

CALLING A SPADE A BIG SPOON WITH A HANDLE: EUPHEMISMS FOR TABOO WORDS ON SEX IN KIKUYU

By

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Abstract

The present paper reports on the use of euphemisms for taboo terms on sex and sexuality in Kikuyu language. Kikuyu being a majority language in Kenya is comprehended by both native Kikuyu speakers and other Kenyans of different ethnic groups. The aim of this paper is to guide both native and non-native Kikuyu language users on how to use this language by euphemizing it on the central theme of sex. Both primary and secondary data collection methods have been used in this study. The present research has used Politeness theory. The result of the study shows that the Kikuyu people guard against saying things the way they are supposed to be said, especially in polite company.

Key Words: Taboo, Euphemisms, Sex, Kikuyu, Politeness.

1.1 Introduction

Euphemisms for taboo words in any language including Kikuyu help one to say things as if they are not, and by so doing is seen as being polite (Leech 1974, Lyons 1981). This paper looks at euphemisms for taboo words in Kikuyu language that relate to matters of sex. We have chosen to research this topic because sex is guarded in polite company and yet it is very important for procreation and health (Njoroge 2014).

Sex is one of the strongest providers of taboo words. Interestingly, sexuality is the provider of arguably the most popular swear words today, namely the four letter word

(F***) and it's many off-springs. One would think however, that something completely natural such as sexual intercourse, would not elicit anything remotely taboo. Instead, one would think that this activity, which hinges on sex, would prompt positive and happy connection. Unmistakably, this is not the case. Pinker (2007) argues that there are several reasons why sex is tabooed, even today.

Has everyone had fun? Not necessarily. One partner might see the act as the beginning of a lifelong relationship, the other, as one night stand. One may be infecting the other with a disease. A baby may have been conceived, whose welfare was not planned for in the heat of passion. If the couple is related, the baby may be susceptible to a genetic defect (Pinker 2007:347).

In addition, jealousy might be a dangerous opponent should other interested parties get to know what happened as far as sex is concerned, and a problem sets in if a woman engaged in a sex act gets pregnant by another man other than her husband. In such a case the husband might end up raising a child sired by another man especially in a patrilineal marriage setting. The worst misdeed is clearly rape in which one of the parties involved violently forces the other into having sex. Pinker (Ibid) observes that there are many differences between attitude of sex between men and women. In this writer's view, in every act of reproduction, females are committed to long stretches of pregnancy and lactation while males get away with a few minutes of copulation. This author further observes that on the whole, men usually pursue the sex act much more frequently than women. This, to this writer is seen as one reason why the male use swear words more than the female and why sexual talk might be seen as offensive for women rather than for men

The aim of this paper is to enlighten native Kikuyu speakers and protect non-native Kikuyu speakers from using provocative Kikuyu language on sex. They will learn the meanings of words and expressions prohibited in most contexts and the recommended words and expressions for the words that are supposed to be avoided in the Kikuyu language. This paper therefore, gives euphemisms for sexual words that people will dread mentioning in polite company, in the Kikuyu language.

3.2 Methodology

Data for this paper was sampled from two sources. The two sources are primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data was obtained from extensive library research on the topic where books and refereed journal papers from reputable authors were referred to. This library reading formed a basis upon which the topic of euphemisms and taboo words on sex and sexuality in Kikuyu was based.

Primary data for this paper was collected by use of interviews, which lasted for about thirty minutes with each of the respondents. Questions in the interview schedules were carefully constructed eliciting data on socio-democratic characteristics of the interviewee besides wanting to know whether in his or her knowledge there exist euphemisms for taboo words in Kikuyu. Besides respondents ages, other factors like sex, level of education, religious affiliation and income and occupation of respondents were considered as variables upon which use of euphemisms is applied to taboo words on sex and sexuality in Kikuyu language. Even most interesting was the fact that the researchers had native or near native competence of the Kikuyu language by either birth or association.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been applied in research on euphemisms and taboo terms the world over (Halliday's 1987 Socio-Semiotic theory, Austin's Speech Act theory of 2002, and Lakoff's 1973 Politeness/ Face theory that was extended by Brown and Levinson in 1987). The present research has used Brown and Levinson (1987) theory.

Following the lead by Lakoff on Politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that everywhere polite behaviour is based on assumption of cooperation because all social groups need to minimize conflict among co-members.

3.4 Results and Discussion

Below, the present study presents results and discussion on the topic of euphemisms for taboo words on sex and sexuality in Kikuyu language.

3.4.1 Lexicon on Sex

There are words of sexual connotation. The present study found out that these are words that are frequently used in male group talk among the Kikuyu speakers. The findings from the study show that female correspondents use less sex offensive words than their male counter parts. Instead, if forced to, they euphemize the words, topics and expressions. The only exception of calling it as it is, is in the hospital contexts where four letter words are openly used by the medical practitioners of both sexes. The researchers encountered a situation in the maternity wing of Kiambu General Hospital where nurses openly use words like “guika” meaning f*** and “kiino kina *nagiko*” “dirty vagina” without euphemizing them. The researchers observed that these terms were mostly used by female nurses. Some settings may not allow for euphemisms and one such setting is that of the hospital. This is the essence of the concept of register which has to do with language according to use and not user.

Female Kikuyu speaking nurses at the above named hospital used taboo words while on duty for two other reasons. One, the study found out that they were envious of those who were about to get their new borns and so would go a long way to discourage them by use of any means including language. Two, some nurses ended up being nurses as a second option and so did not whole heartedly like the profession and so they ended up transferring their frustrations on their clients using language as a tool.

In Kikuyu, there are various words used to refer to the act of copulation; consider the following data:

Taboo words	Gloss
<i>Guthicana</i>	To have sex
<i>Ngwikwo</i>	To have sex

Euphemism	Gloss
• Gukoma na -	To sleep with
• Gutura	To make a hole
• Kuhaica	To mount onto
• Kuheo	To be given
• Guthegetha	To drill

Gutamura mundu	To hit somebody
• Kuria mundu	To eat somebody
• Kuneo indo -	To be give something
• Kuneo ndurume	To be given a ram
• Kunora thaika	To Sharpen an arsenal
• Kugwata	To have sex with a minor
• Kukanura kinya	To rinse the gourd
• Guthinga mwatuka	To seal a rack
• Kuhinyia wira	To work thoroughly
• Kwenjera gikwa	To dig up a yam
• Kuhura kimandi	To have group sex
• Kuhinyia wira	To work thoroughly
• Guikia muti	Voting
• Guthitithia kihari	To plough virgin land
• Kwihura mbira	To wipe off shoot
• Kihura - muthanju -	Flogging stick
• Kuhura mbiruri	To twirl a wonder cone

Findings of the research revealed that all these terms are used to describe copulation in Kikuyu language. However, it was noted that most of these words can never be used in polite company. The above terms can only be used with close friends and age mates or in the olden days, during initiation into adulthood through circumcision. In all, the researchers found out that the youth could only understand a few of them, the reason being that there is the influence of Sheng in their communication. Thus, the youth have developed other terms in Sheng, a Kenyan Swahili based slang, to mean copulation.

Examples of such terms include, but not limited to, kumangana (to eat each other), kuduu (to do), kukatia (going for/having an affair with), and kupiga mti (beating one with a tree). These ingroup youthful Kikuyu language users euphemise the taboo words for sex and sexuality for their language can be used anywhere without annoying the targeted audience. The aged Kikuyu speakers will not get the meant meaning while the youthful Kikuyu speakers will see it as an ingroup language style.

There are other terms describing copulation that one can comfortably use in polite company so as to save his or her face. Consider the following:

Euphemism	Gloss
Kuonana kimwili	To meet body to body
Kuhumburia nguo	To uncover one's clothes
Kwihumbira na murengeti umwe	To cover with the same blanket
Gukoma	To sleep
Guthii na mundu	To go with someone

Using the above terms, the hearer will be less embarrassed and FTAs will be minimal or none existent at all. As Njeri (2007) rightly observed, sexual activity in Kikuyu is euphemized and mostly equated to a game or a common activity. Consider the following terms that the researchers came across in the course of their research:-

Euphemism	Gloss
Kuhura ndati	To play game of darts
Gutwara muithikiri	To ride a bicycle
Kwanjia mbiruri	Twirling a wooden cone
Guthegethana	To drill one another
Kuhanyahanga	To scratch repeatedly
Kuhinyia wira	To do an activity thoroughly

As the researchers observed, these terms are used mostly by the youth or the ever-green youth who view a sexual act not as a serious activity, which can result to pregnancy or even getting infected by a serious disease, but as an act of enjoyment and passing time. To such respondents, if as a result of the sexual activity the girl involved gets pregnant, they go on describing her as “ni araihurire” meaning gotten filled up. This is because to these youthful Kikuyu language users, sex is just a game.

The Kikuyu are notoriously religious in Christianity for some of the earliest mission stations in Kenyan like Thogoto and Tumutumu are in the Kikuyu nation. Thus in the Kikuyu version Bible, euphemisms are used to refer to the act of copulation. Consider the following verses:

- **Gen 16:2**

Nake Sarai akitiira aburahamu aim, riitri, Jehova aonangira guciara, ngiguiharitha ati utonye, hari miiiritu uyu undungatagira, hihi na gokoruo ndaya kwihanda ni undu wake. Nake abiramu agiitikira kuigua mugambo ucio mumisiri wamutomgatagiru, wetagwo hagai.

And Sarai said unto Abram behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing, I pray thee go unto my maid. It may be that I may obtain children by her And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

"Utonye hari miiiritu uyu ndugatagira" meaning, I pray thee "go unto my maid" is a euphemism for copulation. Ordinarily, going unto somebody can have many meanings that may not necessarily be related to the act of copulation.

- **Gen 29: 23**

And it came to pass in the evening that he too took Leah his daughter and brought her to him; and he went in unto her.

"Akionana nake" meaning "he saw her".

This too is a euphemism used in place of copulation in Kikuyu version Bible.

- **Gen 20:4**

Nariri, Abimeleku ndakoretwo amuthengerere; agikiuria atiri, mwathani, githi woraga ruriri ruthingu?

But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, Lord will you slay a righteous nation?

"Ndakoretwo amuthengerere" meaning "had not come near her". This euphemism means that they had not copulated.

The researchers observed that when a Kikuyu speaking priest is preaching around those verses on copulation, he uses euphemisms to save his image and that of the hearers. Thus all these euphemisms used to describe sex are used so to save the face of both the speaker and the spoken to.

Sex and sexuality cannot be accomplished as human acts without the use of male and female sexual organs. Thus, below we give results and discussion on male and female sexual organs as tabooed and euphemised in Kikuyu language respectively.

4.1.2 The Lexicon on Male Sexual Organ

The male organ is used for urinating as well as for ejaculating. Thus, due to sensitivity of the organ being described, the Kikuyu speakers resort to the use of euphemized expressions. For instance, they use words like “*Itimu*” – “spear” and when such is used, the accurate information which is supposed to be conveyed to the hearer or reader is lost. Such definition styles tend to sacrifice precision in meaning for increased acceptance in the society and as highlighted by Lakoff (1989) politeness supersedes clarity. In this case, the speaker must be polite to save his **face** and that of the listeners. Consider the following terms as used to refer to the male sexual organ by speakers of Kikuyu.

Taboo word	Gloss
• Muthiita	Penis
• Mucuthi	Penis

Euphemism	Gloss
• Itimu	Spear
• Muti	Stick
• Cuma	Metal bar
• Jogoo	Cock
• Mirigo	Load
• Indo	Wealth
• Rwenji	Shaver
• Thiaka	Arsenal
• Icembe	Hoe
• Murao	Plough
• Mucinga	Gun
• Muthi	Pestle

A careful look at the euphemisms of the male sexual organ in Kikuyu shows the societal expectation of Kikuyu man. The men are supposed to be strong, daring, insensitive and having an intense forceful sexual

desire that demands immediate gratification. Spears, guns and arsenals do just that and that is why the penis is referred to as such.

The male sexual organ is represented in positive politeness since it creates a sense of pride and solidarity and portrays men as the “active” partner in sexual matters. This shows that the relationship of people who use such terms is strong enough to cope with what is seen as naturally impolite language (Brown & Levinson, 1987:83).

The testicles are the male sexual organs, which contain seeds of manhood. The use of this term testicles requires politeness; from the study, the researchers discovered that the term testicles is not to be uttered in polite company. Most of the respondents prefer to use euphemisms, in which, the euphemisms of the word give a description of what it looks like and this does not help in explaining it directly. This indicates the Kikuyu societal disapproval of uttering this term in public or in polite company as this violates the moral codes of the Kikuyu. The use of euphemisms indicates the sensitivity that is associated with the term testicle. The most essential element of the meaning is lost. The Kikuyu term or word “*waru*” which is one of the euphemisms, meaning “Irish potato” sacrifices precision for politeness in meaning.

Consider the following data:

Taboo word	Gloss
Nyee	Testicles
Heke	Testicles
Ndendera	Testicles

Euphemism	Gloss
Waru	Potatoes
Mirigo	Goods

Having looked at the male sexual organ, below we give results of the study’s findings and discussion on the female sexual organ as euphemized by the Kikuyu.

3.4.2 The Lexicon on Female Sexual Organ

The researchers observed that in most cases, female genitals in Kikuyu are euphemized for fear of being considered rude and are mostly used by male to male talk and very low female talk. However, the respondents observed that in the event of acquaintance male to female and vice-versa, talk can still use the terms freely. Below are the taboo words and their euphemisms for female genitals in Kikuyu language.

Consider the following terms:

Taboo word	Gloss
Kiino	Vagina
Giti	Vagina

Euphemism	Gloss
Mugunda wa kianda	The lower garden
Indo	Wealth
Jiko	Jiko
Ndiri	Mortal
Murigo	Goods
Mboco	Beans
Kibuyu	Thermosflask

A closer look at the euphemisms used to represent the female sexual organ present a level of passiveness in sexual matters. Most of the words indicate “to serve.” This means that a woman is there to serve the owner who in this context is a man. The owner of the goods being a man, if the owner does not use the ‘goods’, they will stay unused. For instance, if the owner does not use the thermos flask, it will just be there unused. The euphemisms also reveal that a woman’s sexuality is ‘goods’ “*mirigo*” and that it is the property of a man. As Njeri (2007) observes as a matter of fact, Kikuyu men have been heard in many occasions introducing their wives or girlfriends as

uyu niwe mundu wakva

literally meaning, meet my personal thing or

uyu niwe mutirima wakwa meaning

this is my walking stick.

There are terms in Kikuyu language on female sexual organs that are potentially offensive mainly because of the topic and also the profane intent of the expressions. For instance, a woman's behind is referred to as “*mutungi*” meaning “Jerrycan.” This is a way of making this body part trivial or mocking it and so can be highly offensive to the woman who is being referred to as this threatens her self-image. Kikuyu women do take offence when men apply such terms to describe their bodies in what they think are euphemisms. Women breasts and buttocks have been assigned terms to describe them. Below are the terms used to refer to these women body organs in Kikuyu.

Consider these terms for breasts:

Taboo word	Gloss
Nyondo	Breast

Euphemism	Gloss
Makorobia	Avocados
Tuzo	A milk processing plant in Kenya

The researchers observed that the euphemisms for breasts are mostly used by the Kikuyu youth aged 18 – 35 years. The term “*tuzo*” is used when a woman's breasts are seen to be extra big thus seen to be in a position to produce a lot of milk able to sustain a child or children during breastfeeding. The term avocado is used to describe the youthfulness and stiffness of the breasts hence attracting men for sexual acts.

Consider the following words used for a woman’s behind:

Taboo word	Gloss
Itina	Buttock

Euphemism	Gloss
Thutha	Behind
Mutungu	Jerry can
Githurai	A crowded estate in Nairobi
Njikiriro	Sitting apparatus

The researchers observed that the word “*murigo*” which can apply both to a woman’s vagina and her buttocks is common with the youth aged 18-35 years, while the other terms are common with people aged 35 years and above and they all point to the ability of a woman attracting men for sex.

A big woman, who also attracts many Kikuyu speaking peoples, is also described with terms like;

Euphemism	Gloss
Ngari nene	A big vehicle
Momo	A big woman

On the whole, the researchers observed that most of these words on female sexual organs in Kikuyu are used in male to male talk and when used to describe a woman, they can be insulting or sexually appetizing to men. Some Kikuyu men have roaring appetites for fat women hence the use of terms like *ngari nene* and *momo*.

1.5 Conclusion

From the above discussion on tabooess in relation to sex and sexuality in Kikuyu, it clearly comes out that this important topic is avoided if not greatly guarded by by Kikuyu speech community. Not many respondents used in the study were free to tell the researchers what exactly were the names of the organs that form the totality of sex as a phenomenon besides sex being a natural human act. The Kikuyu culture does not apparently approve of saying matters of sex the way they are supposed to. One reason for this could be the fact that female circumcision that taught youthful Kikuyu women some of these so called taboo words has since been stopped by the government of independent Kenya or due to Western culture influences. Besides, globalization has made many Kikuyu speakers exposed to universal culture which jealously guards against careless and carefree talk on sensitive issues that can offend other people in society. In all, however, men among the Kikuyu speakers are not as keen as are women in euphemizing matters to do with sex and sexuality.

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