

A Relevance-Theoretic Analysis of Gendered Insults and the Policing of Female Sexuality among the Gĩkũyũ of Limuru Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract

This study argues that ordinary verbal abuse works as a tool for controlling female sexual behaviour in a corpus of gendered insults in Gĩkũyũ (Eastern Bantu) of central Kenya by using a qualitative discourse-analytic approach. The study is based on the Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004): insults directed at women are not just outbursts of anger but ostensive stimuli that rely on mutually manifest cultural assumptions - concerning circumcision, chastity, marriageability, and animality - to communicate strong disapproval with minimum linguistic effort. All nine insults are qualitatively analysed for the ad hoc concepts, explicatures, and implicatures they entail, and for the higher-level explicatures of the speakers' attitude they encode, from a larger set of insults developed in a doctoral thesis. The analysis reveals that the insult lexicon of Gĩkũyũ consistently reduces women to their genitals, their circumcision or their presumed sexual availability, thus reinforcing a patriarchy based on women's sexuality as communal property that is subject to surveillance. The study's cognitive-pragmatic analysis of the gendered nature of verbal abuse adds to the sociolinguistics of an under-documented African language.

Key terms: Female sexuality, gendered insults, Gĩkũyũ, pragmatics, Relevance Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Insulting speech is universally found in all languages, but the content of the insult—that which a particular language considers most insulting—is never culturally universal. In the lexicon of abuse, there is a record of what is being feared, valued, and policed most anxiously in every speech community (Padilla Cruz, 2019). A significant part of this vocabulary of injustice is concerned with the female body, sexual behaviour, and marital status in the Gĩkũyũ of central Kenya. A neutral anatomical, agricultural or zoological register is systematically re-appropriated to shame, discipline and control women, in particular to police their sexuality: a body part, a domestic animal, a worn cloth.

The importance of Gĩkũyũ oral literature and proverbial wisdom as a place where gender ideology is developed and passed on has been a constant subject of scholarly engagement (Ndungo, 2006; Nwihia, 2005; Gichohi & Subiyanto, 2022). Much less has been written about the common register of insult, and the literature reviewed for the present study reveals a notable gap in systematic analyses of the cognitive-pragmatic processes through which a single word, usually of one or two syllables, can convey an intricate and socially significant moral evaluation of a woman's character. Thus, this study aims to fill this void.

The paper has three aims. It is first to select from a larger repertoire of fifty-four Gĩkũyũ insults drawn up for a doctoral thesis a group of ten items which it argues are disproportionately or exclusively targeted at women and which have a bearing on the regulation of female sexuality. Second, it uses Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004) to explain the communicative impact of each insult: what concept is encoded in language, what ad hoc concept the hearer needs to construct, what explicature and implicature follow, and what higher-level explicature of speaker attitude is conveyed. Third, it reads the efficiency of these insults, their ability to inflict serious damage with minimal verbal input, as relevant-theoretically, the depth of the deep-seated assumptions of patriarchy in the cognitive environment of Gĩkũyũ mutual input.

The analysis is related to three overlapping fields. It continues research in African sociolinguistics on the genres of Gĩkũyũ (proverbs and narratives) and brings to the study of African languages the relatively unknown realm of insult. It brings relevance-theoretic work on insults, which has so far been done almost exclusively on data from European languages such as English and Spanish, into the domain of an African language, whose social organisation of gender is very different to that on which the development of RT approaches to insult is based. In the field of gender studies, it provides a linguistically informed description of the reproduction of women's bodies under the rule of patriarchy, and, in miniature, each time an insult is made.

Building the argument, the paper begins by summarising the tenets of Relevance Theory and situating the analysis in the socio-cultural matrix of gender and sexuality in Gĩkũyũ, with a special focus on the initiation rite (irua) and previous research on gender in Gĩkũyũ oral literature. It then explains the data and method, presents the ten selected insults, provides the correct relevance-theoretic analysis, discusses the patterns that emerge throughout the corpus, and concludes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relevance Theory

Ostensive-inferential Communication and its Relevance to Gendered Insults

This section addresses the ostensive-inferential nature of communication and its application to gendered insults.

The Relevance Theory (RT) model of communication, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995) and further explained in the following papers (Wilson & Sperber 2004), is a cognitive theory of communication. For RT, verbal communication is also special: When a speaker initiates an ostensive stimulus (utterance), the speaker has an informative intention (to say something), a communicative intention (to make the informative intention mutually manifest to speaker and hearer), and the speaker's intentions are made manifest as a result. The model is particularly appropriate for discussing gendered insult as one or more of its Gĩkũyũ terms contains a concept that would need to be elaborated by the listener into a

socially charged ad hoc concept for the insult to be fully understood; the speaker does much of the work for the listener and relies on shared cultural assumptions about women's sexuality to do so, rather than explicitly stating the insult.

The hearer is not supposed to interpret a given meaning but rather to develop an interpretation from the content of the message as linguistically encoded in the message, and also from the assumptions that the speaker made based on the changing mutual cognitive environment. The Gĩkũyũ insults analysed below are full of assumptions about circumcision status, chastity and marriageability, and, indeed, it is those assumptions that enable a one- or two-syllable word to have such an over-strong offensive impact.

The Communicative Principle of Relevance is the centre of this inferential process: each ostensive communication makes a presumption of the correspondence's optimal relevance. Some utterances are optimally relevant to the extent that they provide the cognitive effects (strengthening, revising, or contradicting) that are enough for the least amount of processing effort to achieve them. The hearers are assumed to engage in a relevance-guided comprehension heuristic, testing their interpretive hypotheses in order of access and terminating once an interpretation meets the relevance expectation. The principle also accounts for the effectiveness of the insults discussed, especially the economy of language: the hearer does not require the speaker to explain why calling someone *ngũĩ* ("dog") is degrading—the cultural connection between the two is so salient and unambiguous that the few words used have the greatest cognitive and emotional impact.

Two concepts for the construction of gendered meaning are outlined here: explicature and implicature, as well as ad hoc concepts. Here are two concepts that can be used to construct gendered meaning: explicature and implicature, as well as ad hoc concepts.

RT can recognise both explicit and implicit content. Logical form encoded is a logical form that is further developed and enriched through reference assignment, disambiguation, and free pragmatic enrichment, an explicature; an implicature is a

proposition that is communicated but not explicitly developed, but retrieved through further inference. One of the main mechanisms of lexical pragmatics in RT is the creation of ad hoc concepts: in context, the encoded concept is generally broadened, narrowed, or loosened to produce a concept for the specific occasion—conventionally signified with an asterisk, e.g. DOG*—that need not be consistent with the dictionary definition of the word to which it is applied. It is directly relevant to the present corpus because when a Gĩkũyũ woman is called *ngũĩ* or *ngitĩ* ("dog"), the hearer is allowed to make an ad hoc concept DOG* in which the assumptions that are not required to describe the concept of dog are suppressed and those that are selected and foregrounded, namely the encyclopaedic ones that are relevant in the context of policing female sexual conduct: indiscriminate mating, scavenging, low status.

Additionally, RT also distinguishes between lower-level explicatures (propositional content) and higher-level explicatures, which encode lower-level explicatures under a description of the speech act performed and/or the attitude of the speaker, e.g., "is expressing contempt that [P]." This distinction is important for the present analysis because the nine insults studied do not merely assert a proposition about the target; each also includes a higher-level explicature of the speaker's attitude, such as contempt, disgust, or moral alarm. This higher-level attitude is, for the present purpose, separated from the propositional content of the insults for analysis in Section 5, and the combination of propositional content and attitude of each insult is that which is analysed.

Relevance Theory and the Pragmatics of Insults

The best characterisation of an insult in RT is a linguistic element comprising a higher-level explanation of the speaker's derogatory attitude, along with a lower-level information package that specifies the negative evaluation of the target (Padilla Cruz, 2019). He suggests that insults, epithets, and slurs mark a continuum between 'showing' and 'saying'—some do a lot of showing (the way Sperber and Wilson designate an interjection to be showing), others do a lot of saying (encoding the concepts that instantiate some category with a negative value and which constitute a fully propositional explicature about the target). Many insults, including the

metaphorical and zoomorphic insults that are common in Gĩkũyũ, do much of both: they show contempt, while also saying (via ad hoc concept construction) that the target is an instance of some category with a negative value.

This framework is suitable for the Gĩkũyũ data for two reasons. First, metaphorical extensions to ordinary vocabulary are the most numerous in the corpus of the kind described in this study, in which the referents of the original terms must be constructed for the metaphorical ones to have meaning. The ad hoc construction of concepts for metaphorical (as opposed to metonymic) is precisely the kind of construction that is most required by metaphorical extensions to ordinary vocabulary, which are the most frequent in the corpus studied here. Second, by highlighting such mutually manifest contextual assumptions, RT makes explicit the cultural knowledge, for instance, about the initiation rite, about bride wealth, and about age-grade and gender hierarchy, which a hearer of the RT needs, usually unconsciously and effortlessly, to retrieve the insulting interpretation intended by the speaker. These insults are so short and so devastating because this cultural knowledge is so widely, so easily, and so readily shared.

The Sociocultural Context: Gender and Sexuality among the Gĩkũyũ

***Irua*, Personhood, and the Control of Female Sexuality**
Gĩkũyũ social organisation, traditional, built full personhood through initiation. *Irua*, which is circumcision for males and clitoridectomy for females, signalled the passage into socially recognised adulthood and, in Kenyatta's (1938) seminal work, was deemed essential to the propagation of Gĩkũyũ customary law, religion, and morality. An initiated woman became a full-fledged participant in the community's ritual life, was permitted to marry, and became a mother. In contrast, an uninitiated adult woman was simply a person who was not finished—a person who was not completed, in the social sense of the word.

The simple interpretation of *irua* as a tool of victimisation by patriarchy has been complicated by more recent anticolonial and feminist scholarship. For example, Ngarúiya Njambi (2007) reinterprets *irua* as a

space and community where Gĩkũyũ women created meaning and challenged the colonial and missionary monopoly on interpretation. Ngarúiya Njambi's (2007) account does not so much contradict Kenyatta (1938) as amplify it for current purposes. On a reading that attributes agency to women in ritual, *irua* was the socially authoritative technology that enabled the legitimisation of female sexuality. The post-initiation womanhood was made disciplined, marriageable and able to produce children, a norm against which any excess, precocity or lack of restraint could be judged and condemned. It is this normative architecture, common to both accounts despite their emphases, that is repeatedly exploited by the cultural assumptions embedded in the insults analysed in this study, for instance in *kĩrĩgũ*.

Gerontocracy and Oral Literature and Female Oral Control

In addition to initiation, Gĩkũyũ social life was structured around a gerontocratic, patrilineal hierarchy, within which older men guarded land, livestock, and marriage alliances. At the same time, women's productive and reproductive activities were regulated (Clark, 1980). Gĩkũyũ oral literature has been demonstrated to build and perpetuate this order discursively: the qualities of women are primarily subordination, domesticity, and moral suspicion, whereas men's and Ndungo's qualities are largely positive (Nwihia, 2005; Ndungo, 2006; Gichohi & Subiyanto, 2022). A parallel and illustrative example of women's powerful voice in Gĩkũyũ oral culture is reported by Peterson (2001): the very use of oral language by women was perceived as a disruptive, gender-concerning way to use it by male authorities in the East African Revival in Gĩkũyũ land, which means that oral language—not just its content—was also a contested and gendered resource in Gĩkũyũ society.

Altogether, these three lines of scholarship (Clark's work on the material basis of gerontocratic control, Ndungo's (2006), Nwihia's (2005) and Gichohi and Subiyanto (2022) work on proverb as a medium of gendered subordination, and Peterson's (2001) that women's speech itself was a site of contestation) have enabled us to conclude that verbal genres have been a major medium through which the gender hierarchy of Gĩkũyũ has been produced and contested, not just ritual or material ones. However, none of these works,

investigates the insult as a genre per se, let alone the cognitive-pragmatic processes by which content terms within the genre can produce its effect; it is the interaction of these two approaches—treating insult as a genre which is continuous with the tradition of the proverb or song, and the analysis of the processes by which individual content terms bring about its effect—that the present study will explore. For this research, the discussed insult lexicon is thus treated as an additional, highly abridged genre of this extended discursive device—proverb, song, initiation instruction, and common speech—through which Gĩkũyũ society has historically created, learnt, and enforced norms for female sexual behaviour. The nine insults chosen for analysis are tested against this later in this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative research design, employing qualitative discourse analysis of linguistic data and ethnographic fieldwork (elicitation and participant observation) for data collection. The design is interpretive rather than experimental: it is not a data point to be quantified and tested against a hypothesis, but rather an analysis of each insult in terms of the cognitive-pragmatic mechanism(s) it entails. This discourse analytic (qualitative) perspective is suitable for this study because the goal is to describe how individual instances of insults produce communicative and social effects, not to determine how widespread the use of insults is in a population. The data collection methods used included elicitation and participant observation. The data analysed here are part of a larger inventory of fifty-four Gĩkũyũ insults that were elicited from Gĩkũyũ speakers, some participant observation, and the author's first-language competency in Gĩkũyũ.

The elicitation was conducted with 20 female Gĩkũyũ speakers recruited through purposive sampling in Limuru Sub-County, Kiambu County. The participants were adults aged 18 to 60 years, natives of the study area, and first-language Gĩkũyũ speakers. The elicitation sessions were semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions that involved participants recalling and explaining the insults they had heard or used, and commenting on the meaning and social power of the insults provided by the researcher. Some sessions were audio-recorded and

later transcribed, while others were recorded via handwritten notes, with the researcher's translations. The researcher carried out participant observation in the normal social contexts of the community in Limuru Sub-County such as markets, family gatherings and other natural speech situations in which insults would be used and in which the insult would occur spontaneously over a three month period, during which the researcher captured the use of insults as they happened naturally, together with contextual notes of the situation, the relationship between the speaker and target, and the apparent effect of the insult. This method aims to supplement elicited data with examples of insults used in interaction, thereby reducing purely decontextualised, researcher-led recall.

It was supplemented by the author's own competence as a first-language Gĩkũyũ speaker, who was brought up in Kiambu County, as well as by elicitation and observation, especially in determining the naturalness, register, and connotative power of items, and in providing the encyclopedic cultural knowledge required to interpret them. From the fifty-four items in the inventory, ten items were purposively selected for the present analysis because they are mostly or even exclusively directed at women. Because their insulting force is directed at female sexual behavior, female sexual anatomy or female sexual/marital status, rather than at general purpose faults (e.g., stubbornness, poverty, lack of manners) which are equally applicable to women and men. Ethical behaviour was considered a major topic during data collection, especially regarding the protection of participants' rights and the maintenance of confidentiality. There was no pressure or coercion upon participants to participate, and all precautions were taken.

The analysis is carried out in five stages for each of the ten selected items. The first step is to determine the meaning of the word or phrase as it is actually used (encoded): its literal meaning and dictionary meaning. Second, a Gĩkũyũ-speaking hearer needs to make certain assumptions regarding the context of the situation to reconstruct the insulting meaning of the item, as described in the discussion of gender and sexuality in the Gĩkũyũ above. Third, the concept built based on pragmatic narrowing, broadening or loosening of the encoded concept is defined. Fourth,

the set out explicature(s) and implicature(s) communicated by the utterance are given. Fifth, the higher-level explicature of speaker attitude is specified, and the other social function of the item—what norm it reinforces, and against whom—is discussed.

Two caveats were applied. First, the meaning of an insult is highly dependent on prosody, register, and situational context; the analysis carried out here does not take account of performance-level variation, instead concentrating on the core of contextual assumptions, which is recurrent, conventionalised, and exploited through the use of each item. Second, a

first-language speaker who analyses data from their own language community is a first-language analyst whose interpretations are based on native-speaker competence but are not necessarily experimentally supported. It is suggested that corroborative research with matched-guise or acceptability-judgement methods be developed in the concluding section.

Data: Selected Insults

Table 1 below lists the nine insults selected for analysis, together with their literal glosses. Each is discussed in turn in the relevance-theoretic analysis that follows.

Table 1: Selected Gĩkũyũ Insults Directed at Women, with Literal Glosses

Gĩkũyũ Item	Literal Gloss
Kang'ura	Clitoris
Kĩrĩgũ	uncircumcised girl
Ngũi / Ngiti	Dog
Nyahunyũ	dry, due to lack of (cosmetic) oil
Maraya	Prostitute
Gĩtharia	adulterous (person)
Manyondo	big breasts
Njangiri	wayward person
Ndangari-ĩno	tattered cloth

Note. Items were purposively selected from a larger inventory of fifty-four Gĩkũyũ insults based on their predominant or exclusive application to women and the centrality of female sexual conduct, sexual anatomy, or sexual/marital status to their insulting.

Ethical Considerations

To protect the identity of those involved, steps were taken to anonymise the participants during data analysis and presentation. This approach is in line with the broader ideas that Saunders et al. (2010) have proposed: "Ethical research practice is ultimately about safeguarding the interests of the research participants and others involved in the research

process. The participants were clearly informed before participating in the study about its aims, and it was made explicit that participation is voluntary, meaning that it is possible to drop out without any consequences.

Given the nature of the study, which included questions regarding insults aimed at sexual behaviour,

circumcision status and other topics that were deemed to be sensitive for the participants, care was taken to prevent participants' distress: the participants were allowed to refuse to answer the questions that they considered too sensitive to discuss, the sessions took place in an environment where the participants could discuss the information freely without being overheard, and no participants were pushed to provide more detail on items on which they seemed hesitant to say more.

Confidentiality and anonymity were seen as firm promises: participants were assured that the information they provided would be used only in the context of this study and would not be disclosed or used elsewhere. The necessary formal approval to carry out the research was obtained from the appropriate institutional committees, namely Laikipia University and the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

Limitations

There were several restrictions on these conclusions. The analysis has, of course, abstracted from prosodic and performative variation; matched guise studies and acceptability studies of native-speaker judgements would support and elaborate on the conclusions of this analysis. Second, the analysis has been restricted to insults aimed at women; a complete relevance-theoretic analysis of the parallel subset of the inventory of men-directed insults—including terms such as *kĩhĩĩ*, *gathenge*, and *nyee*—could provide greater precision in the gendered asymmetries identified in the discussion above. Third, the data on the insults in the verbatim section of this study document them only in their traditional derogative sense, and a more ethnographic and sociolinguistic study is required to determine how modern-day Gĩkũyũ speakers, especially women, might be challenging, recuperating, or defying this lexicon of insult.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the analytic approach is applied to each of the ten chosen insults.

Kang'ura ("clitoris")

Kang'ura refers to another sexual organ but one whose cultural value is inextricable from that of *irua*.

In the past, before the abandonment of clitoridectomy, the organ was surgically removed at the moment of initiation, thereby making female sexuality socially legitimate and governable. This institutional history is used as an insult to mean that the woman has traits attributed to *kang'ura*, which they are supposed to possess to control the *irua*, although this may or may not have been the case.

The ad hoc concept KANG'URA* therefore does not refer to an anatomical reality but to an attitude, a character trait: free and untamed feminine desire. It denigrates the addressee for not being sexually autonomous, for being outside the realm of legitimate womanhood altogether. The higher-level explicature is one of scorn, informed by the implication of moral or social danger—the insult makes the target a threat to the communal order, not just to them personally.

Kĩrĩgũ ("uncircumcised girl")

Kĩrĩgũ is a term for an age-grade and ritual-status category—a girl who has not undergone *irua*. When applied to a pre-initiation child, it is not insulting but rather descriptive. When applied to an adult woman, however, it presupposes a pragmatic narrowing of the literal age reference (the addressee is obviously not a child) and foregrounds the encyclopaedic assumptions related to pre-initiation status: immaturity, the absence of the self-restraint imparted through initiation instruction, and non-marriageability.

The ad hoc concept, KĨRĨGŨ*, conveys the strong implicature that the addressee. However, a grown woman was socially and sexually undisciplined – a grave charge in a society where both Kenyatta (1938) and Ngarũiya Njambi (2007) describe *irua* as a key component of full womanhood and marriageability. The insult is effective exactly because it calls on only one of the hearer's deeply embedded cultural schemata—the meaning of *irua* for female personhood—to extract its devastating character judgement from what is (on the surface) a status label.

Ngũi / *Ngitĩ* ("dog")

A paradigm case of zoomorphic insult in the corpus. In the encoded concept, DOG stands for a domestic animal, which is known in Gĩkũyũ (as in many speech communities) to have indiscriminate mating habits, be a scavenger, and be of low value relative to more

valuable livestock. If applied to a woman, it is taken in a loose sense: DOG is extended into the ad hoc concept DOG*, which singles out sexual indiscriminateness, lowered moral/social value, and stifles irrelevant encyclopaedic assumptions about dogs (loyalty, usefulness in herding).

The hearer can easily access the intended concept, having to invest very little effort in processing the information he receives: the relevant stereotype (promiscuous mating behaviour) is readily shared, easily understandable, so that the hearer can infer the intended meaning (or an ad hoc concept) with little effort, and consequently, a high degree of implicature (that the addressee is promiscuous and unworthy of normal moral standards) from a single, monosyllabic-root word. However, the insult, like the preceding showing–saying continuum (as described by Padilla Cruz (2019)), is an interplay of both: showing contempt (in the almost interjectional sense of an outburst of disgust), and saying, through the ad hoc concept, a propositional accusation of promiscuity.

Nyahunyū (dry, due to lack of oil)

The coded meaning is the physical and cosmetic condition of not having an oil applied to the skin; in the cultural context where the ceremonial and daily use of an oil on the skin was a sign of a woman being cared for, provisioned, desired—usually by a male husband or family member. The descriptive content is metaphorically expanded: NYAHUNYŪ* is not just dry skin; it is a woman who lacks a husband's attention and provision, and the implication of lack of provision is of sexual and social undesirability.

The implicature conveyed is that 'you are not wanted; no man provides for you or desires you', and it often implies that if the recipient did engage in promiscuity, they were being neglected. Insult's role is to reinforce an ideology where a woman's body is perceived as an indicator of her success or failure in the marriage economy, thus turning the seemingly benign description of the body into a judgment on her value as a sex and marriage partner.

Maraya ("prostitute")

Maraya (cf. Swahili *malaya*) represents a categorical concept, that of a woman who accepts exchange of sex for material interests. However, when the word is

used as an insult, it is seldom used in its very limited connotation. In an ad hoc manner, the concept MARAYA* is expanded to include any behaviour interpreted as an excess or as an expression of female agency in the sexual dimension: flirtation, polygyny, immodest clothing, or simply socializing with men outside the woman's kin group.

This broadening is motivated by relevance: Recruitment of a single maximally offensive, readily accessible category (commercial sex work) to produce strong cognitive and emotional effects (public shame, reputational damage) with little processing effort required (by the hearer, it only needs to access one well-known stereotype, and not have to assemble a more nuanced description of the addressee's actual behaviour). The higher level explicature is one of condemnatory moral evaluation. The social role of the term is therefore not limited to the labelling of actual commercial sex work, but extends far beyond as it is ad hoc and elastic; its mere existence in the lexicon already disciplines behaviour close to the edge of perceived immodesty, thus creating a wide chilling effect on women's public conduct.

Gĩtharia ("adulterous")

In customary Gĩkũyũ marriage, marital infidelity is encoded in the term *Gĩtharia*, and as such has specific and serious consequences as questions of paternity are directly implicated, as are questions of lineage legitimacy, and the transactional obligations of bride wealth (*ruracio*). The term is broadened from the legal marital offence to a generalised character trait, GĨTHARIA*—a tendency towards sexual untrustworthiness as such (which is directed even at unmarried women).

By invoking *gĩtharia*, the speaker not only assumes a large number of institutional presumptions about lineage, inheritance, and communal legitimacy, but, with one lexical item, also threatens the social and reproductive order itself rather than just her bad behaviour. A clear case of the degree of insulting efficiency of a term being directly proportional to the gravity of an institutional assumption it can trigger with little processing cost.

Manyondo ("big breasts")

Manyondo is entirely descriptive, and addresses the size of the breast. The insulting use of it relies exclusively on a presupposition that is not part of its meaning: that the apparent, or indeed the actual, salience of the woman's body or sexual parts is immodest and socially disruptive, and therefore inappropriately demands the attention of males or implies that the woman is sexually precocious. MANYONDO* is an ad hoc concept, in which the addressee's body is reduced to a single part (metonymy) and at the same time a neutral physical fact is expanded into a critique of provocative or sexually appealing behaviour.

For the insult to take effect, there is no need actually to report anything about the woman's conduct; her body is enough proof for a verdict with a moral basis. Analytically, it is significant because it shows more clearly than the other items how the lexicon of Gĩkũyũ insults the policing of female sexuality, since it does not single out any actual sexual act, but rather the appearance of the body.

Njangiri ("wayward person")

Njangiri is not overtly gendered in its morphology, yet is analysed here because of its use in relation to women who do not conform to the norms of womanhood, such as unmarried older women, women who travel alone, or women with independent economic resources. The word "encoded concept" refers to someone without direction or order.

When the word *exploits* is applied to women, it assumes that women of value can only exist in a household led by a man and a community that monitors them; a woman who is not in such a household is 'wayward' in this sense, that is, by not being in such a household, she is 'wayward'. The implication is that unsupervised female mobility, spatial, social or economic, is also a sexual risk that needs to be corrected. This is an example of the regular merging in the corpus of women's autonomy with sexual risk.

Ndangari-ĩno ("tattered cloth")

The metaphor adopts a new, valuable item—cloth—which has been worn down by repeated use and is now deemed suitable for discards. The ad hoc concept

NDANGARI-ĨNO is based on the assumption, implicit in a marriage economy based on bride wealth, that the value of a woman's sexuality is comparable to the 'newness' of a commodity that is exchanged.

The metaphor is relevant to this particular context, and it is efficient because that's already a fully present and easily manipulated image in the shared cognitive landscape of any Gĩkũyũ household and only requires minimal further cognitive work to map onto the image of sexual and marital value, which might be more readily available and manipulable in other cultures. Of all things, this is an example that makes the ordinary, non-sexual vocabulary, which is always there, accessible for all sorts of uses—including sexual surveillance—especially visible.

Discussion

Patterns in the Policing of Female Sexuality

Four recurring strategies emerge across the nine insults analysed above. The first is bodily metonymy, exemplified by *manyondo*, in which the whole person is reduced to a body part and evaluated through it. The second is recourse to rite-of-passage and status terminology, exemplified by *kĩrĩgũ* and, in a different register, *kang'ura*, in which the institution of *irua* is recruited as the measure of legitimate female sexuality, such that any perceived deviation—symbolic or literal—from the disciplined, post-initiation subject is treated as a denial of full womanhood. The third is zoomorphic and object metaphor, exemplified by *ngũi/ngiti* and *ndangari-ĩno*, in which complex moral judgements are communicated with minimal processing effort by mapping familiar non-human domains—animal mating behaviour, the depreciation of household objects—onto female conduct. The fourth is categorical moral-legal labelling, exemplified by *maraya*, *gĩtharia*, and *njangiri*, in which whole identities rather than specific acts are named, and whose elastic ad hoc construal extends their disciplinary reach well beyond their narrow prototypes (commercial sex, adultery, aimlessness) to any perceived transgression of modesty or supervision norms.

Relevance Theory offers a principled explanation of why these four strategies are so communicatively efficient and, hence, so effective as instruments of social control. Each insult achieves strong cognitive

and emotional effects—public shame, reputational damage, fear of social exclusion—for remarkably little processing effort, because each exploits assumptions that are already mutually manifest within a shared, historically constructed cognitive environment. The institutional meaning of *irua*, the transactional logic of bride wealth, the gerontocratic organisation of marriage and land (Clark, 1980), and the broader corpus of proverbs and oral literature that consistently construct women as morally suspect (Ndungo, 2006; Nwihia, 2005; Gichohi & Subiyanto, 2022).

Indeed, the very brevity and apparent triviality of these insults—a single word for skin condition, an animal name, a term for cloth—is itself evidence, on relevance-theoretic grounds, of just how deeply entrenched the underlying patriarchal assumptions are: an utterance can only be optimally relevant, achieving large effects from small input, when speaker and hearer already share the bulk of the interpretive work in advance.

A further pattern concerns gendered asymmetry. The wider fifty-four-item inventory from which this subset was drawn also contains insults directed principally at men—for example, *kĩhĩĩ* ('uncircumcised boy'), which invokes the male counterpart of the same initiation institution discussed above. Comparative work on gendered verbal aggression in other language communities likewise reports systematic asymmetries in the thematic content of insults directed at women versus men (Špago, 2020). Consistent with that broader pattern, the female-directed items examined here overwhelmingly cluster around sexual modesty, marital fidelity, and marriageability, whereas male-directed insults in the wider corpus more often index incomplete initiation, cowardice, or social incompetence rather than sexual conduct as such. This asymmetry suggests that, whatever else Gĩkũyũ insult vocabulary accomplishes, it disproportionately constructs women's bodies and sexual conduct—rather than men's—as the primary site requiring linguistic surveillance.

Finally, it is worth noting that the corpus is unlikely to be static. As with any living lexicon, individual items are subject to semantic change over time, and general sociolinguistic research on slurs and pejoratives documents a recurring pattern whereby stigmatised

in-group terms come to be reclaimed or redeployed ironically by younger speakers or by members of the targeted group itself, often as an act of resistance or solidarity (Brontsema, 2004; Bianchi, 2014). Whether categorical labels such as *maraya* are undergoing a comparable process among younger, urban, or feminist-identified Gĩkũyũ speakers is, at this stage, an open empirical question rather than an established finding of the present study. The verbatim data collected for this study show these terms in their conventional derogatory use only, with no instances of self-referential or ironic redeployment. Confirming whether such a shift is under way would require dedicated sociolinguistic fieldwork targeted at that specific question—for instance, corpus sampling of younger speakers' usage in informal or online registers, or attitude surveys comparable to Špago's (2020) study of gendered insult perception. Accordingly, this is flagged as a priority for future research rather than advanced as a finding here.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The specific set of ten Gĩkũyũ insults that target women's sexual behaviour, sexual anatomy, or marital and initiation status has been analysed in this study using Relevance Theory. These insults appear to be more than just a single "word," or vocalisation. Rather they are carefully—if unwittingly—calibrated ostensive stimuli, each purposefully operating on cultural assumptions that are shared between the speaker and receiver, but are at the same time elaborately and cleverly designed to produce a robust ad hoc concept, explicature, and implicature of the target, along with a higher-level explicature of the speaker's contemptuous attitude, from an amazingly small amount of explicit linguistic material. The four recurring strategies identified are genital/bodily metonymy, rite-of-passage terminology, zoomorphic metaphor, and object metaphor, all of which appear to have a common project: the regulation of female sexual conduct in a patriarchy-based gerontocracy that historically depended on *irua* (bride wealth) and male-dominated land and lineage.

The study makes three contributions. It brings to an under-documented African language, whose social organisation of gender is very different from the contexts from which relevance-theoretic work on insults has, up until now, been drawn, the insights of

this approach. It takes an approach that explores gender issues in Gĩkũyũ oral genres, with proverb and narrative genres receiving much research attention, and examines the comparatively under-researched register of everyday insult. It provides a linguistically accurate description of how the control of women's bodies is reproduced, on the miniature level of the speech act of insult, in the patriarchy.

Recommendations: Based on study limitations, three future research directions are suggested. Second, matched-guise or acceptability-judgment studies should be conducted with native Gĩkũyũ speakers to test the hypotheses suggested here through empirical research and to document the impact of prosody and performance features that the present analysis was unable to consider. Secondly, a comparative relevance-theoretic study of the male-directed subset

of the insult inventory (e.g., *kĩhĩĩ*, *gathenge*, *nyee*) is recommended to more precisely clarify the thematic content and communicative mechanisms of male-directed insults compared with those directed at females. Third, corpus sampling for a sociolinguistic fieldwork study like the one done on younger speakers' usage in informal or online registers, and/or attitude survey studies similar to what is found in Špago (2020) on gendered insult perception, is recommended to determine whether terms like *maraya* are being reclinate or ironically redeployed by younger, urban, or feminist-identified speakers, which is not empirically tested here. The results of this strand may be relevant to gender-based violence discourse and to Gĩkũyũ-language policy and pedagogy more generally.

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