

Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Context-Specific Honorific Forms in Lubukusu

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of context-specific honorifics in Lubukusu. It specifically examined how honorific forms are linguistically realised and categorised by social and interactional contexts. Honorifics are important in social interaction because they help speakers express and negotiate relationships, status, affection, respect and social distance. It is against this premise that the study examined the forms and socio-pragmatic functions of honorifics in Lubukusu. The study is theoretically grounded in Kecskes's (2013) Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) to pragmatics. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative design. The study purposively sampled 24 native Lubukusu speakers from Bungoma West Sub-County. The study collected data primarily through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, supplemented by selected secondary materials. Data were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. A total of 50 context-specific honorific forms were identified from the combined primary and secondary data and categorised into four groups: familial, affectionate, occupational and age-based. The findings show that honorific forms are context-dependent and may perform different social actions, including expressing respect and social distance. This study adds knowledge to Lubukusu pragmatics and expands the understanding of the Lubukusu honorific system.

Key terms: Context-specificity, honorifics, socio-pragmatics, social action, Socio-Cognitive Approach.

INTRODUCTION

Honorifics provide linguistic resources through which speakers recognise and negotiate social relationships. They show social dimensions such as age, kinship, social status, authority, occupation, familiarity, solidarity and social distance. The interpretation of an honorific cannot always be derived from its conventional or lexical meaning alone; it requires attention to the relationship between interlocutors and the social and interactional context in which the form is used. This context-sensitive character makes honorifics particularly relevant to socio-pragmatic investigation.

Brown and Gilman's (1960) analysis of French *tu/vous*, together with related address systems in European languages, connected linguistic choice to the social dimensions of power and solidarity. Their analysis demonstrated that reciprocal use of an informal form may express social closeness, whereas formal forms may show social distance and that asymmetrical patterns may reflect unequal power relations. The study demonstrates that linguistic choices can encode and negotiate social relations. This provides a rationale for extending socio-pragmatic research to African languages such as Lubukusu.

In East Africa, Habwe (2010) examined honorifics as politeness resources across formal and informal encounters. His findings indicate that honorifics contribute to face management, help define and sustain social strata and support social cohesion. Importantly, the study also demonstrates that the meaning and effect of an honorific may change according to context. For example, commonly used forms such as *bibi* (wife), *bwana* (husband) and *mzee* (old man) do not necessarily produce the same honorific effect in every interaction, while forms such as *askofu* 'bishop', *maalim* 'religious teacher' and *sheikh* occur in more specific contexts. This observation shows that honorific meaning in an African language cannot be adequately explained by treating forms as fixed markers of status. Instead, their interpretation is connected to the social relationship, communicative setting and purpose of the interaction. Nevertheless, Kiswahili occupies a distinctive position as a national and regional lingua franca and has undergone extensive standardisation. Its honorific practices cannot automatically be assumed to represent those

of Lubukusu, whose systems of kinship, age, authority and community organisation may differ. This creates a need for studies that examine honorific practices within individual indigenous speech communities.

Lubukusu is the native name for the language spoken by the Bukusu people. It is a member of the macro-language Oluluhya from the Bantu group of languages spoken in western Kenya (Masika et al., 2023; Wafula et al., 2023). Masika et al. (2023) and Eberhard et al. (2022) classify Lubukusu as a Niger-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid language of Southern narrow Bantu, Central Masaba of the Luhya family. Its use is rooted in the social organisation and cultural practices of the Babukusu, including kinship relations, age distinctions, social roles and forms of authority. These sociocultural dimensions provide a basis for examining how speakers use linguistic expressions to recognise relationships, negotiate interpersonal positions and accomplish communicative purposes. In such a setting, a form associated conventionally with one social relationship may acquire another function when used in a different relationship or interactional context. The study of Lubukusu honorifics therefore requires examination of how speakers use and interpret those forms within the social organisation of the community.

Research on Lubukusu has increasingly addressed pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions of the language. Mandillah & Atichi (2021), for example, examined the functionality of lexico-pragmatic strategies in selected Lubukusu secular music texts. Their study identified strategies including euphemism, code-switching, lexical borrowing, repetition, metaphorical extension and irony, which demonstrates the importance of contextual interpretation in Lubukusu discourse. More recently, Wekesa, Barasa & Mose (2026) investigated politeness strategies in Lubukusu verbal compliments, focusing on how politeness is expressed through compliment discourse within the cultural context of the Bukusu community. These studies demonstrate that Lubukusu scholarship is increasingly engaging with language as socially situated action. However, their primary objects of analysis are lexico-pragmatic strategies, compliments and politeness rather than the honorific system itself.

The distinction is important because politeness and honorification are related but not synonymous. A compliment, for example, may perform a polite or solidarity-building function without constituting an honorific expression, while an honorific may be used strategically for purposes other than politeness. Consequently, findings from studies of Lubukusu politeness and compliment discourse cannot by themselves account for the forms, categories and contextual functions of Lubukusu honorifics. What remains insufficiently documented is how speakers identify and deploy honorific expressions across different social domains and how the interpretation of these expressions changes according to social relationships and interactional circumstances.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Abdulhusain & Alfelugi (2024) associate the use of honorifics with the expression of regard and social esteem, while Matthews (2007) emphasises their role in signalling socially relevant information about the person addressed or referred to. Agha (2007), however, draws attention to the variability of honorific systems across speech communities, arguing that their forms and categories are closely related to particular sociological systems and culturally established practices. This perspective suggests that honorifics cannot be adequately understood through a universal inventory of forms. Rather, the linguistic realisation and interpretation of honorifics are shaped by the social organisation of particular speech communities. Honorifics therefore provide linguistic resources through which speakers recognise, construct and negotiate socially meaningful relationships.

Honorification may be realised through occupational, academic, political, religious and institutional titles. Ugorji (2022) identifies a wide range of such forms, including occupational titles such as *Doctor*, *Captain*, *Coach* and *Officer*, academic titles such as *Doctor* and *Professor*, and institutional expressions such as *Your Honour*, *Your Excellency*, *Prime Minister* and *Senator*. Religious titles such as *Archbishop*, *Bishop*, *Pastor*, *Elder* and *Deacon* similarly associate linguistic forms with institutional or religious positions. These expressions do more than identify an occupation or institutional role; their use may simultaneously recognise expertise, authority, prestige or socially established status.

Habwe (2010) provides an African example; he identifies religious forms such as *askofu* 'bishop', *mchungaji* 'pastor' and *maalim* 'religious teacher', political forms such as *mheshimiwa* 'honourable', *waziri* 'minister' and *mtukufu* 'His Excellency', and professional forms such as *mwalimu* 'teacher', *profesa* 'professor' and *ustadhi* 'Muslim teacher'. These forms demonstrate how honorification may operate across institutional domains to recognise authority, professional qualification and social distance.

The significance of occupational and institutional honorifics, therefore, extends beyond simple reference to a person's position. Their use may construct a particular relationship between interlocutors by foregrounding professional expertise, authority or institutional status. Habwe (2010) demonstrates that Kiswahili honorifics operate in both formal and informal encounters and contribute to the negotiation of social relationships and social cohesion. This suggests that the interpretation of an occupational or institutional honorific depends not only on the status associated with the title but also on the relationship between participants and the circumstances in which the form is used. Honorification is consequently both referential and relational: a form may identify a social position while simultaneously performing an interpersonal function.

Kinship provides another important domain through which honorification is constructed. Braun (1988) defines kin terms primarily in relation to blood and affinal relationships, but Farghal & Shakir (1994) demonstrate that kin terms may acquire a broader social function as relational honorifics. Although their denotational meanings designate particular family relationships, such forms may be used connotatively to maintain and enrich social interaction between both related and unrelated participants. This distinction demonstrates that a form's conventional or literal meaning does not necessarily determine its interactional meaning. A kin term may be extended beyond biological or affinal relations to construct respect, familiarity or social connectedness.

Habwe (2010) identifies Kiswahili forms such as *baba* 'father', *mama* 'mother', *shangazi* 'aunt' and *mjomba* 'uncle' as socially meaningful forms of address. Lusekelo and Mpobela (2024) further discuss *baba* as

an honorific marker capable of operating across institutional and informal domains. Ugorji (2022) documents kinship-related honorific expressions in Efik, including forms associated with parents and grandparents; Ude and Moses (2023) show that Ibibio honorifics are sensitive to linguistic position and social context, including relational expressions such as *añwaan mmi* 'my wife' and *ukod* used toward an in-law to communicate acceptability and respect. These studies demonstrate that kinship expressions can function as socially productive resources beyond literal family reference. Their honorific value emerges through the social relationship and context in which they are deployed.

Farghal & Shakir (1994) show that affectionate terms may be used among intimate interlocutors, including spouses, lovers and parents and children, functioning as social honorifics that communicate interpersonal orientation. Agha (2007) similarly emphasises the relationship between honorific registers, emotional stance and social identity. These observations broaden the understanding of honorification beyond hierarchical deference. Respect and social recognition may also be communicated through intimacy, affection, solidarity and emotional attachment.

Age constitutes another important dimension of honorification. Habwe (2010) identifies age-related Kiswahili expressions such as *kaka* 'elder brother', *dada* 'sister' and *mzee* 'elderly person'. Such expressions demonstrate that age can be constructed as a socially meaningful category. Brown and Levinson (1987) similarly associate social distinctions such as age with face considerations and social distance, particularly where culturally expected forms are violated. Age-related honorification therefore participates in broader cultural expectations concerning respect, interpersonal positioning and appropriate social conduct.

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Kecskes's (2013) Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA) to pragmatics. SCA views meaning construction as influenced by speakers' intentions, prior experience, socio-cultural knowledge and the immediate context of interaction. The interpretation and social function of an honorific may

depend on factors beyond its conventional or lexical meaning.

SCA also gives importance to speaker intention and communicative goals in pragmatic interpretation. Speakers make linguistic choices in order to accomplish particular communicative purposes, while hearers interpret those choices in relation to the situation and the knowledge available to them. This principle examined the interpersonal purpose associated with the selection of a particular honorific. The analysis considered whether the use of a form could be understood in relation to purposes. The intention associated with an honorific was therefore treated as an interpretive dimension rather than as an inherent property of the linguistic form.

Kecskes (2013) also emphasises the role of previous experience and socially shared knowledge in the construction and interpretation of meaning. Particular attention was given to knowledge concerning kinship relations, age, gender, occupational roles, authority, religious practices and other culturally recognised relationships. This enabled the analysis to consider how speakers and hearers draw on socially established knowledge when interpreting an honorific in a particular interaction. Thus, an honorific was analysed as a linguistic resource whose interpretation may depend on knowledge shared within the Lubukusu-speaking community.

A third analytical concept is interaction and social relationship. SCA views pragmatic meaning as emerging in interaction rather than being determined independently of the participants involved. The present study examined the relationship between the speaker and the addressee or referent in each contextualised use of an honorific. The analysis considered relationships such as kinship, age difference, occupational or institutional status and familiarity. This dimension was important because the same linguistic form may be interpreted differently when used between participants occupying different social positions or maintaining different types of relationships. The analytical focus was therefore placed on how the relationship between interlocutors contributed to the interpretation and function of the honorific.

Within SCA, meaning construction is sensitive to the actual circumstances in which communication takes place. In this study, situational context determined the communicative setting in which an honorific was used or reported. The analysis distinguished contexts such as domestic and familial interaction, occupational and institutional interaction, religious discourse, traditional or communal settings, and peer interaction. Attention was also given to the immediate circumstances surrounding the use of the form, since the same honorific could potentially carry different pragmatic implications when used in different contexts. Context was therefore treated as an active component in interpretation.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive research design because it sought to describe and interpret honorific use within its social and communicative contexts. The study was conducted in Bungoma West Sub-County. The target population comprised native Lubukusu speakers who actively use Lubukusu as a medium of communication, and Lubukusu is spoken in its almost stable and homogeneous form, with minimal influence from neighbouring languages or dialects (Masika, 2017). The study employed purposive sampling in selecting participants and the honorific forms for analysis. As noted by Palinkas (2015), purposive sampling involves selecting information-rich cases that are relevant to the objectives of a study.

A total of 24 native Lubukusu speakers participated in the study. The participants comprised 12 younger adults aged 18 to 40 years and 12 older adults aged 40 years and above. Each age group consisted of six males and six females. Within each age-and-gender subgroup, two participants had primary education, two had secondary education, and two had post-secondary education.

Primary data were generated through semi-structured key informant interviews and interactive focus group discussions. Researchers conducted the interviews and focus group discussions in Lubukusu and audio-recorded them. The primary data were elicited with reference to domestic settings, public and institutional settings and traditional and communal settings.

Secondary Lubukusu materials, including transcribed folktales, local radio talk shows, church sermons, community records and relevant published linguistic materials were analysed to complement the primary field data. They were organised according to their source and communicative domain, after which relevant honorific forms were identified, transcribed and translated into English for purposes of analysis.

Priority was given to forms that demonstrated contextual flexibility and could acquire multiple socio-pragmatic meanings across different interactional situations. Following this process, 50 honorific forms were retained for detailed socio-pragmatic analysis and classified into four major analytical categories according to their dominant social domains. The data were analysed through qualitative thematic and contextual analysis.

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the Masinde Muliro University Institutional Ethics and Research Committee (IERC) and a research permit from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Authorisation was also obtained from Bungoma West Sub-County offices. All participants were informed about the purpose and objectives of the study, the nature of the data to be collected and the intended use of the findings. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study without negative consequences. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical data demonstrate that Lubukusu honorifics occur in a diverse range of linguistic forms, including independent lexical items, contextual address terms and complex morpho-syntactic constructions. Four major structural categories were realised: familial honorifics (16 forms), affectionate honorifics (14 forms), occupational honorifics (11 forms) and age-based honorifics (9 forms), as discussed below.

Familial Honorifics

In the study, the researcher found and discussed the following forms, which constituted the largest category, accounting for 16 (32.0%) of the corpus.

Papa /'pa.pa/ "father"

The form refers to one's biological father. Its use in a family context is illustrated in the extract below:

Yakobho: *Papa khenja kwaya chikhafu ekewa ndayukha akolobha.* 'Father, I am going to graze the cows at the river; I will return in the evening.'

The utterance was presented by Wambulwa, a young male respondent with secondary education, as an example of an interaction between a son and his father. Here, *papa* identifies the addressee through his paternal role and recognises the socially expected relationship between the two interlocutors.

The data further showed that *papa* is used for a father's brother and, among some younger respondents, for middle-aged men perceived to belong to their fathers' age cohort. It was also reported in caregiving contexts, where mothers or caregivers used *papa* when addressing male children, particularly when expressing affection or soothing them.

The use of *papa* also extends into public and religious contexts. During the focus group discussions, participants provided the expression "*Papa Francis Atwoli omundu we bhabhandu*" (Father Francis Atwoli, a man of the people), where *papa* conveyed public respect and esteem. In religious discourse, *Papa* refers to God, giving the form a reverential meaning.

Speakers draw on shared socio-cultural knowledge linking *papa* with fatherhood, age and respect, while the particular interaction and communicative intention shape its meaning.

Mayi /'ma: ji/ "mother"

The form refers to one's biological mother and the mother's sister. The data also showed that the form extends to middle-aged women who are perceived to belong to the speaker's mother's age group. Such women can be addressed as *Mayi*, regardless of whether they are biologically related to the speaker. This use reflects a cultural association between age and social respect, whereby women perceived to be of one's mother's generation are accorded a corresponding form of address.

The analysis further showed that *mayi* could be associated with motherly qualities such as care and nurturing. One young female respondent reported using the term when addressing her middle-aged nanny because of her caregiving role. The form also occurred in child-directed interaction, where it could be used affectionately toward a female child. The following extract illustrates this use:

House help: "*Mayiinja onywe bhuyu.*" (Mother, come and take some porridge.)

Child: "Aaah... aaah."

House help: "*Mayiinja ndakhuwa switi.*" (Mother, come, I will give you a sweet.)

Here, functions as an affective address term through which the house help adopts a nurturing stance toward the child. The pragmatic interpretation of *mayi* depends on the relationship between the participants and the immediate interactional purpose.

A further illustration of the contextual flexibility of *mayi* occurred in the expression *Mayi mayi woo ali waye?* 'Mother, where is your mother?' Here, the two occurrences of *mayi* perform different functions within the same utterance. The first is used as an affectionate form of address to the daughter, whereas the second refers to the daughter's mother. The meaning of *mayi* therefore emerges from the interaction between the linguistic form, shared knowledge, social relationship and immediate context.

Omukhasi /o.mu. 'xa.si/ "wife"

The honorific's primary use is to refer to a married woman, particularly one's wife, as in expressions such as *omukhasi wa* 'wife of', where the form shows marital and affinal relations.

The data also showed that *omukhasi* could refer broadly to an adult or socially mature woman. Respondents associated the form with female maturity and participation in adult social roles. This use was illustrated in the statement *Nekesa saii omukhasi, kolile lilia* 'Nekesa is now a mature woman; she can get married.'

A more marked use occurred when *omukhasi* was applied to a male who was perceived to be fearful. Respondents reported that the form could be used

toward males of different ages in situations where their behaviour was considered cowardly. The following extract illustrates this use:

Father: “Mironi warire kwingila.” (Mironi, you have feared to be circumcised.)

Son: “Seningila ta esilikho omutiti.” (I cannot be circumcised; I am still young.)

Father: “Ewe omukhasi bhuri bhwakwingilemo.” (You are a woman possessed with fear.)

Here, the father uses the form to censure the son's fear and challenge his willingness to undergo circumcision. The honorific therefore acquires a face-threatening evaluative function in which a kinship term associated with a woman is used to question a male's courage.

Omusecha/o.mu. 'se. tʃa/ “Husband”

The form is used to refer to one's husband, as in *omusecha wa Nasambu* ‘Nasambu's husband’, where the form identifies a male through his marital relationship and affinal status.

The data also shows that *omusecha* can refer to an adult or socially mature man. Respondents associated the form with males who had attained social maturity and were considered ready to assume adult responsibilities, including marriage. This use was illustrated in the statement *Wekesa saii omusecha, anyala kabheisia* ‘Wekesa is now a man; he can marry’.

A further extension occurred when *omusecha* was used to praise courage or bravery. Respondents reported that the form could be applied to both men and women who demonstrated exceptional courage. The following extract illustrates this use:

Brother: “Nafuna niwe wama kwira endemu?” (Nafuna, are you the one who killed the snake?)

Sister: “Yee nise.” (Yes, I am the one.)

Brother: “Ewe omusecha wasee.” (You are a man, my guy.)

In this exchange, *omusecha* is applied to a female speaker besides its function as a literal reference to a husband or male identity. Rather, it evaluates her action positively by associating her with courage and fearlessness. The form therefore extends from marital

and gendered reference to a broader evaluation of personal character. Thus, *omusecha* can perform different social actions without a change in its linguistic form.

Khocha / 'kʰó. tʃa/ “uncle”

*Khoch*a primarily refers to one's mother's brother. The term also extends to the mother's male cousins and, in some accounts, to close male friends or neighbours who are socially associated with the maternal family.

The data indicated that when a young person engages in behaviour regarded as socially unacceptable, the maternal uncle could be involved in addressing the matter and providing correction. In this sense, *khoch*a shows a socially recognised relationship of authority and responsibility within the maternal family network.

The study also identified *chomba* as a variant referring to ‘uncle’. Unlike *khoch*a, however, the data associated *chomba* more strongly with informal interaction among younger speakers. *Khoch*a was associated more closely with maternal kinship and family authority, whereas *chomba* occurred in a more informal peer setting. The difference is therefore not simply lexical but also socio-pragmatic, since speakers select the form according to the relationship and interactional setting.

Kuka / 'ku. ka/ “grandfather”

Kuka ‘grandfather’ is used to address or refer to a male grandparent. It also extends to elderly men perceived to be of a grandfather's generation as a generalised term of respect, showing the social value attached to seniority.

Elderly speakers could use the form when addressing grandsons and young boys, including children who were not biologically related to them, to express familiarity and affection. The form was also reported in humorous or ironic contexts involving younger males who display behaviours associated with old age, such as excessive seriousness or stiffness.

The immediate interaction and communicative intention determine which aspect of this knowledge becomes relevant. Thus, the form may express respect when directed to an elderly man, affection when used toward a younger male, or humorous evaluation when

applied to a young person whose behaviour is associated with old age.

***Yaya*/'ja. ja/ "sibling"**

The form is used by Lubukusu speakers to address or refer to biological brothers and sisters and also to paternal and maternal cousins. Its reciprocal use across older and younger siblings indicates that it is not restricted to a particular age position within the sibling relationship.

The data further showed that *yaya* extends beyond biological kinship to non-kin community members perceived to be of a similar age to the speaker. In such contexts, the form could replace a personal name and establish a more respectful or solidaristic relationship between interlocutors. Respondents perceived requests containing the form as more socially appropriate than equivalent requests without it, as illustrated below:

- i. *Mbe chumbe*. (Give me salt.)
- ii. *Wekesa mbe chumbe*. (Wekesa, give me salt.)
- iii. *Yaya mbe chumbe*. (Brother/Sister, give me salt.)
- iv. *Yaya Wekesa mbe chumbe*. (Brother/Sister Wekesa, give me salt.)

Respondents perceived the first utterance as relatively direct, while the second was considered acceptable. The third and fourth were regarded as more appropriate because *yaya* invoked a relationship of familiarity, equality and mutual respect. In this context, the honorific contributes to the social acceptability of the directive by framing the request within an already established or invoked interpersonal relationship.

When *yaya* is used with non-kin or within a request, the immediate interaction and communicative intention shape which aspect of this shared knowledge becomes relevant.

***Omukoko* /o.mu. 'ko. ko/ "sister"**

The honorific *omukoko* 'sister' was identified as a gender-marked kinship term used primarily by male speakers to refer to their sisters and female paternal cousins. The data indicated that the form could be used for both older and younger sisters, suggesting that its use is not determined by the age position of

the referent. Respondents also glossed *omukoko* as *omukhana wefw*e 'our girl', highlighting the collective and relational meaning associated with the form.

The use of *omukoko* was further reported to extend to female cousins on the father's side. This distribution gives the form a more specific kinship reference than the English term 'sister', as its use in the Lubukusu data is associated with paternal kinship.

Male speakers reported using the form more frequently in referring to female kin, while female-to-female use was reported less often. Lubukusu speakers draw on this shared socio-cultural knowledge when selecting the form, while the particular relationship and interactional context determine how that knowledge is activated.

***Omusani*/o.mu. 'sa.ni/ "brother"**

The data indicated that male and female speakers use the form to refer to circumcised brothers and circumcised male paternal cousins. Respondents glossed *omusani* as 'our boy', linking the form to shared kinship and group identity. A younger speaker could use the form for an older circumcised brother, just as an older speaker could use it for a younger circumcised male relative. This pattern suggests that, in the contexts reported by participants, circumcision status was more relevant to the selection of *omusani* than relative age.

Respondents also reported that the form could be applied to a brave or respectable man, where it conveyed qualities associated with courage, maturity and strength. Speakers draw on shared socio-cultural knowledge linking circumcision with manhood, communal membership and socially valued qualities. The immediate relationship and communicative purpose determine how this knowledge is activated. Thus, *omusani* may identify a circumcised male relative, acknowledge shared ritual experience among non-kin, or express approval when used for a man perceived as brave or respectable.

***Senge* /'se. ŋe/ "aunt"**

The analysis identified *senge* 'aunt' as referring to one's paternal aunt, or father's sister. The data indicated that *senge* is distinguished from *mayi* 'mother', which is used for maternal aunts.

The data further showed that *senge* carries a deferential function within family interaction. Respondents reported that addressing a paternal aunt by her personal name could be considered impolite, particularly in interactions involving younger and older family members. The use of *senge* therefore recognises the addressee's kinship position and expresses respect.

The data also showed that *senge* could be extended outside the immediate family context, including uses for unfamiliar or middle-aged women in social interactions. In such contexts, the kinship term provides a familiar relational frame that can reduce social distance and make an interaction more socially acceptable.

In the Lubukusu data, the use of *senge* in non-kin contexts similarly draws on shared knowledge of the respectful relationship associated with an aunt. The communicative context determines whether the form functions primarily as kinship reference or as a resource for establishing familiarity and reducing social distance. When the form is used for a non-kin woman, the immediate interaction and communicative purpose activate these associations in a different way.

***Kukhu* /'ku. kʰu/ “grandmother”**

The form is used to refer to both paternal and maternal grandmothers. It was reported across different age groups and educational backgrounds. The data further showed that *kukhu* extends to elderly women within the community. Respondents reported that younger speakers would generally avoid addressing an elderly woman by her personal name because this could be perceived as *sileka* ‘disrespectful’. In such contexts, *kukhu* functions as a respectful form of address that reduces social distance and acknowledges the addressee's seniority.

The honorific also showed a reciprocal and affectionate use. Grandmothers, grandfathers and other elderly speakers could use *kukhu* when addressing granddaughters and young girls with whom they had an affectionate or familiar relationship, including some non-biological relationships. The data therefore show that *kukhu* could operate in different directions, with its

interactional meaning depending on the relationship between the participants.

Respondents further reported a metaphorical use of *kukhu* for young girls who displayed behaviours associated with elderly women, such as excessive seriousness, conservatism or strongly traditional mannerisms. In familiar settings, this use could function humorously or ironically. The form therefore draws on shared cultural associations between *kukhu* and particular age-related behaviours to produce an evaluative meaning that differs from its literal kinship reference.

***Mukhwasi*/mu. 'xʷ.si/ “brother-in-law”**

The honorific is used by a married man to refer to his wife's brothers, male cousins and other male relatives on the wife's side, as well as close male friends associated with the wife's family. Its use therefore extends beyond the immediate brother-in-law relationship while retaining an association with the wife's side of the family. The use of *mukhwasi* therefore recognises the affinal relationship and provides a respectful way of addressing the interlocutor.

The data further indicated that the use of *mukhwasi* was associated with male speakers. Participants reported that women did not normally use the term to address or refer to male relatives on the husband's or wife's side.

Lubukusu speakers draw on shared socio-cultural knowledge concerning marriage, affinal relationships and appropriate forms of address. In interaction, this knowledge is activated when these speakers select *mukhwasi* to recognise the relationship and maintain respectful alignment.

***Mulamwa*/mu. 'lam.wa/ “sister-in-law”**

The term is an affinal honorific associated with relationships established through marriage. Its primary referent is a man's wife's sisters, but the term also extends to the wife's female cousins and, in some cases, close female friends associated with her natal family. The data further indicate reciprocal use: the wife's sisters, female cousins and associated female friends may use *mulamwa* to refer to the wife's husband.

The data also show that *mulamwa* may be used by the husband's siblings, cousins and close friends when referring to the wife's sisters or other female relatives connected to her family. These users may themselves be addressed as *mulamwa*. Respondents nevertheless identified the relationship between a man and his wife's sister as the central social meaning of the term, with the other uses understood as extensions. In interaction, *mulamwa* provides a respectful way of addressing or referring to people connected through marriage and can help maintain familiarity and social harmony in affinal relationships. Therefore, the pragmatic meaning of *mulamwa* emerges from the interaction between its conventional kinship association and the social context in which it is used.

Simakulu/si.ma. 'ku.lu/ "elder sibling"

Simakulu "elder sibling" is a kinship honorific associated with seniority and birth order within the Lubukusu family structure. The term refers to an elder brother or sister, with particular emphasis on the firstborn child. Respondents associated *simakulu* with age, responsibility, and the respect traditionally accorded to senior siblings. Firstborn children are also expected to guide and mediate between parents and younger siblings, giving the term an interactional dimension beyond simple birth-order reference.

Addressing an elder sibling as *simakulu* therefore recognises the addressee's senior position and performs respect within the family. The term was reported more frequently among respondents aged 40 years and above, while younger speakers were described as preferring *yaya* in sibling interaction. Older respondents also reported an extended use of *simakulu* for the eldest male within a group of unrelated men to show relative seniority within the group. This extension can be understood through the interaction of shared cultural knowledge and the immediate context.

Mutuwa/mu. 'tu.wa/ "lastborn sibling"

This honorific is associated with youthfulness and junior status positioning within the Lubukusu speech community. The term primarily refers to the youngest brother or sister, particularly the last-born child in a family. Respondents associated *mutuwa* with endearment, protection and reduced social responsibility.

The data also indicate that *mutuwa* may be used when addressing a younger sibling or child and, in some cases, an adult who remains the lastborn in the family. Its use is therefore not restricted to childhood. Respondents further reported that the term can refer to the youngest boy or girl within a group of children or youths, and sometimes to a person perceived as physically smaller or less mature than others in the group.

Speakers draw on shared knowledge that a lastborn is typically associated with youth, dependence and protection, while the immediate context determines how that knowledge is activated in interaction. The meaning therefore emerges from the interaction between the conventional kinship association, the relationship between the interlocutors and the communicative purpose of the utterance.

Bhasakwa /ba. 'sa. kwa/ "parents-in-law"

Bhasakwa "parents-in-law" is associated with affinal relationships between the parents of a married couple. The term is used by the parents-in-law of both sides to address one another, irrespective of age or gender. Its reciprocal use foregrounds the shared affinal relationship and the mutual respect expected between the two families. The term provides a culturally recognised form of address that maintains social decorum while acknowledging the relationship created through marriage.

The data further revealed an extended use of *bhasakwa* among men who have married sisters from the same family. These men may address one another as *bhasakwa*, drawing on their shared affinal connection. In this context, the term invokes the wider social relationship created through marriage.

Speakers rely on shared cultural knowledge about marriage, affinal obligations and appropriate forms of address, while the particular relationship and interactional context determine how *bhasakwa* is understood. When used between men married to sisters, for example, the term activates shared affinal identity.

Occupational Honorifics

Lubukusu speakers employ occupational honorifics to mark authority, prestige and role-based respect within

formal and semi-formal domains. In the study, it was observed that the majority of the occupational honorifics used in Lubukusu are loanwords, primarily borrowed from Kiswahili and English. Respondents explained this pattern by noting that most modern occupations and professional roles such as those in education, medicine, religion and administration were historically introduced through formal schooling, colonial administration and institutional religion. Kiswahili and English have long held prestige and dominance in these specific domains; Lubukusu lacks indigenous lexical equivalents for some of these modern roles, which makes borrowing a natural linguistic response.

Importantly, the respondents suggested that these borrowed occupational honorifics undergo morphological adaptation to conform directly to the grammatical system of Lubukusu. Occupational honorifics recorded 11 (22.0%) of the total corpus.

Omwilwachi/o.mu. 'wi. lwa. tʃi/ “preacher”

Omwilwachi is primarily used by church congregants to address or refer to preachers and ministers. In the church context, the use of *omwilwachi* draws on shared socio-cultural knowledge about the religious role of the preacher, making that role relevant to the interaction. The interpretation of the honorific therefore depends on the interaction between this shared knowledge and the immediate religious context.

Sifumbukho, an elderly male participant, explained that the community metaphorically applies the term to highly talkative or noisy village members, particularly individuals who speak excessively, uncontrollably or loudly in public spaces. In this vernacular extension, the activity of speaking loudly and continuously is humorously associated with *kwilwacha* “preaching”. The focus group discussants further indicated that this usage is commonly applied to local drunkards who move along public paths making disruptive or incoherent noises. This figurative extension involves a shift from a respectful occupational honorific to an expression of ridicule or social criticism.

Omwami/o.mu. 'wa.mi/ “boss”

The honorific is associated primarily with authority and supervisory roles in institutional and workplace

settings. Respondents used the term for individuals who control an organisation, supervise employees or issue instructions. In this context, *omwami* shows occupational status and institutional authority.

In informal interactions, speakers use it to address peers and strangers as a friendly and respectful form of address. For example, “*Omwami Oriena.*” (How are you, boss?) Here, *omwami* invokes the respect associated with the occupational title while creating a more familiar interactional relationship. Its use resembles the broader use of English *boss* or *sir* in informal encounters. The honorific can therefore reduce social distance and establish rapport between people who may have no prior relationship. The data further indicate that *omwami* may be used to soften requests, particularly in first-time encounters.

An important extension occurs in religious discourse, where *omwami* is used to refer to God. Expressions such as *omwami we mwikulu* (Lord of heaven) and the standalone *omwami* occur in prayers, sermons and religious conversations. In this context, the term shows supreme authority and reverence rather than occupational status.

Takitari/ta.ki. 'ta. ri/ “doctor”

Takitari “doctor” is a borrowed honorific adapted from the Kiswahili *dakitari*. Its primary use is in the medical domain, where it refers to a formally qualified medical practitioner and shows professional expertise. Respondents also reported its use for holders of doctoral degrees in non-medical academic fields, where it shows advanced education and intellectual competence.

A further extension occurs when *takitari* is applied to people regarded as skilled in particular activities. The example “*Omulosi oyo mukhuloka takitari*” (that old woman is an expert in witchcraft) illustrates the use of the term to attribute exceptional expertise outside biomedical practice. Respondents also reported its use for traditional healers or witchdoctors. Within the local socio-cultural context represented in the data, this use reflects an understanding of healing that can include spiritual and ritual practices alongside biomedical medicine. Its pragmatic flexibility demonstrates that the social meaning of the honorific is shaped by the

interaction between its conventional association with expertise and the context in which speakers use it.

Purofesa /pu.ro. 'fe.sa/ “professor”

The findings identified *purofesa* “professor” as a loan adaptation of the English term *professor*. Its primary use is as an academic honorific for a senior university or higher-education academic and shows scholarly expertise, research authority and institutional status.

The data indicate that *purofesa* was used more frequently among respondents with post-secondary education (PSE), particularly university students and less frequently among respondents with lower levels of formal education.

The data also reveal a broader, evaluative use of *purofesa* in community interaction. Speakers may refer to someone perceived as highly knowledgeable, someone who explains extensively, or someone who presents themselves as capable of dealing with many kinds of problems. In such contexts, the honorific can acquire humorous or ironic meaning.

The ironic use of *purofesa* draws on shared knowledge of the conventional association between professors and advanced knowledge. The immediate conversational context then alters how that association is interpreted: rather than conferring genuine academic status, the term becomes a humorous evaluation of perceived or exaggerated expertise.

Mwalimu /mwa. 'li.mu/ “teacher”

The Respondents primarily associated the term with a person who teaches or imparts knowledge in formal and informal educational settings. The expression *mwalimu asomia bhasomi* ‘a teacher teaches students’ illustrates the conventional relationship between the teacher and learners. In this context, *mwalimu* represents institutional authority and recognised knowledge, positioning the referent as a legitimate transmitter of knowledge.

The data also showed that *mwalimu* extends to describe individuals regarded as knowledgeable or experienced in a particular domain. For example, one respondent used the expression *Raila kabha mwalimu wa siasa*, ‘Raila was a teacher of politics.’ Here,

mwalimu attributes expertise and authority in political affairs to the referent. The honorific therefore acquires its interpretation from the social context in which it is used.

Matamu /ma. 'ta.mu/ “madam”

Matamu is a gender-specific honorific used primarily to address adult women in formal and polite interaction. Respondents associated the term with female adulthood as well as respect and social distance. In institutional encounters, for example, *Matamu oriena* ‘How are you, madam?’ was considered more appropriate than the bare *oriena* ‘how are you’, which respondents described as abrupt or overly direct. The contrast indicates that *matamu* functions as a resource for marking respectful distance in interaction.

The use of *matamu* was particularly evident in institutional settings such as schools, hospitals, offices and public-service environments. Respondents reported using it when addressing female teachers, head teachers, administrators, supervisors and managers. In these contexts, the honorific recognises the addressee's institutional position while avoiding a potentially over-familiar use of a personal name. Its function is therefore not limited to identifying gender; it also indexes the relationship between the participants and the formality of the setting. Speakers associate the form with adult womanhood, respect and institutional propriety, while the setting and relationship between interlocutors determine how these associations are activated.

Omupeni /o.mu. 'pe.ni/ “artist”

Omupeni “artist” is a broad occupational honorific referring to musicians, singers, dancers, actors, dramatists, comedians, and instrumentalists.

The data further revealed that *omupeni* may extend to individuals who demonstrate exceptional verbal creativity, wit, or storytelling ability. For example, a witty storyteller or humorous speaker may be referred to as *omupeni* in recognition of their expressive skill. In this context, the honorific evaluates the person's performance.

The immediate context determines whether the term recognises a professional artist or evaluates the expressive skill of an ordinary speaker.

Omuyinda/o.mu 'jin.da/ “boss”

The honorific is used to refer to a person who exercises authority over labour or resources, particularly in work settings. Respondents associated the term with business owners, contractors and supervisors, including individuals who exercise decision-making authority at construction sites. In such contexts, *omuyinda* shows control over work and resources and recognises the referent's position within the workplace hierarchy. The expression from the data: *Omuyinda wa Manchester United*, ‘the owner of Manchester United Football Club’, similarly extends the term to ownership and control of organisational resources.

The data further showed that *omuyinda* can index perceived wealth and socioeconomic status. A financially successful or materially influential individual may be referred to as *omuyinda*. Here, the honorific derives its interpretation from the speaker's shared understanding of the person's resources and social position.

Fundi/ 'fun.di/ “artisan”

The findings indicated that *fundi*, a Kiswahili loanword, primarily refers to a skilled craftsperson such as a mason, carpenter, mechanic or technician. The term identifies practical expertise acquired through experience or apprenticeship and shows competence in a particular technical domain.

The data further showed that *fundi* also describes individuals who demonstrate a high level of competence or mastery in other activities. In this use, the term functions evaluatively, highlighting effectiveness, consistency and skill. Example: “*Kasongo fundi we bhubheyii*.” (Kasongo is an expert in lying.) Here, *fundi* retains its association with mastery, but the activity being evaluated is socially disapproved.

Omusikari /o.mu.si 'ka.ri/ “soldier”

Omusikari is a Kiswahili-derived honorific, adapted from *askari* to fit Lubukusu phonological and morphological patterns. In its conventional use, *omusikari* refers to a soldier or police officer whose institutional role is associated with security, discipline and the maintenance of public order.

The data further showed that *omusikari* extends to describe individuals perceived as strict, disciplined or uncompromising. For example: “*Papa wewe omusikari sekasima kumwinyawe tawe*.” (His father is a soldier; he does not tolerate nonsense.) Here, *omusikari* evaluates his interpersonal conduct by associating him with the discipline and firmness conventionally associated with security personnel. This extended meaning of *omusikari* draws on shared knowledge about soldiers and security personnel as figures associated with discipline, firmness and enforcement. The immediate context then determines which aspect of this knowledge becomes relevant.

Omukhebhi/ o. mu. k'he.bi/ “circumciser”

The *Omukhebhi* refers primarily to the person who performs circumcision during the initiation of boys into adulthood. Respondents also associated the role with post-circumcision care, including treatment of wounds and monitoring recovery, as well as with guidance on adult conduct, discipline and social responsibility. The honorific therefore identifies not only a ritual practitioner but also a socially recognised figure associated with the transition to adulthood.

The study also indicated that *omukhebhi* can metaphorically be used to refer to people who guide others through difficult situations. Respondents reported that a referee, mediator or adjudicator may be described as *omukhebhi* in contexts where firmness, guidance and judgment are required. This extension preserves the association between the circumciser and the broader social role of guiding someone through a consequential process.

Age-based Honorifics

The findings revealed that age-based honorifics are used to encode social seniority within the Lubukusu community. They recorded 9 honorifics representing (18.0%) of the total corpus.

Omusakhulu /o. mu.sa. 'khu.lu/ “old man”

The *Omusakhulu* primarily refer to an elderly man with advanced age. Elderly men addressed as *omusakhulu* may be regarded as sources of advice and guidance and as participants in mediation and other matters requiring seniority. The form therefore represents advanced age in men within the community.

The data further showed that *omusakhulu* can be extended to younger men whose behaviour is perceived as resembling that conventionally associated with older men. In such contexts, the form is typically used humorously or ironically in informal peer interaction. Here, the characteristics conventionally associated with an elderly man are mapped onto a younger referent. The resulting use may function as humour, teasing or mild social correction rather than literal age reference.

The interactional context and relationship between speakers therefore determine whether *omusakhulu* functions as a respectful age-based honorific or as a humorous and potentially face-threatening characterisation.

***Omulosi* /o.mu. 'lo.si/ "old woman"**

The honorific is used to refer to an elderly woman. The term shows advanced age within the female gender category. The data also revealed that *omulosi* is used to refer to younger women who display behaviours culturally associated with old age.

Additionally, the term can refer to someone's mother or even wife and also be used to refer to someone's female lover. The grammar completely separates the word from physical wrinkles, biological fragility or family lineage constraints, mapping these matriarchal qualities onto an active romantic partner; the vocabulary creates an intense zone of private endearment.

***Bakoki* /ba. 'ko.ki/ "age mate"**

The honorific is used to refer to a person belonging to the same or approximately the same age cohort as the speaker. Its use is particularly associated with peer interaction, where shared age provides a basis for familiarity and mutual recognition.

The data further indicated that *bhakoki* is commonly used among adults who share significant life experiences, including initiation, education and marriage transitions, though it was strongly associated with interaction among speakers of similar age. Its use across different age groups was less prominent, indicating that age-cohort membership is an important part of the social knowledge activated by the form.

***Omwana* /o.mu. 'wa.na/ "child"**

The findings showed that *omwana* is commonly used by adults when addressing or referring to younger individuals. In this conventional use, the form shows a difference in age or life stage between the speaker and the referent.

The data, however, revealed that *omwana* can also be applied to adults. In such contexts, the form takes on an evaluative meaning rather than simply identifying chronological age. Respondents associated this use with perceptions of immaturity, incompetence or insufficient social maturity. When used during disagreement or conflict, addressing an adult as *omwana* may therefore challenge the person's claim to maturity or authority.

The contrast between these uses demonstrates the contextual flexibility of the form. When directed toward a younger person, *omwana* can function as a relatively neutral age-based reference. When directed toward an adult, the same form can become a critical or face-threatening characterisation. Its interpretation consequently depends on the relationship between the interlocutors, the interactional setting and the speaker's communicative purpose.

***Wase* /'wa.se/ "my fellow"**

The findings indicated that *wase* is a relational honorific used predominantly among peers and associated with relatively equal age standing.

Respondents associated its use with informal interactions among peers, particularly in marketplaces, social gatherings and cooperative activities. In these contexts, *wase* signals familiarity, trust and affiliation. Speakers recognise the form as more than a neutral reference to the addressee and use it within contexts where familiarity and affiliation are relevant. The form consequently provides a linguistic resource for constructing horizontal alignment among interlocutors.

***Omusecha* /o.mu. 'se. tʃa/ "mature man"**

The honorific is used to refer to a mature man. Beyond chronological age, respondents associated the form with social maturity, reliability and culturally valued attributes of adult manhood, particularly bravery, resilience and decisiveness.

The contextual use of *omusecha* further showed that its meaning is not restricted to literal maturity. For example, in the expression Ewe *omusecha lekha khulila* ‘You are a man, stop crying’, the honorific occurs within a directive addressed to an adult male. Here, *omusecha* invokes shared cultural knowledge about adult manhood and expected maturity, while the accompanying directive (*lekha khulila*) calls for a particular response to the situation. The form also occurs in contexts where an individual is praised for courage or bravery.

Omukhasi /o.mu. 'kha.si/ “mature woman”

Omukhasi is an honorific used to refer to a mature woman. In the data, the form was associated with maturity and the socially recognised responsibilities of adult womanhood.

The data further revealed a metaphorical extension of *omukhasi* to male individuals perceived as cowardly, timid or lacking bravery. The expression therefore functions as a form of teasing, criticism or social evaluation, depending on the relationship between the interlocutors and the circumstances of use.

Sumba /'sum.ba/ “male youth / bachelor”

The honorific is used to refer to a young man who has reached a socially recognised stage of adulthood, particularly one who is considered marriageable but not yet married. The form therefore shows chronological youth and also a culturally recognised life stage between adolescence and established marital adulthood.

The data further indicated that *sumba* can carry positive associations with youthfulness, physical strength and capability. In expressions such as *sumba kwe kamani*, ‘young man of power’ is used to associate young manhood with strength and power. This meaning is also reflected in the secondary data from a Lubukusu musical performance by Matata, where the phrase *nise yaya sumba kwe kamani*, ‘my guy, I am a youth of power’ presents youth as a valued social identity associated with strength and confidence.

Omuraka /o.mu 'ra.ka/ “youth”

Omuraka is used to refer to a young person who has moved beyond childhood and is approaching or has attained social maturity; the form identifies a

particular stage of the life course. Its use therefore reflects chronological age and a recognised transition toward adulthood.

The use of *omuraka* also carries an association with social readiness and responsibility. When elders use the form to refer to a young man, the expression may invoke expectations of responsible conduct and behaviour appropriate to an emerging adult.

In this sense, the honorific can position the referent within a culturally recognised stage in which greater participation in communal responsibilities is expected. This normative meaning, however, is dependent on the context in which the form is used.

Affectionate Honorifics

The findings showed that affectionate honorifics in Lubukusu express emotional closeness, endearment and social solidarity. They occur as modified kinship terms, evaluative expressions and diminutive constructions. They recorded 14 honorifics representing 28.0% of the total corpus.

Khalayi // k'ha.la.ji/ “good one”

In its conventional sense, *khalayi* denotes something good, admirable or pleasing. When applied to a person, it functions as an affectionate form of address that positively evaluates the addressee.

The data further showed that *khalayi* occurs among close friends and in caregiver-child interaction. In the latter context, the form can be used to comfort and reassure a child. For example, an elderly female respondent provided the following utterance:

Mother: “*Khalayi khang sila okhalila ta ewe omulayi.*”
(My good one, keep quiet, do not cry, you are good.)

In romantic and peer contexts, this knowledge supports expressions of endearment and admiration, while in caregiver-child interaction it is activated to provide reassurance and emotional support.

The form thus illustrates how shared socio-cultural knowledge interacts with the immediate relationship and communicative purpose to construct affectionate meaning.

Khalinjola / kʰa.lin. 'dʒo.la/ “satisfier”

Khalinjola “satisfier” functions as a term of praise for a partner who is perceived as providing emotional satisfaction. Speakers may also use the form for relatives and close friends to express warmth and appreciation. For example, a brother may refer to his sister as *khalinjola wa mayi* ‘my mother’s satisfying one’. In this context, the expression foregrounds the speaker’s positive emotional evaluation of the sibling and her valued presence within the family. Similarly, its use among friends can signal appreciation and interpersonal closeness.

Depending on the relationship between interlocutors, tone and immediate circumstances, *khalinjola* may be used affectionately, playfully or ironically. Its interpretation therefore cannot be determined from the lexical meaning “satisfier” alone. Rather, speakers rely on the interactional context and shared knowledge to determine whether the expression conveys genuine affection, playful appreciation or irony.

Siombo /si. 'om.bo/ “something good”

In romantic discourse, *siombo* can be used to foreground the perceived value and desirability of a partner by associating the person with something good or precious. It may comment on a person’s behaviour, appearance or character and thereby communicate admiration. An example from a Lubukusu wedding song by Matata illustrates this use: *Omwana siombo* “good baby.” In this expression, *siombo* provides the positive evaluation, while *omwana* “child” is used as an affectionate form of reference to an adult romantic partner.

The data further showed that speakers may also use the form when referring to a crush or admirer even where no established romantic relationship exists. The interpretation of *siombo* draws on shared knowledge about goodness, value and affection.

Omwana /o.mu. 'wa.na/ “child”

The honorific denotatively refers to a child; the data revealed that the form can be extended to an adult romantic partner, particularly where the speaker foregrounds qualities such as youthfulness, attractiveness and tenderness. The meaning therefore

shifts from literal age reference to an affective evaluation of the addressee.

The data further showed that *omwana* can be used between spouses and long-term romantic partners, including elderly couples. Respondents reported that couples may continue to address each other as *omwana* even at advanced ages. The honorific may also be used toward a person who is admired within the community, including a crush, irrespective of age. However, the data indicated a gendered pattern in its use. It was reported predominantly among male speakers referring to female addressees, while female-to-female use was less frequent and female-to-male use was relatively rare.

In literal contexts, this knowledge supports reference to a child; in romantic interaction, the same associations are activated to construct affection and emotional attachment toward an adult.

Omukosi /o.mu. 'ko.si/ “romancer”

Omukosi is derived from the verb *kosia* “romance”. In its primary use, the form refers to a person who actively engages in romantic pursuit. Respondents associated *omukosi* with individuals who are expressive in matters of love, persuasive in courtship and socially confident in initiating romantic relationships.

The data further revealed a metaphorical extension of *omukosi* among older speakers, where the form is used to mean “friend”. In this context, the term no longer refers specifically to romantic activity but to a close and valued companion. The different uses of *omukosi* illustrate pragmatic flexibility. Its interpretation moves from romantic pursuit to friendship among older speakers.

Owange /o. 'wa.ŋe/ “mine”

Owange “mine” is a possessive-derived affectionate honorific used to express emotional attachment and interpersonal affiliation. Respondents consistently associated *owange* with romantic relationships, where it is used to express attachment and emotional closeness between partners. The data also indicated that the form can be used by a father to address or refer to his wife, children, siblings, parents, friends or peers.

In romantic interaction, the possessive meaning is recontextualised to express emotional closeness and relational attachment. In family and friendship contexts, the same form can similarly foreground the speaker's valued relationship with the referent. The affectionate meaning therefore emerges from the interaction between the possessive expression, shared socio-cultural knowledge and the relationship between interlocutors.

Eng'eniesi /e. 'je.ni.e.si/ "star"

The findings showed that *eng'eniesi* "star" is a metaphorical affectionate honorific derived from the image of a celestial star and associated with brightness and beauty. Data indicated that the form is predominantly directed toward female addressees, although respondents reported occasional gender-flexible use in poetic or highly expressive contexts.

The metaphorical association with a star allows the speaker to present the addressee as bright, beautiful or highly valued. The form therefore functions as an affectionate resource for expressing admiration. The form demonstrates how metaphorical knowledge can be recontextualised as an interpersonal resource in affectionate interaction.

Omusime /o.mu. 'si.me/ "beloved"

Omusime "beloved" is an expressive affectionate honorific used to refer to a person who is cherished or emotionally valued. Although *omusime* can also occur in family contexts, particularly when parents or caregivers express affection toward children or close relatives, its frequency and pragmatic force were reported to be greater in romantic interactions.

In romantic contexts, *omusime* functions as a direct expression of emotional attachment and endearment. In family interactions, the same form can express tenderness and emotional closeness without necessarily carrying a romantic meaning. Its interpretation is therefore dependent on the relationship between the interlocutors and the context in which it is used.

Malayika /ma.la 'ji.ka/ "angel"

The honorific is a borrowed affectionate honorific derived from Kiswahili *malaika* "angel". Its original religious meaning refers to a supernatural being

associated with purity, goodness and divine qualities. According to *Omwilwachi* Yakobho, an older male respondent, an angel is understood as a non-human messenger of God characterised by innocence and moral goodness. These associations provide the cultural and semantic basis for the term's extension to human interaction.

The data further indicated that *malayika* is used in familial contexts to address children or family members as a marker of tenderness, protection and emotional attachment. The form can also occur in broader social interactions as an expression of appreciation. For example, an expression such as *ewe malayika* "you are an angel" may be used toward someone who has offered assistance. Its meaning is not restricted to its original religious reference.

Omusungu/o.mu 'su.ŋgu/ "white man"

Respondents associated the term historically with early contact between African communities and Europeans, during which whiteness was linked to qualities such as visibility, brightness and cleanliness. These associations provide the basis for its extended use as an affectionate and evaluative expression in Lubukusu interaction.

The data indicated that *omusungu* can function as a positive evaluative honorific associated with beauty, goodness and pleasant character. When applied to a person, the term extends beyond physical reference to whiteness and may express positive appreciation of the individual's appearance or behaviour.

In familial contexts, *omusungu* is used as an affectionate descriptor to express admiration for physical appearance or positive behaviour. For example, expressions such as *omwana oyo omusungu* 'that child is a white man' and *omukoko wase omusungu* 'my sister is a white man' use the form as an endearment marker. In these contexts, the expression foregrounds the speaker's positive evaluation of the referent rather than literal racial identity.

The interpretation of *omusungu* draws on shared associations between whiteness and qualities such as brightness, cleanliness, beauty and goodness. These associations are recontextualised when the form is applied to human referents.

Mayi /'ma.ji/ “mother”

In familial contexts, the form is primarily used by children when addressing their biological mother and functions as both a marker of respect and an expression of the mother-child relationship. The form also occurs in romantic interaction, where male partners may use *mayi* to address their female partners affectionately. For example, *Mayi, nakhusima* ‘Mother, I love you’ uses a kinship term within a romantic relationship. In this context, it invokes associations with care, nurturing and emotional closeness and recontextualises them within the romantic relationship.

In biological family contexts, this knowledge supports recognition of the mother-child relationship; in romantic interaction, the same knowledge is recontextualised to express affection toward a partner.

Liua /li.u.a/ “flower”

The findings showed that *liua* “flower” is an honorific whose literal meaning refers to a flower, an object culturally associated with beauty and attractiveness. These associations provide the basis for its metaphorical use in reference to people. When a person is described as *liua*, the speaker attributes qualities such as beauty, pleasantness and desirability to the referent.

In familial contexts, *liua* is used as an expression of endearment, particularly toward children. Parents and older relatives may use the form to comment positively on a child's appearance and to construct the child as valued and cherished within the family. In romantic contexts, *liua* acquires a stronger affective meaning.

Esindu/e.si.ndu/ “something”

The findings showed that *esindu* “something” is a general nominal expression referring to an object, item or entity without specifying its particular qualities. In affectionate interaction, however, the form acquires an evaluative meaning. Speakers use *esindu* to present a person as possessing qualities that are difficult to capture through an ordinary descriptive label, thereby associating the referent with something special, valuable or desirable.

The data indicated that *esindu* is used particularly in close relationships and informal peer interaction to compliment physical appearance and desirable personal qualities. For example, *omwana esindu* ‘a child, something’ and *omukhana esindu* ‘a girl, something’ use the otherwise general expression *esindu* as a positive evaluation of the referent. In these contexts, the form does not simply identify an unspecified object; it functions as an affectionate expression that elevates the perceived value or attractiveness of the person.

Emali /e.ma.li/ “property”

The findings established that *emali* “property” refers literally to material ownership or something that belongs to someone. In interpersonal use, the form extends beyond material possession to function as an affectionate and evaluative honorific that expresses value and worth. When applied to human referents, *emali* conceptualises the person as someone precious, valued and worthy.

In familial contexts, *emali* is used particularly in reference to children as an expression of affection and admiration. When a speaker refers to a child as *emali*, the form performs a positive evaluative function by foregrounding the child's perceived worth within the family.

The form also occurs in social and romantic contexts, where *emali* may be used to describe a woman or romantic partner. In such contexts, the honorific can foreground physical attractiveness and social value, presenting the referent as someone highly valued by the speaker.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that the Lubukusu honorific system is a context-dependent socio-pragmatic resource through which speakers manage social relationships and communicate meanings associated with respect, affection, authority, solidarity, social distance, and interpersonal evaluation. The meaning and pragmatic function of a Lubukusu honorific cannot be determined from the linguistic form alone. Rather, interpretation is shaped by the relationship between interlocutors, the immediate interactional context, the speaker's

communicative purpose, and shared socio-cultural knowledge.

Recommendations: Based on these findings, the study recommends that Kenyan language policy planners, curriculum developers and regional publishers incorporate context-specific Lubukusu honorifics into

localised mother-tongue instructional materials, particularly at the early childhood level. Such materials should present honorifics together with the social relationships and contexts in which they are appropriately used, rather than treating them as vocabulary items with fixed meanings.

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