

## Research Article

## Mental Representation and Interpretation of HIV as A Death Sentence in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS Metaphor

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**Abstract:** HIV is one of the challenges confronting the human race and Kenyans are not an exception to this fact. EkeGusii is a Bantu language spoken by approximately two million speakers in Western Kenya. HIV is both a medical and social problem. Speech communities have invented ways of communicating about the scourge, for instance they use metaphor. EkeGusii speakers form varied cognitive models over HIV and AIDS metaphor such that whenever someone mentions about HIV, some mental representation or image(s) springs onto the mind of the speaker. These cognitive models dictate how speakers perceive HIV and AIDS and their reaction to the seropositives. This research was carried out by interviewing 40 EkeGusii speakers who answered the question what comes to their mind when one talks about HIV and AIDS. This article discusses how HIV is mentally represented and interpreted as a death sentence by EkeGusii speakers. It further highlights the death-related images created out of HIV and AIDS metaphor and their accompanying sensory motor abilities that dictate the behaviour of individuals. This article reveals that the killer cognitive model spreads fear and fuels stigmatization among EkeGusii speakers. Consequently, EkeGusii speakers perceive HIV infection and contracting HIV and AIDS as a death sentence.

**Keywords:** Cognitive models, EkeGusii, HIV and AIDS, interpretation, mental representation.

### INTRODUCTION

This article deals with language use and HIV and AIDS. Specifically, it examines the mental representation of HIV is a death sentence by EkeGusii speakers. This means that the moment one is infected with HIV, then that marks the beginning of his/her death.

HIV is one of the challenges confronting the human race and Kenyans are not an exception to this fact. According to Horne (2010), HIV and AIDS affect individuals, who are part of a larger society. Dixit (2002) argues that HIV and AIDS is not merely a medical problem but a social, cultural and economic one. Therefore, there is need to discuss about HIV and AIDS under the umbrella of health communication.

Health communication is the use of language to provide individuals with important health information. Sharf (1993) notes that health communication is a vital topic of research because everyone interacts with health professionals, encounters health-related messages in the media, has suffered illness or has experienced a loved one with a life-

threatening or terminal illness. Health communication had once concentrated on meeting targets of members of audiences but it has developed to turn its focus on enabling informed individual choice. Therefore, health communication has now become more functionally prominent, more empirical and a more strategic gradient of public health programmes (Williams, 1992). It is in the light of this that this article discusses on health communication in EkeGusii.

Good health is one of the prerequisites for sustainable development. It is therefore not surprising that three of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focus on health issues. The three MDGs are: to reduce child mortality; to improve maternal health; and, to combat diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Governments and other agencies have an obligation to offer adequate and quality services. These services do not operate in a vacuum. For people to enjoy good health, they need to have access to health services such as medical tests, health education and others. It is clear that health services are highlighted through some linguistic media. As such, the language factor needs to be considered whenever planning for

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provision of health. Cameron and William (1997) maintain that:

Although we may think that the primary tools of medicine are technological, the most fundamental tool, upon which the use of technology depends, is that of language. Language allows patients and care providers to make their intentions known, a crucial step in the process of identifying a problem, investigating how long it has existed, exploring what meaning this problem may have, and setting in action a treatment strategy. Thus, if problems in linguistic encoding interfere with this process, there may be important consequences (p. 419).

Language is therefore of essence in health communication and, as such, there is need to take serious consideration of how language impacts on the delivery of health services in Kenya. For a long time, enormous language planning efforts in Kenya have been devoted to the education domain, at the expense of other domains such as health and culture. Waitiki (2010) observes that there is clear neglect of the language aspect in issues of national importance and national development in many multilingual nations in Africa, and Kenya is no exception. This is further noted by Wolff (2006) who observes that:

Discourse on language matters is often considered esoteric and of marginal interest by members of the intellectual elites worldwide... And indeed, on first sight, language appears to have little or nothing to do with the 'real' and burning problems of economic development, spread of HIV/AIDS, and poverty alleviation. Browsing through the major documents relating to the African Renaissance and NEPAD, for instance, one is struck by the observation that 'language' is a word that practically never occurs even in the most important and fundamental papers and speeches! (p. 3).

Waitiki (2010) further argues that it is unfortunate that many issues, including the issues of HIV and AIDS, have often been discussed without much attention being given to the role of language. Language is fundamental in the dissemination of information that would ensure the success of both prevention and treatment of any disease. The role of communication in the fight against HIV and AIDS cannot be overemphasized. The communication of HIV and AIDS issues entails use of language and it even involves use of specific terms and expressions to refer to the scourge. Waitiki (2010) observes that communication is the key to understanding issues related to HIV and AIDS and is instrumental in

inducing behaviour change. Given the fact that there is no cure or vaccine for AIDS, the fight against HIV and AIDS focuses more on preventive measures and care. This encompasses speakers addressing people on how they can prevent the spread of HIV and the measures that can be taken to ensure one lives healthy in case he/she is already infected with HIV. It is against this background that this paper examines the language used in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS discourse, more particularly with the mental representation formed over the expressions used in reference to death once someone is infected and/or affected.

African languages, specifically EkeGusii have numerous terms drawn from the speakers' cognitive experiences in reference with the ailment. Some of these numerous terms that are used in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS discourse include use of metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) define metaphor as understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another or as a tightly structured mapping or a set of correspondences between two conceptual domains which are referred to as the source and target domains. In this case, a concrete and clearly organized source domain, being more clearly related to physical and bodily experience, is used to understand and talk about a more abstract and less clearly structured target domain.

For a long time, metaphors were seen as rhetorical devices and most specifically as a matter of poetry. Todoli (2007) posits that today, however, many cognitive linguists and analysts of discourse recognize that metaphor structures perception and understanding of reality and, that we define reality in terms of different kinds of metaphors and proceed to act on basis of these metaphors. HIV and AIDS are real in the world and therefore it can also be structured in terms of metaphors and these metaphors may influence peoples' actions. Nevertheless, the metaphors used in relation to HIV and AIDS might be represented and interpreted differently from one speaker to the other depending on one's interaction with the environment and his/her culture. Therefore, conceptualization and representation of HIV and AIDS metaphor is environment and culture dependent. This brings about variation of metaphors within languages and cultures. As such, the way the scourge is represented also differs.

HIV and AIDS are rather new concepts in EkeGusii. As a result, all the metaphoric expressions used in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS discourse refer to other entirely unrelated concepts. Therefore, the use of such metaphoric expressions may be represented and interpreted differently especially, if the context of their usage is not very clearly defined or in case the listener is not familiar with the property of similarity being compared between the concept and HIV and AIDS. Consequently, the mental picture or cognitive model formed over an expression used to refer to HIV and

AIDS will determine how the speakers will interpret the scourge. This will further determine their behaviour whenever they come across a seropositive.

One illustration of a cognitive model formed over HIV and AIDS comes from Treicher (1992): "In a Central African Republic pamphlet on AIDS the immune system is shown surrounding the human figure like a rope; viruses are pictured as beaked and bat-like mammals, are eating through the protective boundary" (Treicher, 1992: 8). In this illustration, the human figure and virus are described and this creates a mental picture or a cognitive model of a human being who is hopeless as the virus is pecking at his/her immune system. This creates an image of a wasted seropositive individual surrounded with viruses that are beaked bat-like mammals.

Casey (2002) argues that the interpretation of an audience about a message influence their behaviour. The analysis of EkeGusii HIV and AIDS discourse revealed that EkeGusii speakers use diverse metaphors when referring to HIV and AIDS and these metaphors create different mental pictures to listeners and as a result they may be interpreted differently. This paper examines the mental images associated with death and the interpretation of the speakers whenever they use or heard of metaphoric expressions and the subsequent metaphors referring to seropositives or HIV and AIDS.

### Theoretical Assumptions

This study was guided by the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor as initiated by Johnson and Lakoff (1980). Barcelona (2000) defines metaphor as the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially 'mapped', that is projected, onto a different experiential domain, so that the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one. The domain that is mapped is called the *source* or *donor domain*, and the domain onto which the source is mapped is called the *target* or *recipient domain*. Both domains have to belong to different super-ordinate domain. To illustrate this argument, Barcelona makes use of a well-known metaphoric example of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) LOVE IS A JOURNEY. This conceptual metaphor involves understanding abstract domain of experience (love) in terms of a very different and more concrete domain of experience (journeys). The linguistic expressions that are used to talk about love have a connection to journeys. For instance, *It has been a long, bumpy road, We are at crossroads, We may have to go separate ways, Our marriage is on the rocks, We are spinning our wheels,* and, *look how far we have come*, among others are used in reference to love relationships.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that quite often, conceptual metaphors form coherent cognitive models. That is, complex, gestalt structures of organized knowledge are used as pragmatic

simplifications of an even more complex reality. Lakoff (1987) observes that these idealized cognitive models (ICMs) which can be reconstructed by means of cognitive linguistic analysis of everyday language are regarded as cultural models likely to unconsciously determine the world view of the whole linguistic community. In other words, metaphorical concepts develop out of conceptual bodily experiences (and cultural practices).

Lakoff (1987) describes a cognitive model as an organized whole of generalized experiences of an individual but comparable phenomenon of objects, actions, and events. An individual's everyday encounters with different but comparable phenomena gives rise to ideas of what is normal to come across and experience in their respectable environments. For instance, in the theory of ICM, a *bachelor* could be defined as an *unmarried man* but, only with respect to the MARRIAGE ICM. However, the Pope is a poor example of the term bachelor given the background knowledge people have about the Catholic Church, in that it is a rule that a Pope should not marry and therefore this disqualifies him from being called a bachelor (Lakoff, 1987).

Lakoff (1987) further argues that the ICMs are the static and dynamic mental representations of typical situations in life and their typical elements. An ICM is meant to include not only the encyclopedic knowledge of a particular domain but also the cultural model they are part of. In summary, an ICM is a subject of mental categorization, and how the mind is expressed through metaphors. That is the reason people do not have a mental representation of the Pope being a bachelor (Lakoff, 1987).

### METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in Kisii County where both EkeRogoro and EkeMaate dialects of EkeGusii are spoken. The study employed the analytical research design. The sample for the study consisted of the EKEGusii speakers and the linguistic expressions that are used in HIV and AIDS discourse. The study employed purposive and chain sampling techniques in the selection of respondents. The researcher personally conducted the interviews.

This data were obtained from interviewing 40 respondents in Kisii County using semi-structured interviews. These respondents were required to supply a number of linguistic expressions that they use to refer to HIV and AIDS in EkeGusii. Thereafter, they answered questions emanating from the linguistic expressions they had listed in reference to HIV and AIDS discourse in EkeGusii. The key question that the respondents answered was what mental picture came to their mind whenever they heard or used the linguistic expressions that they had listed in reference to HIV and AIDS. They were also required to inform the interviewer what

mental image came to their mind when they thought of a seropositive or HIV and AIDS, and their reaction towards the seropositives. The instances of the mental representation were also correlated to the interpretation of seropositive individuals and to how EkeGusii speakers regard HIV and AIDS. This in turn established a link between interpretation of HIV and AIDS and stigmatization, and hence the prevalence rates in the county.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The killer cognitive model created in EkeGusii over HIV and AIDS discourse elicits images of something that is deliberately seeking to kill, harm or destroy. A killer usually displays malevolent traits and intentions towards others. EkeGusii speakers mentally represent and interpret HIV AND AIDS IS DEATH. In this case, there are a number of death-related images created via the HIV and AIDS metaphorical expressions used in the language. Regardless of the fact that the seropositives are alive, the cognitive model formed here over HIV and AIDS is that of lifeless individuals and corpses. This in turn brings forth the image-schema of funerals that are associated with fear, grief and orphans. The accompanying sensory-motor-schema may further dictate the motor abilities to behave in a certain way, for instance one may run away on seeing a seropositive individuals. Death is a killer representation and interpretation is exemplified in transcript 1.

### Transcript 1

Interviewer: What comes to your mind when you hear of HIV and AIDS?

**Respondent 3:** *Amakweri na ogokwa.* (death)

**Interviewer:** Why/ how?

(This item elicited polarized responses as indicated in the transcript).

**Respondent 3:** *Ase engencho enyamore tebwati riogo gose teri kobwena. Naende omonta orwarete oborwaire obo obonene nigo anka aakwete kagotara ekiagera omonta oywo nigo arakwe insa chinde chionsi.* (The reason is HIV is incurable and the infected individual's lifespan is shortened).

In this transcript, respondent 3 indicated that HIV infection is equated to a death sentence. According to this transcript, HIV infection is interpreted as a death. Further, the use of the metaphorical expression *enyamoreo* (a slimming disease) reduces one to a mysterious person who for unknown reasons grows thinner and thinner every day. In AIDS IS DEATH metaphor, HIV is mentally presented and interpreted as an agent responsible for causing one to grow thin and thinner everyday and eventually die. Ogechi (2005) observes that HIV and AIDS are referred as *kamosquito* (a tiny mosquito). This expression indicates the wasting nature of HIV, in that the effect of HIV

wastes the seropositives' body until they compared to the size of a tiny mosquito. The metaphoric expression, *oborwaire obonene botarikobwena* (a huge disease that is incurable), from the AIDS IS SIZE metaphor sends terror signals to the speakers. In this regard, AIDS is described as a huge disease that is incurable. This has an interpretation and implication that the other diseases affecting the human race may be inconsequential and may not be having fatalities like the ones presented by HIV and AIDS. The respondent in this transcript further used the metaphorical expression *oborwaire obo* (this disease) which operates within the metaphor, AIDS IS THE UNMENTIONABLE CONDITION. This is an avoidance metaphor as the speakers do not want to mention HIV or AIDS using a specific name. Mathangwane (2011) indicates that the use of the avoidance metaphor in referring to HIV and AIDS may indicate the fatigue the speakers have from always hearing of HIV and AIDS from the media, billboards, church, and schools among other sources. It may further show the peoples exasperation and fatigue with the disease as more people become sick and die. The other response was as indicated below.

### Transcript 2

**Respondent 4:** *Omonta orwarete enyamoreo nigo anka omonta oorameire na ogokwa. Ekio nakio gekogera oborwaire obo bokorokwa enyakweumia.* (The seropositive is perceived as someone who is cursed. That is why HIV is referred to as an owl).

**Interviewer:** How are HIV and AIDS in EkeGusii related to an owl?

**Respondent 4:** *Enyakweumia ase EkeGusii nigo ere egento ekebe mono ase engencho nigo gekoreta emechando buna amarwaire na na amakweri. Enyamoreo nero nigo gekoreta emechando ya amarwaire na amakweri. Banto mbari gotaka enyakweumia ebuge gose egwe mwabo. Eywo nigo eekoorokia buna omonta nabo arakwe ase omochio oywo ase enyakweumia yagwa gose yabuga korwa. Naende, omonta orwarete enyamoreo nigo anka egeteondo kegotara.* (An owl is a bad omen associated with diseases and death in EkeGusii. As a result, speakers fear it perching or hooting from their compounds as this brings forth trouble in the neighbourhood. Similarly, HIV is associated with diseases and death. In this case, a seropositive is also regarded as a walking corpse).

From the foregoing transcript, HIV and AIDS are mentally represented and interpreted in EkeGusii as



a curse or as a result of a bad omen. In this regard, HIV IS A CURSE metaphor is used as AIDS is seen as an agent of a curse that brings misfortunes to an individual and the community at large. In EkeGusii HIV and AIDS are referred to as *enyakweumia* (an owl). In real life situations, an owl in EkeGusii symbolizes death because of the fact that an owl symbolizes a bad omen in EkeGusii culture. Therefore, an owl is an animal that is generally dreaded and avoided by EkeGusii speakers. When an owl is compared to HIV and AIDS, it invokes the mental image of serious misfortune and death. As such, an owl represents the attack of diseases or death just the same way HIV brings forth opportunistic infections and death.

The metaphor, A SEROPOSITIVE IS A WALKING CORPSE with the illustration of the linguistic metaphor *egetondo kegotara* (a walking corpse) was used in reference to a seropositive in EkeGusii HIV and AIDS discourse. There are no walking corpses in real life situations, they are created and exist in the imaginations of human beings. So, this conceptualization mentally presents seropositives as lifeless objects that can be compared to the fictitious zombie figures. As such, the EkeGusii AIDS cognitive model created is associated with death. The zombie imagery creates a lot of fear over HIV and AIDS. Comparing HIV and AIDS to a walking corpse may transform the speakers to react differently upon seeing a seropositive depending on how they would react upon seeing a walking corpse.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that one of the ways of depicting personification of death for instance the pictorial representation of a grim reaper cognitively accommodates the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor. In this metaphor, people just like plants are harvested by the grim reaper, with death being conceptualized as an agent assigned the duty of claiming human lives. According to Lakoff and Turner (1998), death can be constructed as a beast trying to devour someone. From this understanding, HIV and AIDS in EkeGusii can be conceptualized as agents that cause death.

AIDS as a killer interpretation was further represented by the metaphor, HIV INFECTION IS AN IMPEDIMENT or HIV INFECTION IS A STUMBLING BLOCK. These metaphors were illustrated by the linguistic expression that once one is declared seropositive, the verb *togoeta* (a stumbling block) can be used as indicated by respondents.

### **Transcript 3**

**Interviewer:** What comes to your mind when you hear of HIV and AIDS?

**Respondent 5:** *Enyamoreo ne egetango kiamagenderero. Enyamoreo nigo*

*ekorokwa buna togoeta gose tokonyagoka ekiagera ekero omento ayenyorire nigo obogima bwaye bogoonthoreria koba obobe. Magenderero ande onsi taiyo omento arakore gotatiga kwerenda oborwaire tibomobua.* (HIV infection is seen as an obstacle to any form of development as the seropositives concentrate on taking care of their immunities at the expense of other development programmes).

HIV infection is mentally represented, interpreted and perceived by EkeGusii speakers as an obstacle or something that prevents one from engaging in any form of meaningful development. The use of the verbs *togoeta/togocharoka* (one cannot cross or jump over) indicates that HIV is an obstacle that prevents one from progressing. These metaphorical expressions have an underlying metaphor, HIV INFECTION IS AN OBSTACLE. This metaphor implies that either one stagnates in death or retrogresses after being infected with HIV. The image created of AIDS cognitive model of a stumbling block in EkeGusii indicates a barrier or barricade that in turn invokes a lot of fear as AIDS is indicated as an agent of death as it prevents from one progressing either economically, emotionally, physically and socially.

Niehaus (2007) argues that in African culture, death is the biggest reason for stigmatization of the seropositives to an extent that even the newly infected person is 'tainted with death' (p. 856) Similarly, Horne (2010) observes that people with AIDS are seen as 'living corpses' which is a liminal state between the living and the dead, or biologically alive but socially dead. Horne (2010) also posits that the identification of AIDS with death is apparent in many literary representations of the AIDS-illness as illustrated by the following extract taken from a Botswana novel ***'Far and Beyon.***

She used to be a proud woman. Tall, poised, nose slightly turned up. Lips set in a permanent promise of smile.... She used to have a quiet dignity. She is not any of these anymore. She is hardly human anymore. Mosa watched as she lay under a tree, looking like something that had survived a fire. If what she had become could be described as survival under any circumstances.... Cecilia's hands were more than a collection of bones, bones reaching for bones (Dow 2000: 165-166 as cited in Horne, 2010).

Three days after, the novel further describes the appearance of Cecilia as:

The two women were watching the skeleton that used to be Cecilia lying on a mattress in a tiny room motionless, except for the eyes and the occasional grimace of pain.... Cecilia was clearly almost dead but her soul refused to vacate her body. She was hanging on when no recovery was possible (Dow 2000: 177-178 as cited in Horne, 2010).

Horne (2010) observes that although alive, the woman is described with images of death through use of the following expressions among others: a collection of bones and lifeless skeleton. Horne's illustration converges with the EkeGusii speakers' conceptualization of the SEROPOSITIVE IS A WALKING CORPSE metaphor. Thus, the discussion reveals that AIDS turns a seropositive into a lifeless and hopeless object because of the fact that AIDS is incurable. It can be concluded that AIDS in EkeGusii is presented as a death sentence. The findings also are in agreement with Lakoff and Turner (1989) who argue that a beast trying to devour someone or images of death as A coachman are a manifestation of death personified. HIV in EkeGusii is seen as an agent of death and at times a seropositive is seen to be having attributes of the dead, hence the use of the DEATH PERSONIFIED metaphor. The use of AIDS IS UNMENTIONABLE DISEASE metaphor is also used by Setswana speakers (Mathangwane, 2011). The two languages conceptualize AIDS similarly and the linguistic expression is the same (this very disease). This indicates that Setswana and EkeGusii may have the same embodied experiences as far as this metaphor is concerned despite the fact that they are not related linguistically.

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