

Conceptualization of ‘Death is a Journey’ and ‘Death as Rest’ in EkeGusii Euphemism

Damaris G. Nyakoe
Department of Linguistics, Maseno University, Kenya
Email: nyakoed@yahoo.com

Peter M. Matu (corresponding author)
Department of Languages and Communication Studies, The Kenya Polytechnic University College;
Department of Language Management and Language Practice, University of the Free State, South Africa
Email: mainamatu@yahoo.com

David O. Ongarora
Department of Linguistics, Maseno University, Kenya
Email: dvongarora@hotmail.com

Abstract—This paper concerns itself with two conceptual metaphors DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST in reference to the dead, death and dying in EkeGusii Euphemism. The metaphors take the two concepts of journey and rest as source domains while death is used as a target domain. EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes are analyzed into the metaphors DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST using the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The findings reveal that most of the EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes in the conceptual metaphors DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST have religious undertones. Further, these metaphors focus more on life than on death. Finally, the conceptual metaphors DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST illustrate a clear negation of death. Therefore, EkeGusii euphemism utilizes these two metaphors to mask death and the effects that arise out of the dying. This in turn is used as a consolation to the bereaved as they come to terms with the dead, dying and death.

Index Terms—conceptual metaphor, euphemism, EkeGusii, death, domains, journey, and rest

I. INTRODUCTION

EkeGusii is a Bantu language that is spoken in the Western part of Kenya. It is part of the Eastern Nyanza sub-group of Nyanza/Suguti of the Lacustrine Bantu which includes Kuria, Ngurimi, Zanaki, Shashi, Ikizu and Nata (Nurse and Phillipson, 1980). It is set apart from the other languages in its sub-group principally because it has acquired a considerable amount of new non-Bantu vocabulary (Nurse and Phillipson, 1980). Further, all her neighboring languages are non-Bantu, that is, Dholuo, Maasai, and Kipsigis (a Kalenjin dialect). The native speakers of EkeGusii are known as AbaGusii. EkeGusii is used as a first language by approximately two million speakers in two counties of Kenya namely; Kisii and Nyamira, collectively known as Gusii (Ogechi, 2002). However, AbaGusii form part of a considerable proportion of local immigrant workers and settlers outside these counties in various towns and therefore, EkeGusii is spoken in areas far away from the original EkeGusii-speaking region. EkeGusii makes up approximately 6% of the Kenyan population and has two dialects: EkeGoro and EkeMaate, also referred to as Rogoro and Maate in Bosire (1993).

AbaGusii as any other speech community have a way of mentioning the unmentionables. As a result, EkeGusii speakers use special terms to communicate some ideas that are often seen difficult to express in literal speech because either literal words are lacking or the ideas are too embarrassing to mention them publically. Epstein (1985) maintains that there are times and places where a spade cannot be called a spade. In such cases, the use of a euphemistic expression becomes handy. Euphemism is the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1997). Euphemistic expressions are used in presenting a situation, a person or an object in a more agreeable, more reassuring or politer light than would be afforded by the hard glare of reality or by crude, direct definition (Cobb, 1985).

As it happens in other languages, euphemism is used to lubricate communication in EkeGusii. Williams (1975) argues that euphemisms are created when a taboo is abandoned and people have to find another linguistic form or expression to fill up the vacancy. Euphemism as a form of language is profoundly influenced by culture. The culture of a people has an effect on the people's way of avoiding taboo words and their choices of euphemism.

Further, Rawson (1981) observes that euphemism is embedded so deeply in people's language that few individuals, even those who pride in being plainspoken, never get through a day without using it. Fan (2006) also posits that almost

all cultures seem to have certain notions or things that people try to avoid mentioning directly, even when there are terms for such notions in the language. Similarly, Allan and Burridge (1991) argue that language users resort to euphemisms to avoid taboo terms that might cause distress for themselves and the receivers. Consequently, Trinch (2001) asserts that euphemistic substitutes are not only used because they are softer and more delicate terms, but also because they can be ambiguous, thus they permit the mitigation of the taboo.

Rawson (1981) finally posits that the euphemistic effect of using 'kind words' will enable language communication to go on smoothly and successfully and broaden people's vision of euphemism as well as understanding of social cultural communication. Trinch (2001) observes that sexuality, physical and mental illness, diseases, personal finances, death and criminality, among others, are common taboo topics that are euphemized in different cultures.

Death is among the many concepts that are tabooed in EkeGusii and people use euphemism when referring either to death, dying or the effects of death. Whether due to respect or fear, people avoid mentioning the dead, dying or death directly and whoever goes contrary to the expectations of AbaGusii is seen to be disrespectful. Therefore, death is mentioned and understood using different ideas.

Conceptualization is the principle of understanding an idea or a concept in terms of another. The principle can be stated informally as a metaphorical scenario. With regard to death, it can be understood in terms of a journey or rest whereby human beings are travellers on a journey, with death and/or 'going to heaven' seen as a destination to be reached. The metaphors involves understanding one domain of experience, death, in terms of a very different experiences, in this case, that of a journey and rest. In other words, the metaphor can be understood as a mapping from the source domain (in this case journey and rest) to a target domain (in this case death). Therefore, in EkeGusii issues dealing with death are developed by reasoning about the dead, dying and/or death in terms of other concepts or ideas for instance in terms of journeys or resting. In this sense, EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes do utilize the knowledge about journeys and resting when dealing or reasoning about death. The euphemistic substitutes that constitute DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST metaphors map the aspect of travel onto that of death. Lakoff (1993:208) states:

Metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason. The language is secondary. The mapping is primary, in that it sanctions the use of source domain language and inference patterns for target domain concepts.

Fernández (2006) asserts that mankind's failure to come to terms with death has been pervasive in different times and societies. In fact, human beings have traditionally felt reluctant to deal with the subject of death using straightforward terms. Whether owing to superstitions, fear or social respect, the fact remains that when facing death language users resort to use euphemism so that they can soften the effect of what they really wish to communicate. In such a case, the taboo is stripped of its most explicit, offensive or obscene undertones (Fernández, 2006). Further, the number of euphemisms used in reference to human mortality show human being's cultural discomfort in the topic. In fact, in most cultures, EkeGusii included, rarely is death mentioned by its name.

The main concern of this paper is to explore the conceptualization of DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST in EkeGusii, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. The current study is a worthwhile concern, because, whilst there is substantial literature on the metaphorical conceptualization of death (Arrese, 1996; Sexton, 1997; Bultnick, 1998 and Fernández, 2006), there has been no indepth study of the metaphors, DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST. In addition, there is scanty literature that has dealt with the metaphorical conceptualization of death and dying in an indigenous African language. Metaphorization is a potential source for euphemisms (Gómez 1986, Warren, 1992) and a common device to cope with death (Goatly, 1997, Sexton, 1997 and Fernández, 2006). The focus of this paper is predominantly on the conceptualization of death and dying to DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST in EkeGusii euphemism within the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

II. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study was conducted in Nyamira County where EkeRogoro dialect of EkeGusii is spoken. Data for this study was collected by purposively sampling ten EkeGusii speakers. These respondents were required to supply five euphemistic substitutes that are used when referring to the dead, dying or death. Therefore, a total of 50 euphemistic substitutes for death were expected to be used during the analysis. In the end, 21 euphemistic substitutes were realized from the respondents as this kind of data was bound to be similar from one respondent to the other. It was revealed that out of the 21 terms, 6 of them constituted the conceptual metaphor, DEATH IS A JOURNEY whereas 3 terms constituted the other metaphor DEATH AS REST.

The theoretical assumptions on which the present paper is based are derived from the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor as propounded in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later summarised into hypotheses in Jakel (2002). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) present a cognitive assumption which revolves around the existence of a set of metaphorical concepts in terms of which human beings conceptualize the world or their world views. Thus, certain aspects of life are conceptualized metaphorically in a systematic way. Lakoff and Johnson offer a wide range of metaphors covering basic aspects of life by structuring metaphorically one aspect in terms of another. Metaphorical concepts are restructured metaphorically while metaphorical expressions are derived from metaphorical concepts. The domain hypothesis of the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor provided the parameters upon which the analysis was conducted and conclusions drawn.

According to Jakel (2002), most metaphorical expressions are not to be treated in isolation, but as linguistic realizations of conceptual metaphors. Domains play a crucial role in the definition of metaphor as a mapping from one

domain that is from one concept or idea to another. According to the domain principle, a metaphoric mapping involves a source domain and a target domain. One of these conceptual domains which functions as a target domain, for example, the target domain of ARGUMENT is understood by taking recourse to another conceptual domain which acts as a source domain (WAR) and therefore, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. The source domain is therefore used to understand, structure and, in some cases, mitigate the target domain. The domain hypothesis was useful in the current study in identifying the conceptual metaphors of death in EkeGusii euphemism. According to the domain hypothesis, these metaphorical expressions should display enough systematicity to be accounted for in terms of conceptual metaphors. In these metaphor-based euphemisms, euphemistic expressions in the source domain are used to replace the taboo expressions in the target domain.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One concept can be understood through different conceptual metaphors as they structure and define the target domain in different ways. In the analysis of EkeGusii euphemism, it was evident that there were a number of conceptual correspondences from the source domain, the realm of physical or more concrete reality, to a target domain. Therefore, EkeGusii euphemism had several conceptual metaphors for death and, as a result, one could reason about the dead, dying or death using the knowledge of something else. This proves significant information concerning the way in which death was actually used, perceived and mitigated in EkeGusii, for instance, death in EkeGusii was perceived in terms of a journey and rest.

Conceptualization of DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST metaphors arise from the principle of understanding the domain of death in terms of the domain of journeys and that of rest. The principle can be stated informally as a metaphorical scenario where human beings are travellers on earth with death and/or 'going to heaven' seen as a final destination to be reached. Whenever one is travelling, there must be occasional reposés or episodes of rest as one can not embark on a journey and travel forever. The metaphors involve understanding one domain of experience; death in terms of a very different experiences that of journeys and rest.

In other words, the metaphors can be understood as mappings from the source domain (in this case, journeys and rest) to a target domain (in this case, death). Therefore in EkeGusii, issues dealing with death are dealt with by reasoning about it in terms of journeys. The euphemistic substitutes that constitute DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST metaphors map the aspect of travel and rest onto that of death. The mappings for the two metaphors showed a lot of systematicity as the attributes were mapped from the source domain to the target domain only. In other words, the source domain of a journey and rest were used to understand that of death and not the other way round. Thus the concept death was understood by referring to it in inoffensive and softer terms; that of a journey and rest. The metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY will be discussed first followed by DEATH AS REST.

Firstly, DEATH IS A JOURNEY was the source of six out of the 21 euphemistic substitutes surrounding death which translated to 29%. This conceptual metaphor that understands death in terms of a journey had some spiritual connotation. By virtue of this conceptualization, based on the assumption that the dead person is no longer around, and as Bultnick (1998) points out, human mortality is conceptualized as a departure from this world. Bultnick (1998) further notes that a basic domain of experience like death is understood in terms of a different and more concrete domain, as a journey, an association which provides the basis of verbal mitigation of taboo.

Further, this metaphorical mapping transfers different attributes from the source domain of a journey to the target domain of death. More specifically, it uses different conceptual correspondences as a result of using the knowledge about journeys to talk about death. For instance, it is common to hear one mourning that the late had responded to a call, so it was necessary for him/her to embark on the journey. This is further exemplified in data set 1 below.

DATA SET 1

- i) Go- kor- a oro-gendo
INF finish-FV 11-journey
'to finish the journey'
- ii) ko-ng'any-a
INF-migrate-FV
'to migrate'
- iii) ko-rangeri-w -a na Omo-nene
INF-call -PASS -FV by 1-big/Almighty/God
'to be called/summoned by God'
- iv) Go- tir- a
INF- ascend- FV
'to ascend'
- v) ko-rund-a
INF-sail-FV
'to sail/swing'
- vi) a -a -gend -a
He/she -be-gone fv

‘s/he has left us’

Further, EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes, to ‘finish the journey’, ‘migrate’, ‘to be called/summoned by God’, ‘to ascend’, ‘to sail/swing’, and ‘he has left’ use the knowledge about journeys to talk about death because the act of dying corresponds to the act of leaving, the destination of the journey is an encounter with God in Heaven and the dead person is the one who embarks on a journey. Furthermore, ‘to migrate’ corresponds to this conceptual association of journeys as one is taken to have migrated or vacated; the act of dying corresponds to the act of leaving and, consequently, the deceased is viewed as the one embarking on a journey. In addition, the euphemistic substitute ‘to be called/summoned by God’ and ‘ascend’ have a religious belief and it entails that one has to heed to the call, hence the journey aspect sets in. Lastly the euphemistic substitute, ‘he has left’, does give an account of a journey as it is assumed that whoever is being mentioned is on transit; in most cases, the one who has left is purported to have gone to heaven. These euphemistic substitutes indicate that death involves travelling and in most cases it is a living being that travels as the dead do not have the ability to travel.

Moreover, it is in this view of the deceased as a living being that these euphemistic substitutes fulfil their euphemistic function. These euphemistic substitutes imply a negation of death and some of them emphasize the role of survivors rather than death itself. Death and the person who is dead are terms that are avoided or rarely mentioned in EkeGusii. This is illustrated in the euphemistic expressions, ‘to be called/summoned by God’ ‘to migrate’ and ‘to ascend’ as it is a person who is alive who can hear God’s call and is capable of migrating or going upwards. The religious undertone of the metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY is further exemplified from a common song that is sung by the Seventh Day Adventists during burial ceremonies. Seventh Day Adventist church is one of the major churches in Gusii. The song ‘ntore ase orogendo kogenda igoro’ which can be loosely translated to mean ‘we are on a journey to heaven’ euphemises death and emphasizes the concept of all the human beings being travellers on earth. The destination of the said journey, according to the song is heaven, a dwelling for the Godly and a place that has no worries at all. Therefore, AbaGusii have an assumption that once one dies, ‘the passenger alights’ at a specified bus stop, thus marking the end of his/her journey. According to the song, DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor is used to encourage the bereaved as all are travellers heading to a common destination where all shall live happily forever.

Finally, the EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes that constitute the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY can be summarized to have the ability to map the idea of travel onto that of death. The destination of the journey in most cases is unspecified, although, for Christian believers, it is normally assumed that the destination is heaven. Therefore, dying can be referred to travelling as exemplified in the euphemism theses (Domínguez 2005). So, to DIE IS TO TRAVEL in that:

To die is to depart this life
 To die is to pass over
 To die is to go the way of all flesh
 To die is to meet one’s maker
 To die is to go to heaven
 To die is to fly to glory.

Secondly, death in EkeGusii euphemism can be conceptualized as DEATH AS REST which had realised 14% out of the 21 euphemistic substitutes surrounding death and dying. In this conceptual mapping, death is viewed as a desirable condition in that the euphemistic substitutes portray death as a peaceful repose after an earthly existence. Thus, these euphemisms show a positive assessment or attitude towards death. Fernández (2006) argues that the underlying notion of metaphors included in this mapping is based on the fact that rest, a repose or sleep are temporary, and therefore, death is conceptualized as a temporary event.

In EkeGusii euphemism, death is viewed as ‘rest’, ‘sleep’ and passing on’ and thus indicating death as a temporary event too. The attributes associated with rest are thus used to structure and understand death as they are transferred from the domain of rest to the domain of death. When a person is resting, it is assumed that such a person resumes his/her normal duties later on and the same assumption is held when one sleeps, as one is expected to wake up. Therefore, in EkeGusii, death is conceptualized as rest and it is assumed that all the bodily functions resume their duties afterwards. Fernández (2006) continues to assert that this analogy implies that the cessation of bodily functions and speech are not automatically identified with the symptoms of physical death, as they are present in a peaceful sleep. The conceptualization which relates death to rest or sleep provides effective euphemistic reference to the taboo mainly because this association ultimately leads to the denial of death as such: the dying person is no longer dead, but sank into comforting sleep. In addition, this conceptual metaphor is thought to provide some sort of relief for the dying person, a notion on which a euphemistic force of this mapping is also used (cf. Data set 2).

DATA SET 2

- i) go-timok-a
 INF rest FV
 ‘to rest’
- ii) ko-rar-a
 INF-sleep-FV
 ‘to sleep’

- iii) go-twek -a mo
 INF-pass-FV on
 'to pass on'

From the illustrations in Data Set 2 above, the EkeGusii euphemistic substitutes for death conceptualize death as rest. The euphemistic substitutes 'resting', 'sleeping' and 'passing on' have may not be directly be linked to death as whoever is said to be resting, sleeping or to have passed on indicate some kind of temporary repose. It is assumed that such a person will soon resume his/her normal duties. These euphemistic substitutes do fulfil their euphemistic functions as they mask the effects of death and transform it to a normal bodily function. These euphemistic substitutes transform death to something that is temporary, less threatening and very normal.

Lastly, EkeGusii speakers are fond of using the metaphor, DEATH AS REST to console and cushion themselves against death. The speakers at times justify death using this metaphor, especially when death is as a result of terminal illness. Christians do use this metaphor to comfort themselves whenever one of them has passed on and to mean that the dead has just rested from the earthly commitments. This is further illustrated from the song aforementioned. There is an assumption from the song that once the travellers reach their destination which is heaven, the earthly burdens will lessen. Thus they will rest from the earthly commitments.

IV. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that death is a subject that handled with a lot of care and caution in EkeGusii. Most of the euphemistic substitutes in EkeGusii that exemplify the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH AS REST have a religious connotation. These in the long run help the bereaved to accept death, trust and hope that the departed is surely on a journey to heaven-a journey that is compulsory to all Christians. And with the hope that all the dead will rise up one day and meet the loved ones gives a consolation to all human beings. It is also evident that euphemizing death in EkeGusii focuses on life rather than death. Further, the mappings for the metaphors show a lot of systematicity. Finally, there is a general tendency of avoiding referring to the person concerned as dead or to have died, instead it is assumed that the dead shall have rested from the many commitments of the world. Lastly, the conceptual metaphors DEATH IS A JOURNEY and DEATH IS REST ultimately lead to the denial of death as the dead person is assumed to be travelling or somewhere resting or sleeping.

REFERENCES

- [1] Allan, K. & K. Burridge (1991). *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Arrese, M. (1996). To die, to Sleep. A Contrastive Study of Metaphors for Death and Dying in English and Spanish. *Language sciences*, 18 (1-2): 37-52.
- [3] Bosire, F. (1993). *Dialects Rogoro and Maate*. Kenya: Unpublished MA Thesis University of Nairobi.
- [4] Bultnick, B. (1998). *Metaphors We Die By: Conceptualizations of Death in English and their Implications for the Theory of Metaphor*. Antwerpen: Universitet Antwerpen.
- [5] Cobb, R. (1985). Euphemism and Argot in France. In Enright, D. J. (Ed.) *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. PP. 72-78.
- [6] Epstein, J. (1985). Sex and Euphemism. In Enright, D. J. (ed.) *Fair of Speech: The Uses of Euphemism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. PP. 56-71.
- [7] Fan, Z. (2006). The Mechanism of Euphemism: A cognitive Linguistic Interpretation. *US-China Foreign Language*, 4(7): 71-74.
- [8] Fernández, C. (2006). The language of Death: Euphemism and Conceptual Metaphorization in Victorian Obituaries. *Sky Journal of Linguistics*, 19: 101-130.
- [9] Goatly, A. (1997). *The Language of Metaphors*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [10] Jakel, O. (2002). Hypotheses Revisited: The Cognitive Theory of Metaphor Applied to Religious Texts. In *Metaphorik de*, 2: 20-42.
- [11] Lakoff, G. [1993]. The contemporary Theory of Metaphor. In Andrew Ortony (ed.), 1993. *Metaphor and Thought* (2end ed.), pp.205-251. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- [12] Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [13] Nurse, D. & Phillippon, G. (1980). *Bantu Languages of East Africa*. In E. C. Polomé & C. P. Hill (Eds.) *Language in Tanzania*. London: Oxford University Press.
- [14] Ogechi, N. (2002). *Trilingual code switching in Kenya-Evidence from EkeGusii, Kiswahili, English and Sheng*. PhD Thesis, University of Hamburg.
- [15] Rawson, H. (1981). *A Dictionary of Euphemisms and other Double Talk*. New York: Crown.
- [16] Sexton, J. (1997). The Semantics of Death and Dying: Metaphor and Mortality. *A Review of General Semantics* 54-3: 333-345.
- [17] Trinch, S. L. (2001). Managing Euphemism and Transcending Taboos: Negotiating the Meaning of Sexual Assault in Latinas Narratives of Domestic Violence. *Text* 21 (4), PP. 567-610.
- [18] Williams, J. (1975). *Origins of the English Language: A Social and Linguistic History*. New York: The Free Press.

Damaris G. Nyakoe holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Kenyatta University, Kenya and Master of Arts (Linguistics) from Maseno University, Kenya. Her research interests are on cognitive semantics in relation to metaphors and euphemism, especially in the tabooed concepts in EkeGusii. Damaris is currently working on her doctoral proposal.

Peter M. Matu, PhD is an Associate Professor in Linguistics and Communication and Director of Common Undergraduate Courses at The Kenya Polytechnic University College. He is also a Research Associate in the Department of Language Management and Language Practice, University of the Free State, South Africa. He has published widely in both local and international journals. His research interests are centred on syntax, pragmatics, communication and media discourse.

David O. Ongarora holds a PhD in Linguistics from Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, a Master of Arts in English and Linguistics from Egerton University in Kenya and a Bachelor of Education (Arts) degree from Kenyatta University, also in Kenya. He teaches English and Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics at Maseno University, Kenya. Although his research interests are in formal and theoretical linguistics in general, his particular focus is on morphology and syntax.