

An Analysis of the Food Metaphor in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS Discourse

Damaris Nyakoe¹, David Ongarora¹, Pamela Oloo¹

¹Department of Linguistics, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Maseno University
P.O Box Private Bag, Maseno-Kenya

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBS/v4-i1/523 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v4-i1/523>

Abstract

HIV represents one of the greatest public health challenges confronting Kenyans. Whereas Kenya has made significant progress in the fight against HIV and AIDS, the prevalence rates in Gusii are very high and this calls for investigation. The HIV and AIDS prevalence rates in Kisii and Nyamira Counties stand approximately at 26% which is higher than the provincial and national rates. HIV is a social issue, therefore issues dealing with language use and communication cannot be ignored. There are a number of linguistic expressions related to food that are employed when one is speaking about HIV and AIDS its related terminologies. The article investigates the food metaphors that EkeGusii speakers use in relation to HIV and AIDS. We argue that metaphors are used in EkeGusii discourse on HIV and AIDS because metaphors are ubiquitous in nature and AbaGusii culture places restrictions on words and expressions which directly refer to HIV and AIDS and sex related issues. Some of such direct words and expressions are considered taboo while others instill fear or create stigma. Hence, EkeGusii speakers find metaphors handy to use in such situations. Most concepts are understood in terms of other concepts and it could therefore be invaluable to analyze food metaphors in relation to HIV and AIDS and sex related issues. This study reveals how the food metaphor reflects and structures our understanding of reality in relation to sexuality and HIV and AIDS in EkeGusii.

Key words: *Metaphor, Food, EkeGusii, Conceptualization, HIV and AIDS*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article in a broad sense deals with the relationship between language use and culture. Specifically, the paper examines the food metaphor in the type of language and linguistic expressions that EkeGusii speakers use in relation to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and sex relates issues.

EkeGusii is a Lacustrine Eastern Bantu language that is spoken in the western part of Kenya (Nurse & Phillipson, 1980). It has two dialects known as EkeRogoro and EkeMaate. EkeGusii is predominantly spoken in Nyanza province but AbaGusii form part of local immigrants in major towns and cities and it is normal to hear EkeGusii being spoken far from the original EkeGusii speaking areas.

Medical researchers have shown that AIDS is transmissible disease of the immune system caused by a virus known as HIV. The virus slowly attacks and destroys the cells of the immune system rendering them incapable of performing their function of putting up resistance against

infections. A patient with advanced HIV related illness is therefore made vulnerable to a variety of these infections and others and certain malignancies that eventually causes death. When a person is infected with a virus, such a person is referred to as HIV positive.

HIV was first diagnosed in Kenya in 1983. Since then, HIV represents one of the greatest public health challenges confronting Kenyans. Whereas Kenya has made significant progress in the fight against HIV and AIDS, the prevalence rates in Nyanza province is high and this calls for investigation.

Nyanza province is predominantly inhabited by Luo, but it is also home to Bantu speakers. The province has the highest HIV prevalence rate nationally which stands at 13.9% against the national rate of 6.2% (NACC & NASCOP, 2012). Further, the HIV prevalence rates in some of the Bantu speaking areas in Nyanza are higher than the provincial rate. The National Aids and Control Council indicate that the HIV prevalence in Nyamira District stands at 14.8%, Kisii Central 26.1%, Borabu 26%, and Manga 25.6%. Most of these figures are above the provincial prevalence. Apparently, a number of studies on HIV and AIDS in Nyanza have focused on Dholuo leaving out the other languages. Furthermore, Oloo (2012) maintains that communities have different traditional beliefs and practices and these affect the behavior patterns of individuals. The current enquiry will investigate HIV and AIDS communication in EkeGusii.

Socio-cultural contexts have long been recognized as important domains for understanding sexual behavior and pathways of HIV infection. Language however has been overlooked despite its significance as a major component of culture (Selikow, 2004). Indeed, our very conceptual system (and by extension, our actions) have been argued to inextricably linked to, and informed by language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this regard, this article focuses on the use of food metaphor in relation to HIV and AIDS and sex related issues.

However, people try to avoid words and expressions that are unpleasant, inappropriate, or embarrassing to them or to the people whom they are addressing. Such consciously avoided words and expressions can be considered taboo. According to Mashiri, Mawomo and Tom (2002), people consider matters relating to sex, illness and other misfortunes as taboo and unspeakable. EkeGusii as any other language has tabooed words and communicators have to find words from their linguistic repertoire to replace the tabooed words. As a result, EkeGusii speakers use special terms to communicate some ideas that are often seen difficult to express in literal speech. This is the case with the emergence of HIV and AIDS. EkeGusii speakers have to communicate about issues related to HIV and AIDS and as such specific linguistic expressions are being used in reference to these conditions. This study intends to concern itself with the linguistic expressions used by EkeGusii speakers in relation to HIV and AIDS messages.

1.1 HIV and AIDS scourge

HIV and AIDS is a taboo topic among many speech communities in Kenya (Achoka, 2007). Thus, every speech community defines HIV and AIDS on its own terms. Firstly, AIDS is a disease that affects individuals, who are part of a larger society. Therefore, the social aspects of HIV and AIDS cannot be ignored. For instance, since the first case of HIV and AIDS was reported in Kenya in 1983, different speech communities use different terminologies when communicating about the HIV and AIDS epidemic. EkeGusii language is not exceptional of this fact. The linguistic

expressions used to refer to HIV and AIDS and its associated terminologies are coined from different sources notably coming from different perceptions by diverse speech communities.

Secondly, according to Zishiri (2010), HIV in Africa is largely transmitted through sexual intercourse. Zishiri further argues that since HIV and AIDS identification, HIV has been associated with multiple sexual partners, and for that reason, the HIV positive people have been labeled promiscuous. Consequently society has come up with names for HIV and AIDS that 'befittingly' refer to alleged promiscuity of its carrier.

Moreover, no cure has been found for HIV and AIDS to date. HIV positive people can prolong life by taking Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). The fact the HIV positive people do take ARVs further complicates the labeling. As Zishiri (2010) observes that the actual uptake of ARV treatment is also used figuratively for defining HIV and AIDS. However, lack of cure emphasizes the perception that there is only one possible direction for an HIV-positive individual, death.

Furthermore, Zishiri (2010) maintains that AIDS has no cure and for that reason people associate it with death. Like sex, death is not a topic to be discussed; it is avoided in most African societies. People are generally afraid of death and seldom want to talk or even think about it. For the mere reason that AIDS incurable has no cure has made society to create terms that indicate the fact that once one is HIV-positive, that is destination to death. The situation is further complicated by the fact that whenever one dies of AIDS complicated issues, rarely it is indicated that the deceased was HIV positive.

Finally, other new terms are being used by parents and guardians when disclosing their status to their children or the children's status (those who are born positive). Therefore, it is evident that there are a number of linguistic expressions that are used in reference to HIV and AIDS and such linguistic terms include metaphors. This paper examines these linguistic expressions used in HIV and AIDS and its related terminologies in EkeGusii.

1.2 Conceptual Metaphor

According to the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor, metaphor is viewed as a cross-domain mapping of our conceptual system. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) defines metaphor as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another or as a tightly structured mapping or a set of correspondences between two conceptual domains which are referred as the source and target domains. In this case, a concrete and clearly organized source domain, being more clearly related to physical and bodily experience is used to understand and talk about a more abstract and less clearly structured target domain.

Further, Barcelona (2000) defines metaphor as the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially 'mapped', that is projected, onto a different experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one. The domain that is mapped is called the *source* or *donor domain*, and the domain onto which the source is mapped is called the *target* or *recipient*. Both domains have to belong to different superordinate domain. To illustrate this argument, Barcelona makes use of a well-known metaphoric example of Lakoff and Johnson: "love is a journey". The source domain, "journey," is actually a subdomain of the domain of movement. In the metaphor, 'love is a journey' the domain of journey is mapped onto the target domain, 'love' which is itself part of the much larger domain of emotions. This article will adopt the cognitive view of metaphor as propounded by Lakoff & Johnson (1980).

This paper focuses on metaphor since one of the most important characteristics of metaphor is its ubiquity not only in language but also in thought. Therefore, metaphor is pervasive in language and using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) approach, it is difficult if not impossible to conceive of HIV and AIDS as free from metaphorical terms since metaphor is ubiquitous not only in language but also in thought and action. Most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts and it could be invaluable to analyze food metaphors in relation to HIV and AIDS and sex related issues in EkeGusii. Therefore, this paper seeks to discuss how food metaphor reflects and structures our understanding of reality in relation to sexuality and HIV and AIDS.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Background

This study was conducted in Kisii County where EkeRogoro and EkeMaate dialects of EkeGusii are spoken. The study employed the analytical research design. The analytical research design falls within the qualitative research approach. The analytical research design uses facts or information already available and analyse these to make critical evaluation of the material. The research goes beyond merely describing the characteristics, to analysing and explaining why and how the phenomenon being studied is happening. In order to explain the use of the food metaphor in EkeGusii discourse, a thorough examination of the various linguistic expressions was deemed necessary.

The sample for the study consisted of the EkeGusii speakers and linguistic expressions that are used to refer HIV and AIDS issues. The study employed purposive and chain sampling techniques in the selection of EkeGusii speakers who provided data for analysis. Purposive sampling was used in the selection of EkeGusii speakers from Kisii County and who are working as HIV crusaders cum campaigners. This enabled the researcher to engage only those EkeGusii speakers who know and use linguistic expressions frequently when speaking about HIV issues and are willing to share it.

Further, the chain sampling assisted the investigator in identifying the other informants in the study. Therefore, the EkeGusii speaker identified purposively and with the information on the subject of research led the researchers to others of equal or more value. The chain sampling was used until a point of saturation was reached. A saturated sample of the linguistic expressions collected was used for analysis.

A combination of methods was employed during the actual process of gathering data, including informal interviewing, audio-recording and focus group discussions. Such a combination was necessary for obtaining a well grounded view of the situation and to ensure the collection of valid and reliable data

Data for this study was collected by purposively sampling thirty EkeGusii speakers and three focus group discussions were also conducted. These respondents were required to supply five linguistic expressions related to food that are further used in reference to HIV and AIDS and sex related issues. The researcher further used her own linguistic competence in EkeGusii to generate more data for analysis.

2.1. Theoretical Assumptions

Data was analysed qualitatively using the guidelines of the Conceptual Metaphor theory. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory as initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) was adopted in this study. According to the theory, metaphor is a figure of speech that helps us understand or

experience one thing in terms of another. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) further posit that metaphors form part of our speech patterns consciously or unconsciously and ultimately metaphor structure the ways in which we conceive different issues.

In the course of communication, we unconsciously use the device of metaphor to help us make sense of reality. Metaphors shape and structure our perceptions and understanding, lending a framework within which our experiences are interpreted and assigned meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conceptualization of HIV and AIDS and sexuality related issues can therefore be arguably be shaped by metaphors, thus influencing sexual decision making and action. Therefore, the linguistic expressions related to food that are used in HIV and AIDS related issues in EkeGusii were described in relation to the tenets of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

3. Results and Discussion

According to the Cognitive metaphor theory, metaphor is a tool that is used both in ordinary and specialized discourse and in most cases its use is unconscious. Hence, metaphor use in HIV and AIDS discourse in EkeGusii is prevalent. Firstly, conceptual metaphors allows language users to understand and communicate about complex and abstract ideas in terms of ordinary experiences and are important in interpreting people's notions or common sense. HIV and AIDS in Africa is largely transmitted through heterosexual intercourse, therefore issues dealing with sexuality cannot be ignored when dealing with the epidemic. Thus, HIV and AIDS and sexuality can be understood by ordinary experience like that of food.

Secondly, Moto (2004) observes that the physiological and psychological need to have sex has at times been compared to the body's requirements to be replenished with food from time to time. In EkeGusii, the scenario is not different from Moto's. The speakers use the metaphor *koría* (which means eating) in reference to sex. EkeGusii speakers further understand sex as *koriana* which can be loosely translated as 'eat each other' and it is slightly different from *koría* since the reciprocal morpheme [-na] is added to the verb. In this scenario, the food metaphor is replicated to the two partners as they are assumed to be food that is eaten or consumed by the other partner.

The food metaphor used here is further exemplified by use of *koiya obong'ari* (to excavate a type of sweet honey) in reference to sexual intercourse. In this example, the food metaphor vividly describes the process of excavating honey; a substance that is very sweet. The image invoked by the metaphor of excavating honey transforms the exercise to something that is quite invaluable. The foodstuff that is excavated is thus taken to as appetizing, salivating and sumptuous.

In addition, eating and food are common sources of naming sexual organs and sex related actions. Allan and Burrige (2006) argue that the close association between the alimentary canal and the sexual matters can be explained on the basis that 'food is often the prelude for sex and eating and love making go together. The link between eating and sex has an obvious influence at the linguistic level; indeed, the food/eating metaphor is pervasive in ordinary language and throughout the history of English slang. This metaphor can also be used in reference to oral sex in the sense that the mouth and tongue used in oral sex are also used in eating.

Therefore, the food metaphor tries to understand the sexual taboo in terms of a different domain, food, or more precisely as Kövesces (2006) points out appetizing food. This particular

association provides the language user with different linguistic alternatives from this source domain of food to understand and structure the target domain of taboo, which is sex in this case. The other illustrations of the food metaphor in EkeGusii in reference to sex are; *komeena oboke* and *konywa amabere* which means leaking honey and taking milk respectively. In these illustrations, the food metaphor in relation to sex is compared to using milk and honey. It is apparent that sex is conceptualized as eating and therefore, *eating each other* is equivalent to copulation. The conceptual basis of this metaphor considers preceding terms like appetite, hungry and meal, which all share a common sexual reference namely, *sexual desire*, *sexual arousal* and *sexual intercourse* respectively. The food metaphor is still used when referring to HIV and AIDS.

Moreover, once an individual is infected the food metaphor is consequently used figuratively to define such an individual. For instance a group of EkeGusii young men were overhead describing another young man who had passed on. First, the food metaphor was used to describe his death in that *nigo atiga koragera* which loosely translates to 'he had quit eating.' At a glance, it strikes the listener that the said individual was fasting or he intentionally stopped eating only to realize that it is a metaphor at play. The metaphor vividly captures the image of the dead in that one stops eating once he dies. Secondly, on enquiring further what might have caused the deceased death, two other food metaphors were used.

It was reported that *achegetie chinchoke korwa omotana ime chikamorasa* which means he had disturbed wildly stinging bees from their hive and as a result, he was injured. The metaphor meant that the said individual had unprotected sex and contacted HIV which further caused his death. The stinging bees in this metaphor shows the devouring and exorable nature of HIV and AIDS. The hive in this scenario is compared to an infected individual. The other food metaphor that was used in this case was *nigo anywete amabere amagundo korwa ekerandi kiabande* which means he drank rotten milk from somebody's guard. Here, the metaphor means that he had unprotected sex outside his marriage, got infected and died. The two metaphors aforementioned capture powerful images in EkeGusii as far as sex and HIV and AIDS is concerned. That it is essential to enjoy certain foodstuffs like 'milk and honey' but caution should not be thrown to the winds as one musician in EkeGusii tries to caution his listeners on the dangers of promiscuity by saying that *momura kanywe amabere korwa ekerandi kiao gioka* which means young men, you better drink milk exclusively from your guard. In this metaphor, a guard is compared to a sexual partner. This metaphor is further used to encourage young people to be faithful in their marriages and in turn avoid having the famous Kenyan phrase, *mipango ya kando* (having extramarital affairs).

Furthermore, religion and HIV and AIDS and other related issues are well captured by use of the food metaphor in EkeGusii. Many at times religious leaders use the food metaphor in relation to the Bible to admonish promiscuity in their congregation. They do use the expression *,eating the forbidden fruit* which alludes to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. The intended message is that it is morally wrong 'to eat the forbidden fruit' especially when one not married or ends in danger by contracting AIDS.

Lastly, the HIV positive people do prolong their lives by taking ARVS. The uptake of ARVS is further used metaphorically to define the individuals who are positive and at times it sends a word of caution to the community. EkeGusii speakers know very well that the outward appearance many at times can be deceiving as it may not show that someone is infected. On

one hand, it is common to hear that *ooria nomorwaire, namariogo akonakonywa* which means that person is sick, he is taking medication. Such an explanation automatically means that the person in question is infected and he is on ARVS as it is assumed that the said medication can only be ARVs and not for example, anti-malarials. The food metaphor is thus illustrated by expression, uptake, it is assumed that it is foodstuffs which are drinks or water that are taken. On the other hand, another expression in EkeGusii *oywo nigo anka ritunda ririre na amakonde korwa ime* which means that, 'that person resembles an attractive fruit but with maggots inside'. The food metaphor used here of an attractive fruit that is full of maggots gives a vivid picture of how people may be good looking or attractive hence have an inviting outward appearance of a sexual partner without realizing that they are infected. In reality, maggots do eat and disfigure fruits from inside and this image is used vividly to describe how the AIDS virus destroys the infected from within.

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that AbaGusii culture places restrictions on direct communication in matters concerning HIV and AIDS and sexuality because such direct communication is considered taboo and at times it instills fear to speakers and/or stigmatizes. These matters can be well understood and structured using metaphor. It is clear that food metaphor has been used to understand and structure diverse concepts dealing with HIV and AIDS and sexuality. The metaphors have largely been drawn from linguistic repertoire of EkeGusii speakers thereby making it easy for meaning interpretation. The study further confirms the relationship between language and culture. The contexts that the metaphors are used make the speakers decipher meaning. The discussion has also offered insights into attitudes towards HIV and AIDS and sexuality.

Corresponding Author

Damaris Nyakoe

Department of Linguistics, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Maseno University,
P.O Box Private Bag, Maseno Kenya.

Email: nyakoed@yahoo.com

References

- Achoka, J.S.K. (2007). Female Gender Vulnerability and Challenges of HIV/AIDS to Health, Education and Development in Kenya. In: *International Journal of Disaster Management and Risk Reduction*. Vol. 1 No.1. pp 29-33. Kakamega: Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology.
- Allan, K. and Burrige, K. (2006). *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barcelona, A. (2000). *Metaphor and Metonymy at the Crossroads*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kövesces, Z. (2006). *Language, Mind and Culture: A Practical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Mashiri, P. Mawomo, K. and Tom, P. (2002). "Naming the Pandemic and the Ethical Foundations of Vocabulary." *Zambezia XXIX* (1).
- Moto, F. (2004). Towards a Study of the Lexicon of Sex and HIV/AIDS. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 13(3): 345-362.
- NACC & NASCOP (2012). Kenya AIDS Epidemic Update 2012. Nairobi: Kenya.
- Nurse, D. & Phillipson, G. (1980). Bantu Languages of East Africa. In E. C. Polomé & C. P. Hill (eds.) *Language in Tanzania*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Oloo, P. (2012). Representation of HIV and AIDS Discourse in Nyanza Province, Kenya. *International Journal of Humanities and Social science*, Vol.2, No. (11).
- Selikow, T. (2004). "We have our own Special Language." Language Sexuality and HIV and AIDS. A case Study of Youth in Urban Township in South Africa. *Afri Health Sci*, 4(2): 102-108.
- Standard Digital: Kenya. HIV prevalence in Kisii Region Worrying. www.standardmedia.co.ke/?article. Retrieved on 18th July 2012.
- Zishiri, E. (2010). The Face of HIV and AIDS through Euphemisms Used by Society. <http://www.consultancyafrica.com/index.php?Option=com>. Retrieved on 6th November 2011.