

A Cognitive Linguistic Interpretation of Sexual Dysphemism in South Nyanza by Dholuo Speakers

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Abstract

Mboya (2001) posits that dysphemistic words are part and parcel of culture, they are worth studying so that the current and future generations will have access to them and may not lose them as no nation can prosper by adopting foreign cultures and ignoring its customs and practices. It is important that a society uses its good customs as the foundation upon which foreign customs and practices can be laid. In addition, the choice of Dholuo is not only based on the fact that this is an indigenous language which has not been extensively studied in the area of sex-related dysphemistic words, phrases and their euphemistic equivalents in the domains of birth, death, social and economic activities but also on the fact that there is a need for a study that the respondents can culturally associate with. This study therefore sought to establish the usage and interpretation of sexual dysphemism in South Nyanza. The study took a cognitive linguistic approach exploring some of the dysphemistic words used in Dholuo. The author used a descriptive design in which the researcher identified the sex-related dysphemisms. Both purposive and simple random techniques were applied to obtain a sample of eighteen native Dholuo speakers for the study (nine were males and the other nine females). The author used an interview schedule and a tape recorder to collect data. The paper concludes that in the Luo culture just like in most cultures of the world, dysphemistic language is usually avoided because it is regarded as obscene and its use in many instances leads to embarrassment though, in a few occasions it may be positive especially when it occurs in circumstances like sexual enticement or in jokes. It is therefore worthy to avoid such dysphemisms in order to mould a morally upright generation.

Key Words: Sexual Dysphemism, Sexual Euphemism, Dholuo Speakers, Culture

INTRODUCTION

Dysphemism is a system of placing prohibitions and restrictions on certain acts and utterances in a society. These prohibitions signify that the acts or utterances in question are not acceptable within the norms and culture of the society and therefore, must not be practiced or talked about by its members. The degree of avoidance varies from one social context to another and is also based on the item dysphemized. Dysphemism (both behavioral and verbal) is a universal concept practiced by every human society around the world. However, it is language and culture specific, such that what is prohibited in one society may be the norm in another (Agyekum, 2002).

The English word dysphemism came to notice towards the end of the 18th C, having been introduced to English use in 1777 by Royal Navy Captain James Cook, during a voyage to Tahiti (Marsen, 2006). The word simply means —to forbid or —forbidden and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. Dysphemistic language is regarded as a breach of etiquette. It exists in great predominance in the language of insult. Dysphemisms are uttered, heard and accepted in such contexts and this explains why they are shunned in normal conversation.

Allan and Burrige (2006) state that there is an assumption in most communities that both accidental breach and irrational defiance of dysphemism will be followed by some kind of trouble to the offender such as sickness or death of the offender or one of his or her relatives. However, there are milder kinds of dysphemism, whose violation results in lesser penalties of corporal punishment, incarceration, social ostracism or mere disapproval. Those who violate a dysphemism can often purify themselves or be purified by confessing their sins and submitting to a ritual.

Allan and Burrige (2006) further note that to an outsider, the prohibitions imposed on dysphemisms are perplexing and seem silly but they are among the common values that link the people of a community together. What one group values, another scorns. Shared dysphemisms are therefore a sign of social

cohesion. Moreover, as part of a wider belief system, they provide the basis people need to function in an otherwise confused and hostile environment.

Trudgill (1974) notes that linguistic dysphemisms, which are associated with particular words or sets of words, exist in most cultures. Such words are not only considered inappropriate for a certain context, but are forbidden in most communicative contexts. According to Trudgill (1983), dysphemistic language is normally associated with lack of decency and very often, it is just a matter of convention where the normal use of an item in a language is prohibited due to particular social values and beliefs. He further posits that the strongest dysphemistic words in the English speaking world are still associated with sex. This is the same view held in African societies, and the Luo are a good example.

Luo widows are required to have sexual intercourse with one of the male-in-laws as part of the cleansing rite. This is done to get rid of the husband's spirit or ghost. The —sin of death that is symbolically represented by a banana rope (*okola*) tied around the widow's waistline is removed sexually by the cleanser. The rope must fray and break during intercourse. This is called *chodookola* (Okeyo&Allen, 1994).

Mboya (2001) observes that after cleansing, the cleanser proceeds to change house for the widow. A ceremony called *turo-osuri* is then organized by the inheritor to celebrate the completion of the house. It involves feasting and sex between the widow and inheritor. He further notes that burial rites are also performed by the relatives of the deceased family member on the night before and after burial. The rite is also performed by unmarried women who lose their children through death. The ritual is believed to have protective powers against the spirit of death.

Mboya (2001) states that sexual cleansing, a sacred ritual, is also associated with and precedes many societal activities and achievements like buying a new home or moving to a newly constructed house. This ritual is practiced by married couples when they move into a new house or home and those who are unmarried have to get a sexual partner for the occasion. It is dysphemistic to disregard this ritual. It is believed that the rite brings forth protection from evil curses and many blessings. He further notes that on the day the new born baby is taken outside the house for the first time (*chieng'' yiegonnyathi*) the parents have (ritual) sex (*ng''adoimbo*). It is believed that after this, the child cannot be affected by sex related dysphemisms if the mother commits adultery.

Douglas (1979) argues that in many speech communities, unacceptable language of which dysphemisms are part, are only uttered under restricted circumstances; a speaker who utters them outside the restriction is shamed or punished. William (1975) notes that acceptable language is profoundly influenced by culture. The culture of a people has an effect on people's way of avoiding unacceptable language. Almost all cultures seem to have certain notions or things that people try to avoid mentioning directly, even when there are such terms in the language.

Mbaya (2002) notes that linguistic dysphemisms or the fact of avoiding mentioning certain words and expressions in a language is a common practice in more than one society. In traditional Africa, as a result of their lack of decency, shocking character or immorality and in order not to hurt the other members of the society, many a term are never used in the lives of some individuals although they know them perfectly. It would therefore be plausible to observe that even though dysphemisms are not uttered in general audiences, they are uttered in certain contexts. Trudgill, (1983) adds that dysphemistic language is not only associated with lack of decency but it is also just a matter of convention where the normal use of an item in a language is inhibited due to particular social values and beliefs. This is the same view held in the Luo society. The dysphemistic terms are avoided because they are considered obscene. However, they could be used among friends especially if it is done for the purposes of entertainment.

Ullman (1981) states that dysphemisms are divided into four categories —according to the psychological motivation behind them. The first of these categories is fear, which has motivated different dysphemisms on speaking the names of certain supernatural beings. These include God, the Devil and names of certain animals like bear, lion and tiger. The clearest dysphemism motivated by fear must be that of the Devil. The euphemistic expressions associated with the Devil are somewhat humoristic and friendly, perhaps to make the Devil seem less frightening. Examples are: *Old Nick* and *Lord of Flies* among others. The dysphemisms in Dholuo can also be classified using this classification. For example a dysphemism used

to refer to the devil in Dholuo to portray the element of fear is the term *“Obel Sibuth”*. This term portrays the devil as capable of massive destruction and inflicting pain in humans.

The second category is respect. It is argued that the motivation behind the dysphemism of God might have something to do with respect as Katamba (1994) suggests. He posits that God could not be referred to by name, which has resulted in expressions such as the *Lord*, *King of Kings* and *the All-Mighty*. The third category is delicacy. In this category people try to avoid direct reference to topics they find unpleasant such as death, disease, physical and mental defects and criminal actions. There are many euphemisms used to refer to the dysphemistic term death for example, *‘to pass away’* which seems to be appropriate and politically correct in a large number of situations. Others are *‘passing on, going to one’s maker, joining the majority, to resign one’s being, moving into upper management and no longer eligible for the census.’*

The fourth category has to do with propriety. The three most common areas in this category are sex, certain body parts and functions and swearing. This study is interested in this category specifically that of sex. Santaemilia (2005) argues that sex is not a univocal phenomenon, but a mixture of voices and desires, of private and public meanings. It is overwhelmingly present in our daily lives, for instance, in a number of words which serve to describe our body or its ailments, to prescribe medical care and to arouse readers erotically; it is also present in a series of genres, discursive situations, speech events and communicative contexts. Sexual language is also a remarkable cultural feature because of the profound effects it has on individuals and on social relations.

There are a number of different ways used to refer to having sex, they include: *sleeping with, going to bed with, and making love*, as mentioned by Hughes (2000). People also find it difficult to talk about going to the toilet, and have therefore, invented numerous ways of avoiding direct reference to the topic. Bousfield (2007) argues that among good friends and acquaintances, it may be acceptable to directly ask the location of the toilet or mention the bodily function(s) for which one needs to use it, but in other situations people may use terms like *—washroom or restroom* to refer to the toilet. Among the Luo the dysphemistic terms are also used comfortably among peers and acquaintances and it is acceptable when that is done. For example, a woman or girl will tell a friend bluntly that she is menstruating but will talk of *‘crossing the red sea’* when referring to menstruation in public discourse.

Jay (2000) posits that people use dysphemistic language for various reasons such as to hurt others, for expressing themselves and most importantly for power. Dysphemistic language is emotionally powerful. As emotional, sexual and aggressive animals, human beings have the need to express and relieve themselves of depression, as well as establish an identity through their speech. Using dysphemistic language is definitely an effective way to accomplish this aim. He further adds that usage of such language depends on the consequences following the speech act. If the employment of dysphemistic language will lead to a costly end (for example, embarrassment, punishment or banishment) it will be eliminated, while if it will lead to beneficial consequences (for instance, relaxation, solidarity or humor), it will be enhanced. In this sense, the usage of dysphemistic language will be positive when it occurs in circumstances like joking and sexual enticement but it will be negative when used to harm someone like name calling or sexual insults. Jay’s observation is also captured in the Luo community for example when a woman turns down sexual advances from a man, the latter may refer to her as *“ochot”* (prostitute). This is used to hurt the feelings of the woman and to embarrass her. A sexually aggressive man may be referred to as *“Jamalili”* or *“Jakilutu”* (a man who wants to have sex with any woman he comes into contact with). Among his peers such a man is *‘respected’* and considered powerful.

Mbaya (2002) notes that dysphemistic words are frequently used as swear words to express hatred, antagonism, frustration, pain or surprise because of their power. In this study he observes that husband, wife and relatives from both sides avoid mentioning the names of the different persons involved in the marriage relationship. Such names are avoided by devising substitution mechanisms like use of honorific pronouns, improvisations and use of physical traits among others.

He further notes that dysphemistic words must be observed by all members of the society. Failure to do so can lead to punishment or public shame. In the Oromo culture, violations of dysphemisms are usually rare. If violation occurs by accident, it will literally be spit out, thus symbolically atoning for the impropriety. While Mbaya looks at the linguistic dysphemisms of avoiding mentioning the names of

different persons involved in a marriage relationship in the Oromo marriage context, the current study on the other hand, is interested in sex-related dysphemistic words and phrases in the Luo context.

Ng'eno (2009) argues that breaking a dysphemism constitutes a breach of morals and this explains why people try as much as possible to avoid using dysphemistic words. She further argues that dysphemistic prohibitions have no ground and are of unknown origin. In the Kipsigis community, like other communities, dysphemisms are passed down from one generation to the next. Ng'eno notes that women married into the Kipsigis community from other tribes do not find anything unusual about the dysphemistic words since what counts as dysphemistic language is something defined by culture, and not by anything inherent in the language itself. This is the same view held in the Luo community. While Ng'eno looks at dysphemistic words and their euphemisms in Family Health Education, this study deals with sex-related dysphemistic words and their euphemisms in sex related issues.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The author identified and described the sex related dysphemisms and euphemisms as they currently were and then reported the findings. To achieve the objective of the study, the author used a descriptive design. The respondents were asked to give the alternative terms that were used to refer to the sex-related dysphemistic terms mentioned. The author used both purposive and simple random techniques to obtain a sample of eighteen native Dholuo speakers for the study (nine were male and the other nine female). An interview schedule and a tape recorder was used to collect data which was transcribed, categorized, quantified and then processed after which suitable methods of statistical representations were used to display the emergent patterns. The findings of this study indicate that dysphemistic words in most cultures are normally avoided due to their obscene nature. These expressions are also found to cause embarrassment, shame and are considered dirty thus banned from the community.

FINDINGS

Sexual Dysphemisms

In all societies on earth there are certain behaviors both verbal and non-verbal which have been forbidden since they are considered dysphemistic by the people of a given community. Jay (2000) posits that being social animals, human beings tend to avoid some words or expressions which are generally considered dirty or shameful thereby imposing a ban on them. Words in this category include expressions of sex, certain diseases, defecation, micturition, body effluvia and even death. For instance, people tend to be ashamed when they refer to sex or any other term related to it because it is highly personal and private. In most societies therefore, direct references to sex and its related words are strongly forbidden or avoided. People have as a matter of fact learnt how, to whom and when to use them in terms of careful and speculative choice under the restriction of factors such as age, status, gender, education and relationship in a socio-linguistic environment.

The respondents interviewed noted that in the Luo culture just like in most cultures of the world, dysphemistic language is usually avoided because it is regarded as obscene and its use in many instances leads to embarrassment though, in a few occasions it may be positive especially when it occurs in circumstances like sexual enticement or in jokes. The members of the Luo Council of Elders that were interviewed noted that in the Luo set-up, women are prohibited from using dysphemistic terms even though the males are allowed to talk rough thereby employing aggressive sexual terms in their speech. They further pointed out that dysphemistic words and phrases are powerful and that is why even though they are avoided, language users are compelled to preserve them. The next section discusses the male and female sexual organs.

The Male Sexual Organ

This organ has both internal and external components. The external component comprises the penis and the scrotum while the internal component consists of the testicles, a system of genital ducts, urethra and accessory organ (Graap, 1998, p. 70). For the purposes of this study, the external components of the male sexual organ and one internal component which are the testicles were discussed since the author was only interested in the penis, sperms and the euphemistic expressions used for them.

The penis is a cylindrical organ which contains erectile tissue. Its tip which is referred to as the glans is usually slightly thicker than the body of the penis and it is extremely sensitive to touch, particularly around its rim. By the same token, it is also an important source of sexual pleasure for the male. The penis has procreation as well as pleasure-giving functions (Graap, 1998, p. 125).

The Female Sexual Organ

Just like the male sexual organ, the female one is also made up of two parts namely, the internal and external sex organs. The external organs consist of the mons veneris, the major and minor lips, the clitoris and the vaginal opening all collectively referred to as the vulva. The internal sex organs consist of the ovaries, the fallopian tubes, the uterus and the vagina (Graap, 1998, p. 127).

The last and the most important of the internal sex organs is the vagina. It has several functions including provision of a passageway for the menstrual flow from the uterus to the outside. It also serves as a receptacle of the man's penis and his ejaculated sperms which may then move on through the cervix. Thirdly, it provides a passageway for a baby during birth from the uterus to the outside. During sexual excitement, the vaginal walls secrete a watery substance which serves as a lubricant during coitus (Graap, 1998, p.127). The penis and the vagina are organs of sexual desire that elicit sexual language which as was found out during this study is catalogued as impolite therefore, the usage of such language calls for unending apologies and justifications on the part of the user.

After the brief discussion of the male and female sexual organs that elicit dysphemistic terms which form part of this study, a tabular representation was done as shown in Table 1. It gives the dysphemistic terms of the organs discussed, sexual intercourse and sex related physiological processes as they are referred to in Dholuo with a gloss provided for each term.

Table 1. Sexual dysphemisms

Dysphemism	Gloss
<i>Chund/Chul</i>	Penis
<i>Ng''ony/Ther</i>	Vagina
<i>Boke</i>	Menstruation
<i>Nyuol</i>	Giving birth
<i>Olomach</i>	Ejaculation
<i>Ng''othruok</i>	Sexual intercourse

Dysphemistic terms such as ejaculation attract two meanings. In Dholuo, this word is referred to as *olomach* which is literally translated to mean 'pouring fire.' 'Fire' in this instance refers to the sperms that are released into the vagina by the penis during sexual intercourse and as was noted during the study, this 'fire' is a significant component in procreation since in the traditional Luo set-up, sexual intercourse was primarily geared towards reproduction with children being the valued end product of the sexual act.

DISCUSSION

Hudson (1994) observed that dysphemistic words are mostly used in graffiti. The strength surrounding such words is that people know what they mean, and yet may never utter some words throughout their lives. They would prefer to use a technical synonym instead of the real dysphemistic word. Such synonyms in most cases are euphemistic and this study is interested in such expressions. For example in the Luo community sex related terms are referred to by using euphemisms. For instance in graffiti especially those used in public transport vehicles expressions such as *chuma liet* (the rod is hot) may be used to refer to an erect penis. The dysphemistic term for the expression may never be uttered. Risch (1987) argues that dysphemism is based on cultural values, norms, beliefs and cognitive attitudes that the members of the society have formed towards the topics concerned. She further notes that dysphemism is usually indirect; its real object is not so much what is forbidden, but rather the cultural and social circumstances affected by the prohibitions. This is the same view held in the Luo society. For example it is believed that a woman may kill the husband when she engages in dysphemistic actions and use dysphemistic utterances as well. For example a woman who hits her husband with her inner garment and points at her vagina saying that the husband will never have sex with her may lead to the death of the man

if they do not engage in ritual sexual intercourse to neutralize the effect of the curse. If she runs away and the ritual sexual intercourse is not done, the husband may suffer from *chira*, a disease whose symptoms resemble those of HIV AND Aids.

It was noted that the society prohibits women from using dysphemistic terms while the men are allowed to talk rough thereby employing aggressive sexual terms in their speech. Noted also was the fact that dysphemistic words and phrases are powerful and even though they are avoided, language users are compelled to preserve them. This study found out that the Luo society is patriarchal; therefore, it is the men who are allowed to openly use sex-related dysphemisms which are regarded as obscenities.

The study noted that men generally use dysphemisms that are sex-related than women since obscenities are considered their domain as Jay (2000) asserts. He continues to argue that dysphemistic terms are emotionally powerful and breaking the rules that societies have laid down as concerns language use may have connotations of strength or freedom which people especially the men find desirable. Coates (2004) additionally observe that using dysphemisms according to some researchers help men maintain their positions in society. Impacted by the hierarchical system, men tend to be more competitive in conversations so as to maintain their power and to achieve masculinity

Mbiti (2002) points out that there is a moral order at work among people. Through it, customs and institutions have arisen in all societies to safeguard the life of the individual and the community of which he is part. As a matter of fact, dysphemisms are seen to strengthen the keeping of the moral and religious order. Therefore, breaking them constitutes a breach of morals and this explains why people try as much as possible to avoid using them as was seen among Dholuo speakers who were interviewed in the study.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to identify and explain the sex-related dysphemistic words and phrases in Dholuo. Sexual organs (vagina and penis), physiological processes like menstruation, ejaculation and giving birth as well as sexual intercourse were analyzed. It was discovered that such terms are normally avoided in virtually all types of settings because they are regarded as abusive and as such, euphemisms which are considered polite and more agreeable are used to replace them.

Analysis of metaphors can be valuable in enhancing our understanding and appreciation of many different areas including the language, culture and history of a particular people. Metaphors have the power not only to shape already existing euphemistic and dysphemistic references in their use and interpretation but they also have the power to create a new reality. As a matter of fact, cognitive linguistics cannot be omitted from the study of sex-related metaphorical language.

RECOMMENDATION

This paper recommends that people be encouraged to openly discuss dysphemistic related issues and this is made possible by the wide variety of euphemisms that have been provided that will enable people discuss such dysphemisms without shying off.

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BIO-DATA

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