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The Impact of Cultural Mismatch on Pragmatic Interpretation of *Nyimbo za Kristo* Hymns by SDA Churches in Kakamega County

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Abstract
This study examined the impact of cultural mismatch between the SDA church congregation in Kakamega County and the one in which the gospel songs in Nyimbo za Kristo were composed. The study adopted relevance theory by Wilson and Sperber (1995/2012), as explained by Chenenje (2023), because it highlights how the human mind interprets discourses through implicatures. A descriptive research design and purposive sampling technique were adopted to select 17 songs commonly sung in SDA churches in Kakamega County during services. The songs were sampled until saturation was attained after three months. The oral interview was conducted with 67 respondents from SDA Churches in Kakamega County, based on convenience and their willingness to be interviewed, until responses no longer changed (saturation stage). The data were analysed thematically using a content analysis guide and frequency distribution tables based on audiotape-recorded clips. The study found that 88 per cent of congregants cannot interpret *Nyimbo za Kristo* lyrics adequately because the language used is symbolic and biblically alluded to. It concluded that the songs of NYIMBO ZA KRISTO are biblically alluded to. The study recommends that preachers design sermons to match the songs' messages and that singers should select songs based on the occasion, while also providing the song's background before singing it. The study is significant because it addresses how cultural differences may hinder congregations' understanding of hymn meanings.

Key terms: Alluded, congregants, discourses, implicatures, pragmatic.

INTRODUCTION

This study is examined the impact of the cultural mismatches between the congregants of Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kakamega County and those in which songs of NYIMBO ZA KRISTO were composed on the interpretation of such songs. According to the online survey, *Nyimbo za Kristo* songs are popularly sung in Seventh-day Adventist churches to enhance worship and entertainment in Eastern Africa and beyond. The 1998 edition contains 220 songs. Mwendwa (2020) studied the pragmatic meaning of Kikamba gospel songs and found that they are immersed in the Bible, which is rich in metaphors that require background knowledge to interpret adequately. This study highlights how gospel singers interpret metaphors but does not explain whether the congregation interprets the lyrics adequately, given the cultural mismatch between the songs' background and the Kamba community. The current study is then set to investigate how such cultural mismatches impact the interpretation of such gospel songs during worship.

In contrast, Agbeleoba (2020) found that in Nigeria, Christian songs convey deeper meaning than they present at the point of rendition and blend stylistic and pragmatic elements to enhance meaning. This shows evidence of implied language in Christian lyrics, hence the need for interpretive knowledge to enhance communication during church worship and other social functions. The current study therefore examines whether the cultural mismatch between the origin of songs and the congregants results in misinterpretation of gospel songs.

Chenenje (2017) analysed Kabara folk songs and found that stylistic aspects are inevitable in African songs, and that understanding the cognitive environment in which the song was composed is necessary for interpretation. The current study investigates whether congregants in SDA churches in Kakamega County experience cultural mismatch when singing gospel songs and how they interpret them.

Adrallisman and Charissa (2021) studied the book of Psalms in the Bible and found various aspects of figurative language, including metaphors, hyperbole, paradox, and symbolism, meant for politeness, attractiveness, and honesty. Because Christian lyrics are drawn from the Bible, these stylistic features are common and require background knowledge to understand implied meaning. Therefore, interpreting the message is vital. In line with Chenenje (2017), the study found that interpreting stylistic aspects in songs is an issue to be addressed because message communication is crucial in songs, and it recommends interpreting songs based on knowledge of the cognitive environment. There is therefore a need to investigate whether or not the congregation interpret the lyrics from *NYIMBO ZA KRISTO to* enhance communication of the intended message to the audience.

Chomba et al. (2025) analysed the Gikuyu gospel songs by De, Mathew in his comparison of gospel songs. They found that Gikuyu gospel songs are rich in metaphors of love, animals, and the environment, such as "*life is a dance*," "*love is sweet,*" and "*my rib,*" which make songs interesting. Still, they did not examine strategies for interpreting the songs to communicate the message to the audience. Because of the frequent use of metaphors, De-Mathew is metaphorically referred to as the king of metaphors; however, the current study is set to examine the strategies of analysing figurative language in gospel songs. It has been revealed by Chomba et.al. (2025) that figurative language makes the songs difficult to interpret, yet leaves the reader in suspense about how the metaphors are interpreted and what causes the difficulties in interpreting such songs. This study agrees that figurative language creates interpretive challenges and examines whether cultural mismatch contributes to them.

Atiya and Surya Surya Putra (2023) analysed four Christian songs by Philip David Wickham. They found that figurative language is widely applied to make the words sound lovely and intriguing to the singer and listener through interpretation. Figurative language is inevitable in Christian songs; therefore, effective communication requires additional interpretive knowledge. The current study then examines whether interpretation of such songs is adequate and the effects of cultural mismatch between the singer and the song's composer.

The study by Abakasabagayang and Kanu (2023) shows that interpretation of Christian songs varies

depending on the period in which they were sung and the denomination singing the lyrics. The songs sung by the SDA church in *Nyimbo za Kristo* have been translated from English church hymnals dating back to the 19th century in America, where the church started in 1844. Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether churches interpret the songs adequately, given the hindrances caused by mismatches between Kakamega County and the Hebrew cultural backgrounds in which the songs were initially composed.

The main objective of the study is to examine the impact of cultural mismatches on the pragmatic interpretation of *Nyimbo za Kristo* by the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church congregation in Kakamega County, and to verify whether they interpret the songs' message correctly. Relevance theory by Wilson and Sperber (1995/2012), as illustrated by Chenenje (2023), explains that knowledge of the cognitive environment, which is derived from a particular cultural setting and the interlocutor's experience, is crucial in the interpretation of implied language in any discourse.

Cognitive environment is the knowledge the interlocutor has at the time of interlocution, or the background knowledge the interlocutor brings to a conversation, resulting from exposure to a particular culture, experience, education, and the situation at hand (Chenenje, 2023). The study therefore examines whether the congregation interprets the Christian songs adequately during worship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Relevance Theory

This study adopted Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995) and later revised in Wilson and Sperber (2012), as expounded by Chenenje (2023). The theory was considered appropriate because it explains how hearers interpret utterances by deriving implicatures that yield adequate cognitive effects with minimal processing effort.

According to Relevance Theory, interpretation is guided by the principle of least effort: the greater the processing effort required to understand an utterance, the lower its presumed relevance to the hearer. In other words, listeners naturally seek interpretations that produce the strongest cognitive effects with the least cognitive effort. The theory also emphasises that interpretation depends on the hearer's cognitive environment, including shared background knowledge, cultural assumptions, and contextual information.

This framework was relevant to the present study because *Nyimbo za Kristo* hymns contain metaphors, idioms, religious symbols, and culturally specific expressions whose meanings may not be immediately accessible to all worshippers. Cultural mismatch may increase the processing effort required to interpret such figurative language, thereby reducing relevance and increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation or miscommunication.

Accordingly, the study examined whether cultural mismatch affects the pragmatic interpretation of metaphors in *Nyimbo za Kristo* among SDA churches in Kakamega County, Western Kenya. It further sought to establish whether such mismatch creates high processing effort and to identify the specific cultural factors responsible for that effort.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive research design to gather information as it occurs in the natural setting (Kumar, 2011). This design was adopted because the study's central concern was to examine how cultural mismatch influences the pragmatic interpretation of *Nyimbo za Kristo* hymns among SDA churches in Kakamega County, rather than manipulating variables or testing a cause-and-effect intervention. This shows that gospel songs were collected from the SDA churches as they exist in NYIMBO ZA KRISTO and sung in sampled churches.

In Kakamega County, SDA churches number approximately 150, with over 35 members in each church (WKC of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2025 statistical report). The sample size collected was 17 songs, which are commonly sung by most SDA churches in Kakamega County, and it took three months to complete the task until saturation was attained. Participants sang the 17 songs repeatedly during data collection. The study purposively sampled 67 church members from 48 SDA churches, regardless of gender and age, as long as they were song leaders

in their churches. Song leaders were purposively and conveniently targeted because of their interest in songs and their ability to provide first-hand information from the church. They were interviewed in a church setting, and the process continued until saturation was reached, as Wanjohi (2014) recommended that in social sciences, the researcher does not have a predetermined number of respondents but continues interviewing until responses no longer change (saturation stage). The churches were sampled based on whether they were rural, urban, semi-urban, or in a learning institution, using convenience and willingness to participate. Those who were unwilling or lacked interest in songs were excluded from the oral interview. The churches that used English versions of song books were excluded from the study.

The data collection technique was an unstructured oral interview using an interview guide to obtain first-hand information and encourage interviewees to express their feelings deeply (Kumar, 2011). The songs from NYIMBO ZA KRISTO were part of the interview guide to be interpreted by respondents, one at a time, until there was no more variation in responses.

Responses were tabulated in frequency distribution tables, interpreted, and analysed based on the study objective. The summary of the correct interpretation of songs was drawn from both online sources and resource people from the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kenya, as the marking guide for informants' responses, after verification by professional musicians and theologians from the Western Kenya Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table1: Interpretation of Songs by SDA Church Congregants in Kakamega County

Interpretation By Gender	Literal Interpretation	%	Weak Implicature	%	Strong Implicature	%	Total Responses	%
MALE	20	66.7	8	26.6	2	6.6	30	100
FEMALE	19	51.4	12	32.4	6	16.2	37	100
TOTAL	39	58.2	20	29.85	8	12	67	100

The table above presents the responses from both genders. Approximately 58 per cent misinterpreted the songs by giving literal interpretations, and weak implicatures accounted for approximately 30 per cent, while only 8 per cent gave the correct interpretation. The study found that lyrics in *Nyimbo za Kristo,* like other Christian songs, are rich in stylistic features, most of which are dominated by metaphors, biblical allusion, symbolism, paradox, hyperbole, and euphemism that require knowledge of the cognitive environment to interpret.

These features make literal interpretation cumbersome and require extra processing effort, as Wilson and Sperber (2012) presume that the more effort required to process information, the less cognitive effect it has; this implies that when processing effort is high, the chances of misinterpreting songs increase. Previous findings on gospel songs revealed metaphors as an impediment to correct interpretation. At the same time, this study found that metaphor misinterpretation results from cultural mismatches between the culture from which the songs are composed and that of the singers and interpreters.

The study found that most congregants could not interpret Christian songs from *Nyimbo za Kristo correctly* because 39 relied on literal meaning, 20 gave weak implicatures, and only 8 interpreted correctly out of 67 who were interviewed. Most who attempted pragmatic interpretation used weak implicatures, leading to multiple misinterpretations of the lyrics, so the number who interpreted the songs adequately using strong implicatures was insignificant. Correct interpretation was 12 per cent, but misinterpretation was 88 per cent. This resulted from insufficient knowledge of the cognitive environment, occasioned by a cultural mismatch between the two groups involved in composing and singing.

Chenenje (2023) explained that knowledge of the cognitive environment results from cultural exposure, education, memories, assumptions, and the history of the lexical items used. Respondents had insufficient background knowledge of the Bible, which draws heavily on Greek, Roman, and Jewish culture. Chenenje (2023) adds that when the speaker and the hearer share common knowledge of what is being communicated, it creates a cognitive environment that supports accurate interpretation and enhances communication. The current study reveals that there is a cultural mismatch between the congregation and the composers' environment that leads to misinterpretation of NYIMBO ZA KRISTO hymns by the SDA churches in Kakamega County.

Yule (1996) expounded that speakers use implicatures to convey information to the hearer, who needs shared knowledge for effective communication. Such shared knowledge includes Bible background and languages such as Greek and Hebrew before translation into English, Kiswahili, and local languages in Kenya. This study agrees with this view because the artists of the songs and the interpreters lacked a common cultural environment, which led to cultural mismatch and misinterpretation of the songs, either through weak implicatures or literal meanings.

Commonly used symbolic words that derived different meanings depending on the context confused many respondents. They include river, which represented life in one context and, in another, depicted Jesus or a multitude. Rock represented Jesus, refuge or something firm. Blood stands for life, salvation or soap that cleanses the sinners.

Sample Responses from the Oral Interview Clips
Illustration 1:
Interviewer: Interpret song number 77 (Habari zake usiku? Asubuhi karibu?-How is the night? Is it almost dawn?).

Informant 1: How the night was and whether morning is near-Literal interpretation.

Informant 2: How the darkness was and whether it will end soon-Weak implicature.

Informant 3: how we have lived in trouble and whether we are almost successful-Strong implicature.

Interpretation: darkness or night means trouble, and morning means success.

Illustration 2:
Interviewer: Interpret the same song-Tutalala baharini bandari bado mbali?-We shall stay in the sea, the harbour/shore is still far?

Information 1: We shall still travel longer or reaching home?-Weak implicature.

Informant 2: shall we reach the destination or not? Weak implicature.

Informant 3: We shall remain in the sea or reach home?-Literal interpretation.

Informant 4: We are still in the sea or saved from it?-Weak implicature.

Interpretation: Shall we remain in the troubled and sinful world, or is Jesus almost taking us to heaven to enjoy everlasting life?

The biblical word "sea" means the world of people; "night" means trouble; "harbour" means success or the end of trouble. Morning or dawn means success, the beginning of delight, or the end of trouble when Jesus comes a second time to take Christians to heaven, which is home.

Illustration 3:
Song Number 39-What is the interpretation of (ati kuna mvua njema-that there is good rain).

Informant 1: the rain is not destructive-Literal interpretation.

Informant 2: there is good life-Weak implicature.

Informant 3: the weather is conducive -Literal interpretation.

Informant 4: that the rain will enable the crops to grow-Weak implicature.

Interpretation/strong implicature: There are showers of blessings to help people live comfortably.

In that context, the word rain means blessings. In some cultural contexts, it may imply destruction, trouble or blessings.

Illustration 4:
Interviewer: Interpret the message of the song number 52 (wapate nuru wasafirio-Let those travelling get light).

Informant 1: Let travellers see the way using sunlight.

Informant 2: Let the travellers have peace when on the journey-Weak implicature.

Informant 3: Let those living in the world see the joy-Weak implicature.

Informant 4: Let those working be sober-minded-Weak implicature.

Interpretation: let people living in the world get the word of God from the Bible for holy living. To know the dangers (darkness) of the world, you should read the Bible as a source of information to leave peacefully.

From the above responses, there is a misinterpretation of the song and therefore a need to establish the cause of such an anomaly.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concluded that the songs of NYIMBO ZA KRISTO are biblically alluded to. The Bible was first written in a Hebrew and Greek cultural setting and has been enriched with figurative language that requires strong implicatures to achieve cognitive effects for effective communication. This lack of knowledge stems from a cultural mismatch between the Greek and Jewish cultures in which the Bible was written and the culture of Kakamega County, Kenya, where the songs are sung during worship and other social gatherings. This implies that cultural mismatch impacts the interpretation of Christian songs from *NYIMBO ZA KRISTO.*

Recommendations: The study recommends that song leaders should always share the song's background before leading the congregation to sing, so that the author's intended message reaches congregants during worship, entertainment, or any social function for easier interpretation. It is also advisable that preachers match the message of their sermons to the songs sung, and that singers choose songs that fit the occasion, to reduce misinterpretation and help hearers receive the intended message.

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