



A conceptual metaphor analysis of gender construction in Lwisukha of western Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This article categorizes metaphors that construct gender in Lwisukha, one of the Luhya languages spoken in western Kenya into different distinct conceptual domains. This is prompted by the fact that despite the rich oral traditions of Kenyan indigenous languages, there is scanty literature on how gender ideologies are structurally maintained and communicated through metaphor. The objective was to analyse the distinct conceptual domains of metaphors that construct gender in Lwisukha. The study was framed within the Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT). The framework provided the cognitive parameters that helped to systematically analyse and contextualize gender-related metaphors in Lwisukha. A descriptive qualitative research design was used. The study purposively sampled 80 respondents, including boda boda operators and other native speakers, to gather data on social and cultural activities. A corpus of 60 metaphorical expressions about gender were collected, and the metaphors identified using the Pragglejaz Group's (2007) Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). The data was gathered using audio recorders, focused group discussions guide and key informant interviews schedule. The data collected was transcribed, translated into English, and analysed thematically. The study findings revealed the patriarchal gender representation and the concrete source domains used to describe men and women are plants, animals, objects, actions and natural phenomena. The results revealed how Lwisukha language carries information from plants, animals and natural world to build and assess femininity, masculinity in metaphors such as A WOMAN IS A PARASITIC PLANT (Mkhali ni shikulikuli) and A MAN IS A GREEN MAMBA (Msatsa ni inzukha iveve). The Lwisukha metaphors above show dependency in women and dangerous authority in men who should be admired from a distance and never be taken for granted. The study contributes in scholarship in areas of indigenous languages, cognitive linguistics, metaphor studies and gender by providing descriptive linguistic data on metaphorical conceptualization in an indigenous Kenyan language. The study recommends that the metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha and other Kenyan indigenous languages need to be documented and preserved by linguists, cultural agencies, and organizations within the communities. Such metaphors form part of cultural heritage and help understand indigenous knowledge systems, which have been under threat from language change and globalization.

Keywords: Gender construction, Source domains, Patriarchal ideology, Extended Metaphor Theory, Lwisukha

I. INTRODUCTION

Metaphor, as a fundamental mechanism of human cognition and communication, carries deeply embedded cultural connotations. It enables individuals to frame more abstract concepts through culturally shaped imagery and reasoning Kovecses (2020). However, when metaphorical expressions are interpreted solely within the confines of a single cultural framework, they risk being misunderstood leading to miscommunication friction or cultural estrangement (Mudogo, 2019) This highlights the urgent need of more nuanced metaphor studies that consider the diversity of cultural models across languages or societies.

Gender metaphors refer to how we use language to talk about, think about and structure masculine and feminine attributes of people. Gender is conceptualized through other domains since we don't have its physical experience. It is how we map it onto things we do experience that are called source domains Kovecses (2020) illustrates the mappings as: GENDER IS CONTAINER, GENDER IS WAR/SPORT, GENDER IS PLANT/OBJECT, GENDER IS HIERARCHY/SIZE. The mappings illustrated by Kovecses (2020) structure how we reason about gender roles. Embodiment and culture both shape gender metaphors. Kovecses (2000) argues that metaphors come from bodily experience linked to different physical/ social roles historically, as well as situational, discourse and cultural context: Metaphors differs from one culture to another. What one culture counts as masculine, the other one counts as feminine therefore, MEN ARE HUNTERS makes sense in some cultural contexts while MEN ARE

PROVIDERS or MEN ARE EMOTIONAL SUPPORTERS shows up in other cultures. The body gives the basis, but culture selects and reinforces which metaphors stay alive (Wanjala, et al., 2022).

Gender metaphors are systematic and evaluative. Wanjala et al., (2019) notes that conceptual metaphors come in systems and not just in isolated expressions. With gender you see whole networks: MASCULINITY IS HARDNESS, FEMININITY IS SOFTNESS/FLUIDITY, MASCULINITY IS RATIONALITY, FEMININITY IS EMOTION/NATURE. These systems do ideological work; they make certain gender norms feel natural because we talk about them as if they were physical properties. Because Kovecses emphasizes discourse and situational context, gender metaphors aren't fixed. When context changes, the metaphors shift. Gender metaphors work in the same way as cognitive metaphors. They ground an abstract target domain (GENDER) in more concrete source domains (BODY, WAR, NATURE, OBJECTS). But crucially, which source domains get used depends on the body plus the situation, culture and discourse we are in Kovecses (2020).

Lwisukha is considered as one of the sixty-seven languages of Kenya that are alive Lewis et al. (2016). The present study considers Lwisukha as a micro- language(variety) of the Luhya macro-language of Kenya. Lwisukha is a Bantu language and its noun class system can be used to classify nouns in Lwisukha just like any other bantu language according to Nandama, et al. (2022). It is spoken in the Shinyalu and Lurhambi Sub-Counties of Kakamega County, by approximately 403,000 according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019).

Majority of Kenyans use their native language for in-group communication. It is therefore expected that most communication be done in a language that is fairly understood and used by majority of the people. Kibigo, et al., (2019) They assert that, In Shinyalu and the neighbouring constituencies, members of the community use *boda bodas* as the common and public means of transport as they are used during funerals for ferrying people to and from the morgue to their homes and especially if the funeral involves one of their own, they are also used in bullfighting (*Mayo*) which was considered in the community as a cultural practice known as '*Shilembe*' ceremony but has recently been considered a sport activity.

1.1 Research Objective

To analyse the distinct conceptual domains of metaphors used to construct gender in Lwisukha, examining how source domains such as plants, animals, objects, actions, and natural phenomena are used to represent femininity and masculinity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT) propounded by Zoltan Kovecses (2020) presents a holistic view of how conceptual and contextual factors influence metaphor production and comprehensive review and evaluation of contemporary metaphor theories. While traditional Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) leaned towards metaphors being universal due to shared human biology, ECMT heavily emphasizes variation. It argues that metaphor production is dynamic. It posits that because human experiences are filtered through specific local cultures and unique individual biographies, the exact choice and interpretation of a metaphor will differ drastically across different societies, eras and personal life experiences. Kovecses (2020) in his book *Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory* expands this framework to better account for real-time communication, discourse variation and immediate cultural context.

The extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory introduces two main pillars; a multilevel hierarchical structure of concepts and a contextualist view of how metaphors are activated online. In his multilevel hierarchy structure, Kovecses (2020) argues that a single metaphor is not just A IS B for example LIFE IS A JOURNEY instead it is shared across many cultures. The Domains which the present study found talks about the categories of the Lwisukha metaphors which included plants, Animals, Objects, Body Parts, Action, Natural Phenomena and all these metaphors were framed into localized cultural scenarios that hold specific social roles in the specific real-time communicative instances. According to Kovecses (2020), his other major tenet is the contextualist component where he believes that metaphor production is context-induction. He talks of the three contexts which are conceptual which is the cognitive context which includes the overarching cultural ideologies like gender.

Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory intergrates modern grounded cognition theory asserting that activating a conceptual metaphor is not just an abstract computational tracking mechanism in the brain. Instead, where a person encounters a metaphorical expression, their brain runs a real-time neural simulation of the physical source domain.

2.2 Empirical Review

Researchers like Barasa et al., (2017) investigated the Use of Animal Metaphors in the Representation of women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs. The study established that various differences in meanings are associated with the metaphorical schemas of women in Bukusu and Gusii proverbs due to the cultural aspects of these languages.

While the previous study was investigating a concrete entity (women), the current study will be different because it studied the metaphors used to construct gender in Lwisukha, that is the construction of both men and women, and not limit itself to Animal Metaphors that only construct women like Barasa et al., (2017).

This study focused on gendered metaphors. One of the ways in which people construct their identities is through the use of conceptual metaphors. Conceptual metaphors are elements of thought as well and as such they both reflect the inner feelings of language users and describe the world. The use of metaphor is one of the most prominent tools for showing gender. Al - Abdullah (2020), states that there is a close correlation between language, metaphors and thought. He developed this idea that has become the ‘cognitive linguistic view of metaphor’ or known as Conceptual Metaphor Theory.

This study investigated how metaphors used to construct gender in Lwisukha influence their conceptualisation and how they construct gender identities in Lwisukha. Arnawa et al. (2021), conducted a study on the use of metaphor on Balinese women. Arnawa’s (2021) study found out that the use of metaphor is not merely connotatively expressed; it also acts as a representation of society’s moral message, cognition and social attitude in accordance with tradition and social status. Arnawa’s (2021) study applied the conceptual metaphor theory by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) to explain the analogy between vehicle and metaphor tenor on Balinese women. The present study is similar to this in a manner that they have both looked at gender metaphors. While the previous study used Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the present study has used extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory ECMT which is an improvement of CMT.

Wanjala, et al., (2022) study on the metaphoric conceptualisation of pain by Lubukusu speakers in doctor-patient consultation, found out that Lubukusu speakers produce direct metaphors like pain is a hole and so on. In the same vein in Sasala et al., (2022) study on Covid-19 metaphors, he employed direct metaphors whereby he named the pandemic as war. The present study has also found out that metaphors used to construct gender in Lwisukha falls under this category of direct metaphors.

The construction of gender in metaphors refers to how we use metaphor to build, maintain and neutralize ideas about what man and woman are supposed to be Fang and Wang (2026). Language plays a central role in shaping human thought and social interaction and metaphors are among it’s influential tools.

III. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this article is to examine how the sociolinguistic and cultural mechanisms are rich source domains through which gender is metaphorically constructed in Lwisukha. The study employed descriptive research design which falls within qualitative research design approach (Dulock, 1993). This design was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth analysis of metaphorical expressions and the conceptual domains through which femininity and masculinity are represented, without manipulating variables. The study targeted 80 respondents from which 60 metaphorical expressions were identified using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) by Pragglejaz (2007). Stratified purposive sampling technique was employed which involved the researcher identifying groups and individual elders were selected for the purpose of this study.

Data for this study was qualitatively analysed, transcribed, openly coded and translated in English. The present study addressed the validity of research through triangulation of methods to enhance credibility. FGDs provided communally shared metaphors while KIIs provided in-depth cultural interpretation and historical context. The researcher also collected data from different groups of people and at different times to see if it were giving the same results. The interviews and FGDs were repeated to ensure consistency of the responses and clarity of the questions.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

The findings revealed that Lwisukha metaphors are categorized into 6 distinct generic metaphors as GENDER IS A PLANT, GENDER IS AN ANIMAL, GENDER IS AN OBJECT, GENDER IS A BODY PART, GENDER IS AN ACTION, GENDER IS A NATURAL PHENOMENA. From these generic metaphors, the study categorized gender through plant metaphors, animal metaphors, object metaphors, body-part metaphors, action metaphors, natural phenomenon metaphors. Categorization was facilitated by literal meanings of metaphors and led to the identification of culturally familiar characteristics that mapped on women and men’s identity, behaviour, power, morality, and interpersonal relationships.

4.1 Plant Metaphors

This section presents and discusses plant metaphors identified in the *Lwisukha* data. The metaphors draw on culturally familiar plants and plant-related features, including trees, vines, stems, fruits, seeds, vegetables, and other forms of vegetation, to describe and evaluate human characteristics, behaviours, social relationships, and gender

identities. The use of plant-based expressions reflects the close relationship between the *Isukha* community and its natural and agricultural environment, where plants provide important sources of food, medicine, livelihood, cultural knowledge, and symbolic meaning.

Anchored in the Extended Conceptual Metaphor Theory (ECMT), the analysis examines how characteristics associated with plants are mapped onto human beings, particularly women and men, to construct meanings related to sexuality, maturity, physical appearance, social conduct, dependence, power, and moral behaviour. The plant entities function as source domains, while women, men, and their socially perceived attributes constitute the target domains. Through these conceptual mappings, familiar qualities of plants, such as growth, maturity, strength, dependence, fertility, usefulness, and resilience, are transferred to human experiences and social identities.

Table 1
Plant Metaphors

Metaphorical expression	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mukhali ni Shikulakuli</i>	A WOMAN IS A PARASITIC PLANT	A woman who attaches on another woman's husband for material benefits.

The metaphor A WOMAN IS A PARASITIC PLAN (*Mkhali ni shikulakuli*) constructs an image of a woman who either depends on or is attached to a married man. The source domain is a parasitic plant that survives on another plant. By metaphorical mapping, the feature of dependency from the source domain is mapped onto the target domain, which is a woman regarded as being attached to a married man. Thus, the metaphor constructs a stereotype of the female role by portraying her as being dependant, intrusive, and engaging in socially unacceptable sexual behaviour. Barasa et al., (2017) found in Lubukusu that woman as a flower and man as a tree construct inequality. This current study in Lwisukha confirms this however I went further to analyze them using image schemas.

4.2 Animal, Birds and Insect Metaphors

The metaphors are based on familiar human characteristics and behaviours that are represented by animals, birds, and insects. The abundance of animal imagery is a reflection of a close relationship between the community of *Lwisukha* and its natural habitat, and the animal imagery is a reflection of the cultural knowledge of animals of a particular species.

Animals, birds and insects can have positive as well as negative connotations for gender. For instance, certain metaphors equate women with strength, power, courage, or intelligence, whereas others suggest an evaluation of some kind about morality, physical appearance, sexuality, social conduct, or interpersonal relationships. The observable characteristics of the animals, as well as culturally shared beliefs, values, experiences, and communicative contexts, have an impact on their interpretation. The following discussion focuses on the metaphors found and how they translate into their literal context, figurative meaning, conceptual mapping and role as a way to construct gender in the *Lwisukha* speech community as seen in example 2 below;

Table 2
Animal Metaphors

Metaphorical expression	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Msatsa ni Lung'weli</i>	A MAN IS SECRETARY BIRD	A man who has ravenous appetite for women.
<i>Mkhali ni itionyi</i>	A WOMAN IS A FIGHTING BULL	A powerful woman

The findings of the study show that Lwisukha language speakers make prolific use of the visible attributes, actions, environment, body and culturally shared symbolic significance of animals, birds and insects to develop and assess gender identities. The metaphors represent women and men in terms of power, body, sex, morality, pregnancy, personality, social conduct and interpersonal relations. While Cherogony's (2019) study found men to possess strength and leadership and women to be weak and domestic, this present study found that some Lwisukha metaphors view women as powerful.

4.3 Object and Material Metaphors

This section outlines object and material metaphors found in the Lwisukha corpus. These metaphors use objects and materials drawn from the everyday experiences of people, such as tools, utensils, vehicles, and other physical materials, to convey information about human actions, personalities, looks, and identities as in example below;

Table 3*Object and Material Metaphors*

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mkhali ni Itiolo</i>	A WOMAN IS A WOODEN SPINNING TOY	Woman repeatedly doing wrong
<i>Msatsa ni Msumari namba sita</i>	A MAN IS A LONG NAIL	Keeping someone confined

The findings show that everyday objects and materials can be a useful conceptual resource for the speakers to describe women, the men, and socially valued or disapproved behaviours. Objects from household activities, motion and communication, cleanliness, confinement, age, sexuality and social accessibility are the metaphors. The overwhelming predominance of women as a target domain, suggests that, as a language attribute, material metaphors are significant tools in the communication of Lwisukha domain expectations, values, and judgements about the appearance and behaviours of women, as well as their morals, sexuality, and social identity.

The interpretation of the meaning of each expression evolves with culturally shared knowledge, contextual interpretation and the activation of the associated characteristics of the source domain. So, the material qualities of objects and materials are expanded to human behaviours and gender identities. Cherogony (2002) found woman to be material that is soft that can be shaped by men. The study findings seem to be similar since the present study found men to confine women. The two studies show that women can be manipulated and controlled by men.

4.4 Action and Behavioural Metaphors

This section identifies action and behaviour metaphors from the Lwisukha corpus. These metaphors are based on human actions, bodily behaviours and movements used to refer to personality, social behaviour, morality, relationships and gendered identity as in the example below.

Table 4*Action and Behavioral Metaphors*

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mkhali ni Itiolo</i>	A WOMAN IS A WOODEN SPINNING ROD	A woman doing wrong things in the same area
<i>Mkhali ni isese</i>	A WOMAN IS A SPARK	Very talkative woman

The findings suggest that the concepts of gender related identities and social behaviour in Lwisukha can be found in certain source domains such as actions, movements, behavioural patterns and everyday social practices. These metaphors tend to be used to characterize women, especially in terms of marriage, sexuality, morality, social mobility, communication, consistency, and conformity to community norms.

Metaphor A WOMAN IS ROAMING (*Mkhali ni msusumi*) imagines a woman that walks from one marriage to another. The source domain ROAMING OR MOVEMENT is represented in the target domain MARITAL INSTABILITY. In Barasa's (2017) study found that Lubukusu speakers use the Action and Behaviour Metaphors to construct women. Both studies found that metaphors construct what women do is wrong.

4.5 Body-Part and Physical-Condition Metaphors

Body-part and physical-condition metaphors use human body parts, human experience, physical state and sensory properties to talk about human behaviour, personality, health, morality and social identity as in example below;

Table 5*Body-Part and Physical Condition Metaphors*

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mkhali ni Induli</i>	A WOMAN IS GALL BLADDER	A harsh person
<i>Msatsa ni mkhono murambi</i>	A MAN IS A LONG HAND	A thief

It is clear from the findings that *Lwisukha* speakers use their bodily experience, physical states, and bodily features in order to understand personality, morality, social behaviour, aging, and gender identity. This shows that the human body and bodily experience serve as source domains for understanding abstract properties and behaviours. The findings reveal that body-part and physical-condition metaphors in *Lwisukha* are cognitive and cultural tools used to construe personality, morality, cleanliness, aging, social conduct, and gender identity.

Nyakoe et al (2014) in Ekegusii findings show that woman is reduced to SEXUAL PARTS while man to POWER PARTS. The present study found woman an internal body part while man an external body part which means women are to be kept private and men to be public and also having a long hand to take and put women in their custody.

4.6 Place and Environmental Metaphors

The findings show common places and natural elements, like roads, rivers, caves, bushes, lightning, thunder, water, and famine, have been employed as sources to explain behaviour, personality, physical characteristics, social interactions, and gender categories of both men and women as in the example below;

Table 6

Place and Environmental Metaphors

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mkhali ni Shisoko shu Muhoteli/Mubaa</i>	A WOMAN IS A HOTEL/BAR SEAT	Woman available to everyone
<i>Mkhali ni Imbinga</i>	A WOMAN IS A CAVE	Woman never satisfied with men

From these metaphorical expressions, it becomes clear that gender construction in *Lwisukha* is highly intertwined with knowledge about places, landscape, access, scarcity, movement, and social interactions. From this perspective, the metaphors of place and environment show the way in which speakers utilize their physical and social surroundings in order to conceptualize women's actions, sex life, reputation and social standing. All these features are transferred into the target domain of womanhood, which means that the resultant concept of womanhood involves the notion of womanhood being open to everybody.

Onchoke (2019) study found that WOMAN IS KITCHEN to show that woman is domestic and man is public. My study findings show align with the former study as the above metaphors view women negatively. Similar to Barasa, et al. (2017) in Lubukusu and Nyakoe et al. (2014) in Ekegusii found that woman is conceptualized as kitchen object while man as rock. This mirrors my Lwisukha findings where women who are public are viewed negatively as seen in example below;

Table 7

Natural and Environmental Metaphors

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha	Metaphor in English	Gloss
<i>Mkhali ni Luheni</i>	A WOMAN IS LIGHTNING	A light-skinned woman
<i>Msatsa ni Likulu</i>	A WOMAN IS THUNDER A WOMAN IS A NIGHT RUNNER	A frightening woman

Lwisukha speakers use natural events and natural things as source domains used in constructing gender, personality traits, behavior, appearance, and social status of human beings. LIGHTNING (*Mkhali ni Luheni*), A MAN IS THUNDER (*Msatsa ni Likulu*). It is evident from the above examples that *Lwisukha* people base their construction of human characteristics on the observable experiences in their natural and social environment. The study findings reveal that natural processes and environmental occurrences are productive source domains for gender and social identity construction among the *Lwisukha* people. The metaphors relate qualities like brightness, power, depth, movement, scarcity, sickness, and uncertainty to women and other people.

Barasa (2017) in Lubukusu and Atieno (2020) in Dholuo studies also found gender representation as natural Phenomena. Both studies and the present study found woman to be physically attractive while man to possess strength and power, that is, someone to be feared.

V. CONCLUSION & RECCOMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study findings reveal that metaphor is an important cognitive and cultural process for construction of gender in Lwisukha. The metaphorical utterances identified in this study do not simply serve as stylistic devices for decoration of language; rather, they serve as conceptual frames within which the speech community perceives, organizes and judges gender categories, the study shows that the use of metaphorical language helps to preserve the indigenous culture and identity. For instance, the use of metaphors like A WOMAN IS A BULL (*Mkhali ni itionyi*) which is associated with the culture of bull-fighting and shilembe where bulls are involved among the abiisukha cultural practices. The study conclusion drawn from the study is that interpretation of gender metaphors in Lwisukha

is entirely linked to culture cognition. The metaphors' meaning is informed by collective experiences, indigenous knowledge, traditional beliefs and practices. Hence, interpretation of gender metaphors in Lwisukha can only be achieved through awareness of the cultural background. The findings of the study, therefore, confirm that language is the storehouse of cultural knowledge and the means of transmitting cultural values across generations. The metaphors capture the traditional understanding of society, morality, family, and gender.

5.2 Recommendations

Metaphorical expressions in Lwisukha and other Kenyan indigenous languages need to be documented and preserved by linguists, cultural agencies, and organizations within the communities. Such metaphors form part of cultural heritage and help understand indigenous knowledge systems, which have been under threat from language change and globalization. Indigenous metaphors need to be considered in the curriculum and teaching of Lwisukha and other local languages. The inclusion of indigenous cultural meaning contained within metaphorical expressions in the learning process will enhance linguistic proficiency as well as respect for indigenous culture. Universities, research centres, and governments should encourage research into indigenous languages through provision of funds and collaborative efforts across different disciplines. This will go a long way towards preserving linguistic diversity and advancing the field of African linguistics and cognitive linguistics.

Declaration of Interest

The author declares that he does not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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