation. These are the analytical tools used in the following sections to identify the categories and syntactic patterns of Koyo toponyms.

Corpus and Methodology

The analysis is based on a corpus of Koyo toponyms referring to villages, ponds, forests, and other geographical features of the Mbosi-speaking area in the Republic of Congo, as presented in examples (1) to (12). Each toponym in the corpus is accompanied by its literal gloss, its constituent segmentation, and, where available, information on the circumstances or motivations of its attribution.

Data were gathered through two complementary techniques: a questionnaire administered to native speakers of Koyo, designed to collect toponyms together with their meaning, pronunciation, and origin; and interviews conducted with native speakers, which made it possible to clarify the etymology, internal structure, and cultural background of each name, and to verify its acceptability as an attested place name within the community.

Each toponym collected was then segmented into its constituent morphemes and parsed according to the syntactic category of its parts (N, A, P, Num, Q, V). The resulting examples were classified into two broad types, phrasal and sentential toponyms, and further grouped into recurrent syntactic patterns within each type. Each pattern is illustrated with representative examples and analysed by means of tree diagrams, within the Minimalist Program outlined in the Theoretical Framework.

1. Phrasal Toponyms

An NP Toponym is a place name formed as a noun phrase, commonly structured around a head noun, with or without modifiers. Here, I am going to analyze these toponyms based on their syntactic construction types.

1.1. Noun+Noun Toponyms

A “Noun+Noun Toponyms” is a place name composed of two nouns (substantives), often linked by a determinative or descriptive relationship. As illustrated below:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| (1) (a)- Koyo ngandza.
<div style="margin-left: 40px;">N N </div> <div style="margin-left: 40px;">Village ngandza</div> | “The village of Ngandza.” |
| (b)- Ingyè ongalé.
<div style="margin-left: 40px;">N N </div> <div style="margin-left: 40px;">Ingyè town</div> | “The town of Ingyè.” |
| (c)- Onga baro.
<div style="margin-left: 40px;">N N </div> <div style="margin-left: 40px;">Owner people</div> | “The owner of people.” |
| (d)- Mbɔmɔ esélé.
<div style="margin-left: 40px;">N N </div> | “A unfit python.” |

Python unfit

In toponymy, 'Noun+Noun' refers to a type of compound toponyms where two nouns are combined to form a place name. This structure commonly indicates a relationship between the two elements, where one noun often modifies or specifies the other. From the example in (1a), the toponymic expression "Koyo Ngandza" results from the collocation of two proper nouns: "Koyo", likely an anthroponymic name, and "ngandza", also a proper noun referring to a former clan chief. From a syntactic perspective, this construction follows a Noun + Noun order, which is common in Bantu languages, where the first noun (Koyo) functions as a modifier of the second (ngandza), which serves as the semantic nucleus. Thus, the constituent order places the identifying noun (Koyo) in the initial position, followed by the honorific or referential noun (ngandza), suggesting a relationship of belonging, origin, or commemoration.

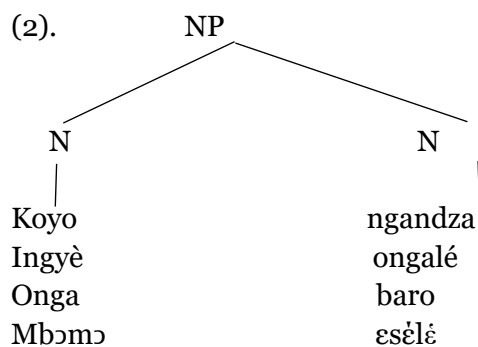
In 1(b), the expression "Ingyè ongalé," derived from the Koyo nominal syntactic structure composed of two constituents namely: the noun "Ingyè," which refers to a wild fruit, followed by the noun "ongalé," meaning "city." The constituent order follows the typical syntactic patterns of Bantu languages, whereby the head noun precedes its modifier in compound nominal groups. Thus, "Ingyè" functions as the nominal nucleus (the main referent), while "ongalé" serves as a contextual specification or appositive, acting as a locative determiner. The whole constitutes an exocentric toponymic construction, where the meaning transcends the mere sum of its parts and instead refers to a specific referential reality: a former village that has become a quarter of Owando. This compound name therefore adheres to a syntactic order of the N1 + N2 type (Noun + Noun Complement or Appositive), which is characteristic of geographical naming practices in this language.

In 1(c), "Onga baro" is drawn from a syntactic order characteristic of possessor–possessed structures. Here, "Onga" (the possessor) precedes "baro" (people), indicating a N1 (possessor) + N2 (possessed) construction. This structure highlights a relationship of possession or authority: "Onga baro" literally means "the owner of people" or "the responsible people." It reflects a constituent order in which the determining noun or the primary referent (the possessor) comes before the determined noun (the possessed), marking both a syntactic and semantic hierarchy. Thus, the name "Onga baro," as applied to the pond of the village Ibonga la Ewoli, implies that this place is associated with a figure of authority or ownership over the surrounding people or community, and exemplifies a [N1 + N2] syntactic pattern centered on a possessive relationship.

In 1(d), the expression "Mbɔ̃ɔ̃ ɛsɛ́lɛ́" is a binary nominal structure composed of two juxtaposed nouns; "Mbɔ̃ɔ̃" (python) and "ɛsɛ́lɛ́" (inept/inapt). Syntactically, it consists of a head noun followed by a modifying noun, where "ɛsɛ́lɛ́" functions as a restrictive apposition or semantic specification of "Mbɔ̃ɔ̃." The noun phrase follows a Noun + Semantic Determiner order, which is common in many Bantu languages, where the second element specifies or qualifies the first without the use of a grammatical particle. Literally translated as "inapt python," the expression suggests a powerful yet incapacitated creature, which justifies its toponymic use: a python that remains passive, confined to a particular pond, hence the attribution of this name. The constituent order reveals a descriptive structure with an identificatory function, marking a characterizing relationship.

To sum up with the example (1), the toponymic constructions Koyo ngandza, Ingyè ongalé, Onga baro, and Mbɔ̃mɔ̃ ɛsɛ́lɛ illustrate fundamental syntactic and semantic patterns characteristic of Bantu languages, notably the Noun + Noun structure. These constructions function as compound toponyms that encode relationships of possession, identity, and commemoration. Such naming practices serve not only geographical designation, but also sociocultural memory and symbolic authority.

As observed by Guy Di Méo (2001:115): “*Place names are much more than just coordinates; they are bearers of memory and identity.*” This insight applies to Koyo ngandza, where the commemorative reference to a former clan chief embeds a collective memory into geographic space. According to David Crystal (2010:275): “*Toponyms often carry a semantic load that reveals historical, cultural, or political influences.*” In fact, Ingyè ongalé exemplifies how lexical meaning extends beyond literal interpretation to symbolize a shift in spatial function, from wild fruit territory to urban settlement. Furthermore, Naftali Kadmon (2000:83) asserts that: “*Toponyms can express ownership or sociopolitical structures when structured around possessive constructions.*” This is clearly reflected in Onga baro, where the syntactic order reveals a possessive hierarchy symbolizing governance or dominion. The following tree illustrate the N+N Koyo toponym at syntactic level.



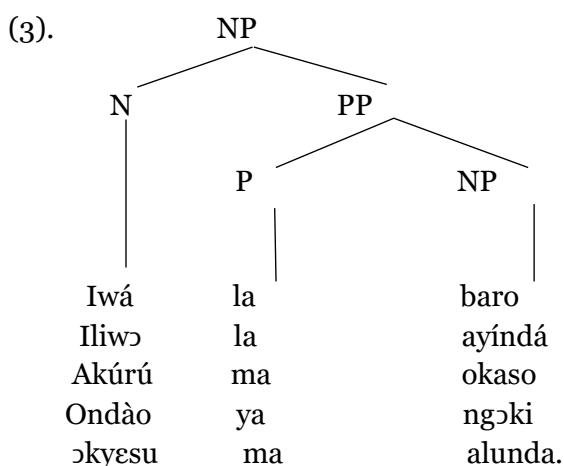
1.2. Noun+Preposition+Noun

The “Noun+Preposition+Noun” structure is a common grammatical construction in embɔ̃si language. It typically consists of two nouns connected by a preposition. To illustrate:

- (2) (a)- Iwá la baro. “The death of people.”
 N | P | N |
 Death of people
 (b)- Iliwɔ̃ la ayíndá. “The holes of misfortunes.”
 N | P | N |
 Holes of misfortunes
 (c)- Akúrí ma okaso. “The pillars of bridge.”
 N | P | N |
 Pillars of bridge
 (d)- Oṇdào ya ngɔ̃ki. “The house of crocodile.”
 | | |
 | | |

N	P	N	
house	of	crocodile	
(e)- ɔkyesu	ma	alunda.	“The stream of alunda herbs.”
N	P	N	
Stream	of	alunda herbs	

This structure is often used to express relationships, actions, or concepts between the two nouns. To conclude the example (2), the Koyo language, like many African languages, exhibits a distinctive syntactic structure regarding its noun phrases, characterized by a **Noun+Preposition+Noun pattern**. This structure is used in various expressions with symbolic and cultural significance, reflecting the deep ties between language and environment. The noun phrase “Iwá la baro” (the death of people) illustrates how place names are often imbued with historical or social contexts. Similarly, “Iliwɔ la ayíndá” (the holes of misfortunes) metaphorically designates a location marked by tragedy, while “Akúrú ma okaso” (the pillars of the bridge) shows a post-nominal genitive construction, denoting a spatial or historical relationship. “Ondào ya ngɔki” (the house of the crocodile) and “ɔkyesu ma alunda” (the stream of alunda leaves) highlight possessive constructions, with the head noun followed by a genitive complement.



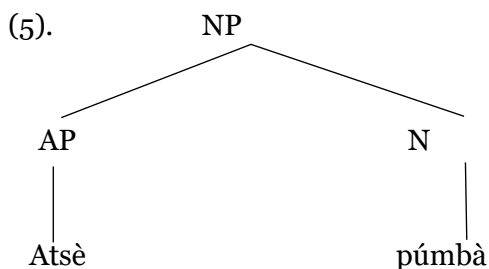
1.3. Adjective+noun

The “Adjective+noun” is a very common grammatical structure in English (and also in French), and rare in Koyo, wherein an adjective precedes a noun in order to qualify or modify it. Let’s consider:

(4) (a)- Atsè	púmbà.	“A small stream.”
A	N	
Small	stream	

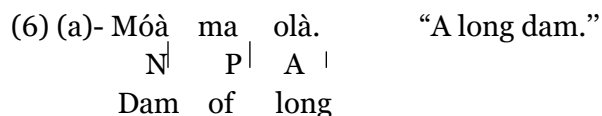
In the example in (4), the noun phrase “Atsè púmbà” consists of two main constituents arranged in a pre-nominal order, which is typical of many Bantu languages: the adjective “Atsè” (small) precedes the noun “púmbà” (stream), thereby forming an [A

+ N] syntactic structure. This combination reflects an attributive order in which the qualifying adjective immediately modifies the noun, reinforcing the image of a stream that, although small in size, is of great value. The structure conforms to a constituent order in which the adjective, occupying the initial position, serves as a descriptive epithet that precedes and specifies the central noun, in this case a concrete common noun. The resulting noun phrase functions as a proper name assigned to the stream, motivated by empirical observation concerning its size and richness.

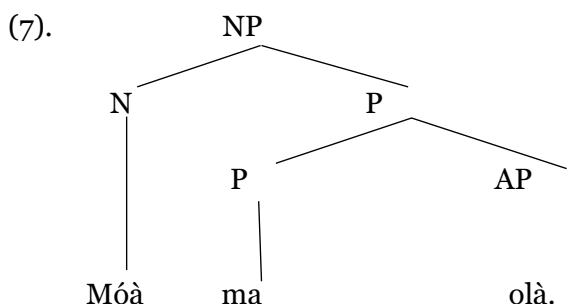


1.4. Noun+Preposition+Adjective

The structure "Noun+Preposition+Adjective" is exceedingly rare and generally considered ungrammatical in Koyo, as adjectives typically either precede or follow nouns, but do not directly follow prepositions in this specific structure. As illustration:



In 6(a), the expression "Móà ma olà" follows a syntactic order typical of languages with a Nominal + Preposition + Adjective structure. In this structure, "Móà" functions as the head noun, that is, "the dam." It is followed by the preposition "ma", which introduces a noun complement. This complement is formed by the qualifying adjective "olà", meaning "long." Thus, the adjective does not directly modify the noun, but it is mediated by a grammatical link introduced by the preposition. The entire phrase "Móà ma olà" can therefore be syntactically interpreted as a complex noun phrase, where the main noun "Móà" is specified by a determiner complement introduced by "ma" and qualified by "olà", which could be literally translated as "a long dam."



1.5. Noun+Number Phrase

A [Noun+Number phrase] or (noun phrase with a number) is a grammatical construction in which a common noun is followed by a number. Let's consider the illustrations below:

- | | | | |
|----------|--------|---------|--------------------|
| (8) (a)- | Ipònga | tsambɔ. | "The seven holes." |
| | N | NumbP | |
| | Holes | seven | |
| (b)- | Indàó | ibá. | "The two houses." |
| | N | NumbP | |
| | Houses | two | |
| (c)- | Akàmbo | ábá. | "The two parts." |
| | N | NumbP | |
| | Parts | two | |

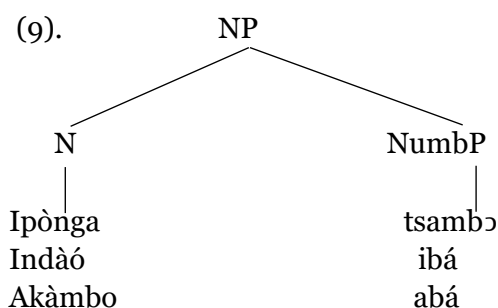
In 8(a), "Ipònga tsambɔ," has the following constituents notably "Ipònga" "holes" and functions as the head noun and "tsambɔ," which is a numeral quantifying the noun "Ipònga," meaning "seven." In terms of constituent order, "Ipònga" (the base noun) precedes "tsambɔ" (the quantifier), following a standard structure in Bantu languages where the base noun generally comes first, followed by the numerical attribute. Thus, it refers to a pond with precisely seven holes, with the numerical attribute "seven" specifying the number of holes in the pond.

In 8(b), the term "Indàó Ibá," composed of "Indàó" (houses) and "Ibá" (two). It follows a syntactic order in which the noun "Indàó," is accompanied by the quantifier "Ibá." In this structure, "Indàó" functions as the main noun, representing the object or location, while "Ibá," modifies the noun by specifying the quantity (two). The construction "Indàó Ibá" indicates a modification relationship in which "Ibá" quantifies and specifies the number of houses, translating to "the two houses." By applying this analysis to a pond, we understand that the name "Indàó Ibá" refers to a pond with two holes, a specific characteristic of the location. The order of constituents therefore reflects a hierarchy where the main noun (Indàó) is modified by a numeral determiner (Ibá), a normal construction in Koyo nominal structures.

In 8(c), the expression "Akàmbo abá," constructed according to the typical syntactic order of Bantu languages, such as a Noun + Numeral Determiner structure, where "Akàmbo" (a common noun meaning "the shares") precedes "abá" (a numeral meaning "two"). This sequence highlights a Noun + Modifier order. The plural noun "Akàmbo" functions as the head of the noun phrase, while "abá," in a post-nominal position, serves as a quantitative determiner, providing numerical specification. The resulting noun phrase refers to a defined entity: "the two shares." As a toponym, "Akàmbo abá" functions as an autonomous noun phrase, encapsulating both a geographical reality (the forest) and a social history (the division between two clans), while adhering to the canonical syntactic order of Bantu languages, in which modifiers generally follow the noun.

To summarize the example (8), The syntactic structures of the toponyms Ipònga tsambò, Indàó Ibá, and Akàmbò abá highlight a common Bantu morphosyntactic pattern: the noun precedes its numeral modifier, forming a post-nominal quantifier in these languages. This structure reflects linguistic rules, as well as encodes social, cultural, and spatial meanings embedded in toponymic expressions.

As observed by Githiora (2002:81): “*the postposition of numerals to head nouns is a syntactic hallmark of most Bantu languages, reflecting their typological consistency across dialects.*” In Ipònga tsambò, the noun Ipònga anchors the meaning while tsambò qualifies it, denoting a tangible geographic feature marked by quantifiable attributes. This morphosyntactic phenomenon also aligns with Kadmon’s (2000:47) assertion that: “*toponyms are linguistic fossils that preserve the grammar and worldview of a speech community.*” In the case of Akàmbò abá, the name encapsulates not only a numerical concept, but also a historical and socio-political division, giving linguistic substance to cultural memory. Furthermore, as Tent and Blair (2011:159) argue: “*the syntactic structure of toponyms (especially compound names) frequently reveals underlying cognitive models of space and categorization in non-Western systems.*” The examples discussed here fit into this model: each term indexes a specific feature (holes, houses, shares) and links to social facts (number of entities, clan divisions, or location type). Thus, toponymic structures such as Ipònga tsambò, Indàó Ibá, and Akàmbò abá provide a door into syntactic norms, but more importantly, they serve as cultural signifiers, rooted in quantitative, spatial, and historical realities encoded in the grammar of a people.



1.6. Quantifier+Noun

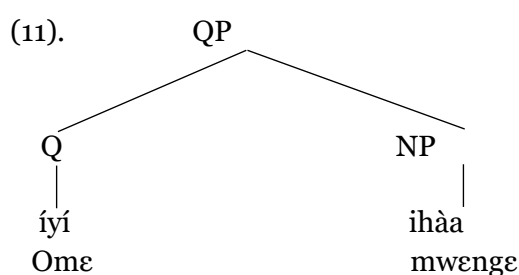
The expression [Quantifier+Noun] refers to a grammatical structure in which a **quantifier** precedes a **noun** to indicate a quantity or measure. As illustration:

- (10) (a)- íyí ihàa. “Many acutirostre microctenopoma fish.”
 Q N
 Many acutirostre microctenopoma
- (b)- Ome mwenge. “Many hepsetus fish.”
 Q N
 Many hepsetus

From the example (10a), the expression “*íyí ihàa*” follows a syntactic in which the quantifier generally precedes the noun it determines. In this sequence, “*íyí*” (a quantifier meaning “many” or “a lot”) functions as a modifier of the noun “*ihàa*” (a common noun referring to the acutirotre fish *Microctenopoma*), forming a quantifier phrase. The constituent order is, therefore, [Quantifier+Noun], that reflects a syntactic structure typical of many Niger-Congo languages, where nominal expansion adheres to a logic of expanding determination. From the most general element (quantity) to the most specific (the nominal head). This structure, “*íyí ihàa*” exemplifies a process of toponymic nominalization motivated by the high presence of the species in the area.

In 10(b), the expression “*Ome mwenge*,” derived from syntactic structure based on a fixed constituent order: [Quantifier Determiner + Noun]. The term “*Ome*” functions here as a quantifier or possessor, translatable as “many” or “owner of,” and directly precedes “*mwenge*,” which refers to the hepsetus fish. Thus, “*Ome mwenge*” literally means “the one who has many hepsetus” or “the place where hepsetus are abundant,” a toponymic designation motivated by empirical observation of the abundance of this species in a pond in the village of Ibonga la Ewoli.

To conclude with the examples in (10), the toponymic expressions “*íyí ihàa*” and “*Ome mwenge*” reflect linguistic patterns typical of Niger-Congo and Bantu language families, where the constituent order [Quantifier + Noun] or [Determiner + Noun] is prevalent. These structures highlight how ecological features of a given environment (such as the abundance of specific fish species) can be encoded in place names through nominal constructions. The presence of quantifiers like *íyí* (“many”) and *Ome* (“owner of” or “many”) reveals the socio-cognitive role of language in mapping environmental knowledge onto geographical space.



2.2. Sentential toponyms

This subpart discusses the syntactic analysis of sentential toponyms in Koyo. For instance:

- (12) (a)- Kwere opango. “Cut a cane.”
 V | N |
 Cut cane
- (b)- Dzà nima. “Eat and don’t share.”
 V | V |
 Eat not give

- (c)- Ebòndzi angòmɔ. “He who broke long drums.”
 V N
 Broke drums
- (d)- Abomi oyàa ngè. “If you die there, people wouldn't know.”
 V V A
 You are killed, you become silent
- (e)- Tème kirina. “The plain of market or meeting.”
 V V
 Leave, sell each other

In 12(a), the expression "Kwèrɛ opango" is an imperative sentence composed of two main constituents: a verb in the imperative mood ("Kwèrɛ", meaning "cut") and a noun complement ("opango", meaning "a cane"). The word order follows the typical imperative structure in Koyo, which is V + NP (verb + noun), with no overt subject pronoun, something commonly observed in imperative constructions. This structure conveys a command addressed to an implicit interlocutor. Syntactically, "Kwèrɛ" functions as the predicate, while "opango" serves as the direct object of the verb.

In 12(b), the expression "Dzà nima" is a verbal construction composed of two main constituents: the conjugated verb "Dzà", meaning he/she has eaten (affirmative verbal form in the third person), followed by "nima", which can be analyzed as a negative imperative or subjunctive verb form meaning do not share. Syntactically, "Dzà nima" presents a juxtaposition of two predicates without a conjunction, thus forming an elliptical or implicit phrasal structure, closely resembling an asyndetic complex sentence. The word order is verb 1 (affirmative) + verb 2 (negative imperative), creating a contrast or ironic structure: he eats, but does not share. This structure results from a nominalization process of a verbal phrase, producing a toponym with a metonymic or expressive meaning that designates a remote, difficult-to-access, and inhospitable forest (it "eats," but "does not share").

In 12(c), the "Ebòdzi angòmɔ", could be broken down into two main constituents: the verb "Ebòdzi" (to break, here in the past tense), functioning as a predicate, and the noun phrase "angòmɔ" (the long drums), which serves as a direct object. The word order follows a verb-object (V-O) structure, typical of languages with V-O word order. Although it is fixed as a proper noun, this construction can be analyzed as a simple declarative verbal sentence of the assertive and active type: Implicit Subject + Verb (Ebòdzi) + Object (angòmɔ), where the subject is not explicitly stated, but implied (e.g., "someone broke the long drums"). Thus, "Ebòdzi angòmɔ" exemplifies a toponymic nominalization derived from a complete verbal sentence, crystallized into a verbal phrase that has become a proper name.

In 12(d), the expression "Abomi oyàa ngè," is composed of three main constituents: "Abomi," a verbal form derived from the verb eboma (to kill or to die), here used in a conditional or passive sense ("would have been killed" / "would die"); "oyàa," a verb conjugated in the non past tense, second person singular, from eyàa (to become: "you become"); and "ngè," an adjective meaning "calm." The syntactic order is [V1 – V2 – A], which deviates from the canonical SVO order due to the particular enunciative function of the phrase. It appears as an exclamatory-declarative role with proverbial or

metaphorical value. The sentence is a complex predicative structure, elliptical in subject, with the subject likely implied and generic (“someone,” “one”). Semantically, it expresses a tragic consequence or observation: “When one dies, you become calm,” highlighting the peace associated with death.

In 12(e), the sentence “Tɛmɛ kirina,” formed by two verbs in a nominalized construction, is syntactically composed of two juxtaposed verb constituents: “Tɛmɛ” (a conjugated verb meaning “to leave” or “to part”) and “kirina” (a lexical verb meaning “to mutually sell or trade”). The word order follows a V1 + V2 structure, where V1 denotes an act of separation (leaving a place or people), followed by V2, which signifies an interaction involving exchange or commerce. This verbal juxtaposition yields a juxtaposition of verbs used in a toponymic sense to designate a forest or a communal meeting place. The implicit sentence that can be reconstructed is a nominal declarative type with a descriptive value: Tɛmɛ kirina = “a place from where one departs to trade,” or “a place of exchange between those who part ways.”

To conclude with (12), the analysis of these Koyo toponyms reveals a rich interplay between syntax, semantics, and pragmatics in the process of toponymic nominalization. These place names are not mere labels, but they are linguistic artifacts, encoding historical memory, cultural beliefs, and social behaviors through compact, yet expressive verbal structures. They stem from verbal clauses or elliptical sentences, often lacking explicit subjects, but conveying full predicative meanings, making them living testimonies of a people’s interaction with their environment.

As Tent and Blair (2009:77) explain: *“Toponyms can be seen as linguistic fossils, encapsulating past events, speech patterns, and naming motivations in condensed, crystallized forms.”* This supports the idea that Koyo names like “Dzà nima” and “Abomi oyàa ngè” do more than identify, they narrate and evaluate. Moreover, Ainiala, Saarelma, and Sjöblom (2012:115) affirm that: *“Names are not merely referential devices, but also reflect syntactic patterns and semantic innovations characteristic of natural language in social use.”* This is obvious in “Tɛmɛ kirina,” where the name encapsulates movement and commerce in a compact, descriptive verbal phrase. In addition, Anderson (2007:173) emphasizes the intercultural importance of toponyms, stating that: *“Across languages, toponyms can serve as metaphors, mini-narratives, or condensed instructions for social behavior or geographic knowledge.”* The Koyo expression “Kwɛɛ opango,” may be interpreted as a directive, a memory of action, or a symbolic marking of territorial practices. Koyo toponyms are part of a broader typological pattern where linguistic economy, cultural relevance, and syntactic creativity converge. They represent toponymic crystallizations of speech, functioning both as geographic identifiers and semantic capsules of social knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper set out to identify the categories of Koyo toponyms and to determine the syntactic patterns underlying their formation, within the framework of Chomsky’s Minimalist Program. The analysis confirms the hypotheses formulated in the introduction: Koyo toponyms are not derived from an autonomous “toponymic grammar,” but instantiate the ordinary phrase- and clause-structure of the language, crystallized into fixed proper names.

With respect to the first research question, two structural types were identified: phrasal toponyms, built on a nominal head expanded by another noun, a prepositional phrase, an adjective, a numeral, or a quantifier, and sentential toponyms, built on imperative or coordinate/elliptical clauses.

Regarding the second research question, six syntactic patterns were attested at the phrasal level (Noun+Noun, Noun+Preposition+Noun, Adjective+Noun, Noun+Number, Noun+Preposition+Adjective, Quantifier+Noun), while sentential toponyms instantiate simple imperative sentences as well as compound, juxtaposed, or elliptical clause structures.

The analysis of phrasal toponyms, structured around patterns such as Noun+Noun and Noun+Preposition+Noun, illustrates the way relationships of possession, description, and quantification are encoded in language. These syntactic forms reflect the community's understanding of spatial relationships and social hierarchies, showcasing how language acts as a vehicle for cultural memory.

Sentential toponyms, which encapsulate verbal phrases into concise names, reveal an additional layer of meaning. These names often carry metaphorical or narrative significance, linking the toponyms to the community's historical experiences or cultural beliefs. For example, names that express actions or commands not only identify locations, but also evoke the stories and practices associated with them, reinforcing the connection between language and lived experience.

Most Koyo toponyms are descriptive because they provide physical and semantic features of a given geographical place. In addition, some Koyo toponyms reveal linguistic, historical, and symbolic patterns, since naming reveals a given people's beliefs, historical memory, and linguistic marks.

Beyond its contribution to the grammar of Koyo, this study opens avenues for further research: extending the corpus to other categories of place names, such as anthroponyms, hydronyms, and oronyms, collected across the wider Mbosi-speaking area, and comparing the syntactic patterning of Koyo toponyms with that of other Bantu languages of the C20 group, in order to determine to what extent toponymic nominalization follows shared regional patterns or is specific to Koyo.

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