

# Metaphoric Conceptualizations of Death in Gikūyū

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Using the dictum that metaphor is a conceptual mapping from a concrete source domain to an abstract target domain, this paper identifies and categorizes the metaphors of death in Gikūyū using the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. To achieve this objective, a purposive sample of twenty speakers of Gikūyū was interviewed. The study collected 47 metaphors of death as the target domain. Having employed the mnemonics “TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN” as posited by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the study identified four conceptual metaphors of death in Gikūyū as follows: DEATH IS A JOURNEY; DEATH IS THE END; DEATH IS A REST; and DEATH IS A SUMMON. The study concludes that the Cognitive linguistics model provides tools for understanding, interpreting and accounting for metaphors of death in Gikūyū.

**Keywords:** *Death, metaphors, Gikūyū, cognitive linguistics*

## 1. Introduction

The interest in metaphor studies has gained currency recently and this is connected with the growth of cognitive linguistics (Alm-Arvius, 2008). In the paradigm of cognitive linguistics, a metaphor helps people to conceptualize and understand abstract concepts in terms of the more concrete concepts (Gibbs, 1994; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Thus, as Lakoff and Turner (1989, p. ix) posit, “Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically, with so little effort that we hardly notice

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it.” Similarly, Lakoff (2008) points out the nexus between language and mind:

We think with our brains. There is no other choice. Thought is physical. Ideas and the concepts that make them up are physically “computed” by brain structures. Reasoning is the activation of certain neuronal groups in the brain given prior activation of other neuronal groups. Everything we know, we know by virtue of our brains (p.18).

In other words, the process of making metaphors is a cognitive process and is something that the human brain does naturally (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Generally, metaphor is common to all languages and cultures irrespective of the phenomena being discussed (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

In the phenomenon of death, for instance, metaphor constitutes a potent source of reference (Aubed, 2011). As shown in different cognitively-based studies (Bultnick, 1998; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Crespo-Fernández, 2008, 2011), “[m]etaphor is, by far, the most powerful mechanism in the formation of euphemisms for the taboo of death” (Crespo-Fernández, 2006, p.111)<sup>1</sup>. Burridge (2004, p.212) is even more succinct when he argues that taboo “provides a fertile seedbed for words to flourish – and the more potent the taboo, the richer the growth”. Similarly, Allan and Burridge (1981) note that death is a “fear-based taboo” in which different fears coexist, namely fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of the corruption of the body, fear of evil spirits and fear of what comes after death (Crespo-Fernandez, 2006). Crespo-Fernandez (2006, p.100) adds that “Mankind’s failure to come to terms with death has been pervasive in different times and societies”. In a later publication, Crespo-Fernandez (2013, p.100) underscores people’s fear of death by noting that “Either owing to fear, religion or issues of tact and respect, death is a topic that, far from having lost its interdictive strength with the passing of time, remains one of the greatest taboos in our contemporary society.” This is one of the reasons that motivates us to look at the phenomenon of death in *Gikūyū*

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<sup>1</sup> A euphemism is used as “an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face either one’s own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience, or of some third party (Allan & Burridge, 1991, p.11).

Although the use of metaphor is universal, the choice of metaphor for interpreting the world may be cultural-specific (Liu, 2002). Indeed, it seems that metaphor is a “unique cognitive mechanism underlying social thought and attitudes,” as much a reflection of culture as any other form of language (Landau, 2010, p.2). Thus, conceptual metaphors expressed in language can serve as an indicator of culture. This is what motivates this study since relatively little attention has been paid to study conceptual metaphors of death in Gĩkũyũ. The concern of this paper is, therefore, to identify and categorize the metaphors of death in Gĩkũyũ within the framework of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (henceforth, CMT) initiated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). As Crespo-Fernández (2011) notes, “metaphorization stands out as one of the most prolific devices of lexical generation; it is hardly surprising that speakers turn to figurative language as a means of coping with taboo topics” (p.54). In this regard, the main aim of this paper is twofold: to identify the metaphors of death in Gĩkũyũ and analyse the metaphorical conceptualizations of death in Gĩkũyũ.

Gĩkũyũ, the subject of this study, is a language in the Central Bantu branch of the Niger–Congo family spoken primarily by the Agĩkũyũ of Kenya. Kikuyu (technically, Gĩkũyũ) belongs to the Kamba-Kikuyu subgroup of Bantu and is spoken in an area extending from Nairobi to the southern and southwestern slopes of Mt. Kenya, in Kenya (Guthrie, 1967). The genetic mode of classifying languages places Gĩkũyũ in Zone E, group 50. It is language number 51 (Guthrie, 1967). However, there is no agreement as to the composition of the Gĩkũyũ dialects. For example, as cited in Macharia (2011, p. 7), Gĩkũyũ has five dialects: Southern Gĩkũyũ (spoken in Kiambu and Southern Mũrang’a), Northern Gĩkũyũ (Northern Mũrang’a), Mathĩra (Nyeri), Gĩchũgũ (Northern Kirinyaga) and Ndia (Southern Kirinyaga). Mutahi (1977), however, classifies Gĩkũyũ dialects on the basis of geographical, economic, political and linguistic factors as: Kabete dialect (Gĩkũyũ spoken in Kiambu County), Metumi dialect (Gĩkũyũ spoken in Murang’a County) and Gaki dialect (Gĩkũyũ spoken in Nyeri County).

## 2. Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

The theoretical notions on which the present study relies are derived from the cognitive model of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) which was initially developed by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980)<sup>2</sup>. First, the CMT emphasizes the importance of metaphor in language, and considers metaphor an essential and indispensable phenomenon in both language and thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1994). In the CMT, a conceptual metaphor refers to the understanding of one conceptual domain in terms of another, which means that “metaphor is a set of cross-domain mappings” (Kövecses, 2006, p.116). Therefore, within the cognitive tradition, the conceptual metaphor view proposes that metaphors are instantiations of conceptual mappings<sup>3</sup> that are understood via mapping source/concrete domains to target/ abstract domains (Ahrens, 2002, Coulson & VanPetten, 2002; Nayak & Gibbs, 1990). The CMT as propounded by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) adopts a methodology for naming mappings in the conceptual system, using mnemonics which suggest the mapping.<sup>4</sup> Another key notion in the CMT is that “the mind is inherently embodied, reason is shaped by the body” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p.5)<sup>5</sup>.

The application of the CMT was important in the discussion of the mapping of the source domain to the target domain of metaphors of death in *Gīkūyū*. For example, the embodiment thesis made it possible for us to

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<sup>2</sup> The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) was first proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and developed by Lakoff and a number of cognitive linguists (for example, Gibbs, 1994; Kövecses, 1990, 2000, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> In this theory, the sets of systematic correspondences between the source and the target are referred to as “mappings” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 2003; Kövecses, 2002; Deignan, 2005; Charteris-Black, 2004, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Mnemonic names typically have the form: TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE-DOMAIN, or alternatively, TARGET DOMAIN AS SOURCE DOMAIN (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> The notion of embodiment is of growing importance in cognitive linguistics. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition and explanation of “embodiment” and “embodied mind” in cognitive linguistics is found in Lakoff and Johnson’s *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999).

explain metaphorical expressions of death in Gikūyū. As postulated by the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), this implies that human beings find phenomena they can *see, hear, feel, taste and / or smell* easier to understand and categorize than phenomena they cannot. The MIP, therefore, helped us analyse the metaphorical expressions of death in Gikūyū in terms of the different kinds of conceptual metaphors. For example, DEATH is the Target Domain (TD), while REST is the Source Domain (SD).

### 3. Methodology of the Study

The current study is a qualitative analysis of responses from a purposive sample of twenty speakers of Gikūyū. The underlying principle behind purposive sampling is that it involves identifying in advance the cases that have the required characteristics (Marshall, 1996). Creswell (2012) also notes that researchers may purposefully and intentionally select respondents that can best help them to understand their central phenomenon. The responses were from the following interview question: “There are metaphors that Gikūyū speakers use to avoid mentioning death because it is considered a taboo. Name any 5 such metaphors in Gikūyū and explain why each of the metaphors is used.”<sup>6</sup> In order to structure the data collected, the mnemonics “TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN” as posited by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) (quoted in Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 13) and which suggests meanings are achieved through a mapping from the source domain to the target domain in the conceptual system were used<sup>7</sup>. (cf. Table 1).

### 4. Results and Discussion

The study collected 47 metaphors that mitigate the target domain of death.

<sup>6</sup> The full interview schedule is given in the appendix.

<sup>7</sup> In Cognitive Metaphor Theory, it is common to use capital letters to indicate that these particular wordings are not a matter of language, but of concepts, belonging to the realm of human thought. These concepts are underlying the very nature of our daily metaphorical expressions (linguistic or otherwise) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

**Table 4.1.** Metaphors of Death in Gĩkũyũ

METAPHORS			
NO	GĨKŪYŪ	GLOSS	Conceptual Domain
1	Kũhurũka	to rest	DEATH IS A REST
2	Kwambata / gũthiĩ matu-inĩ	to go to heaven	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
3	Kũrĩkia wĩra	to finish one's work	DEATH IS AN END
4	Gwĩtwo	to be called	DEATH IS A SUMMON
5	Kũhenerio	to be beckoned	DEATH IS A SUMMON
6	Gũthiĩ gĩkeno-inĩ	to go a place of happiness	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
7	Gũthiĩ kwegu	to go to a good place	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
8	Gũthiĩ gũtarĩ na ruo kana thĩna	to go to where there is no pain or care.	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
9	Gũtigana	separation	DEATH IS AN END
10	Gũthiĩ gatwe	going to the horizon	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
11	Gũthiĩ ũthamakinĩ	to go to the kingdom	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
12	Gũthiĩ kwa huko	to go to the mole's home	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
13	Gũthiĩ kũndũ mũndũ atagacoka	to go to a place where one will never come back	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
14	Gũtirima mũkũyũ	to touch the fig tree	DEATH IS AN END
15	Kũhinga maitho	to close one's eyes	DEATH IS A REST
16	Gũthama	to shift to another place	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
17	Ndagaikia koiga njara	the deceased will never again put his / her hand into the food calabash.	DEATH IS AN END
18	Gũkũnja ndiira	to fold one's heel	DEATH IS AN END

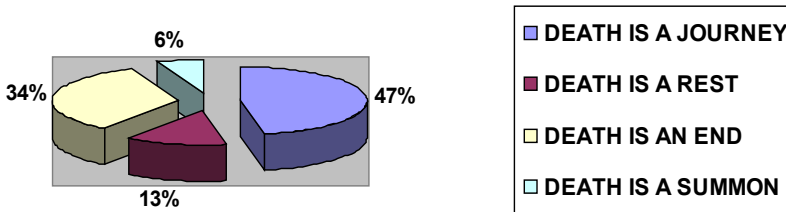
METAPHORS			
NO	GĪKŪYŪ	GLOSS	Conceptual Domain
19	Gūthang'ata / kūng'ata / kūng'ang'a	to be unconscious	DEATH IS A REST
20	Gūkoma	to sleep	DEATH IS A REST
21	Gūthiĩ / kwehuta	to go	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
22	Kūinūka	to go home	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
23	Kwoyo nĩ Ngai	to be taken by God	DEATH IS A SUMMON
24	Kwīhitha	to hide	DEATH IS A REST
25	Gūcekeha	to get thin	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
26	Gūte nyamūga	to get rid of one's sandal	DEATH IS AN END
27	Gūikia thari	to kick involuntarily when in death throes	DEATH IS AN END
28	Gūthiĩ gwa baba	to go to the father	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
29	Kwehera	to leave / move	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
30	Gūtuĩkana	to be cut off from life	DEATH IS AN END
31	Gūthiĩ mucĩ urĩa ũthondeketwo nĩ Mwathani	to go to a place specially made for us by God	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
32	Ndarĩ ho	to be no more; to cease to be	DEATH IS AN END
33	Kūng'urio	to be removed	DEATH IS AN END
34	Kūhoria matawa	to put off lights	DEATH IS A REST
35	Gūthengio	to be moved	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
36	Gūtherera	to disappear down a river when one drowns	DEATH IS A JOURNEY

METAPHORS			
NO	GĪKŪYŪ	GLOSS	Conceptual Domain
37	Gũthĩ kũhanda mĩanga	to go and plant cassava	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
38	Kũhoha	to dry up / to wither	DEATH IS AN END
39	Kũrega ngima	to refuse to eat ugali	DEATH IS AN END
40	Kuuga ũhoro	to say goodbye	DEATH IS AN END
41	Kuuma	to move out	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
42	Kũng'athĩria / Kũrega mbembe	to refuse maize	DEATH IS AN END
43	Kũrũma mbamba	to bite the cotton	DEATH IS AN END
44	Gũthĩ mũgũnda	to go to the land / garden	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
45	Gũthĩ gwa tũongo twerũ	to go to the white skulls	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
46	Gũthĩ na mĩri ya mĩkongwe	to go with the sisal's roots	DEATH IS A JOURNEY
47	Gũikia magũrũ ngũnia	to put one's legs into a sack	DEATH IS A END

Using the principles of the CMT, the study identified four conceptual domains for death in Gĩkũyũ as: DEATH IS A JOURNEY; DEATH IS AN END; DEATH IS A REST AND DEATH IS A SUMMON.

From a quantitative point of view, the conceptual metaphor DEATH IS A JOURNEY accounts for 47% of the metaphors, DEATH IS AN END (34%), DEATH IS A REST (13%), while DEATH IS A SUMMON (6%) is the least frequent of the mappings of death. Figure 4.1 displays the percentage of metaphors in each cognitive domain.





**Figure 4.1.** Conceptual Domains for Death

#### 4.1 Death Is A Journey

Among the Agĩkũyũ human mortality is conceptualized as a journey from the world and this provides the ground for the verbal mitigation of the taboo word<sup>8</sup>. This study identified 22 consolatory metaphors mitigating death which makes 47% of the total number of the metaphors of death collected. This conceptualization provides different sets of conceptual correspondences as a result of using the knowledge we have about journeys to understand death. The metaphors collected together with their variants focus on the journey rather than on its conclusion. It is the deceased who embarks on the journey and, for that reason, he / she is considered to be somehow alive. The metaphors in this mapping utilize the journey metaphor since it is believed that one has passed to another world. For example:

- (1) ‘Gũthĩĩ’- to go,
- (2) ‘Gũthĩĩ kwegā’ - to go to a better place,
- (3) ‘Gũthĩĩ gĩkeno-inĩ’ - to go to a place of happiness,
- (4) ‘Gũthĩĩ kwa baba’ - to go to the Father,
- (5) ‘Kwambata / ‘gũthĩĩ matu-ini’ - to go to heaven.

Crespo-Fernández (2006) argues that the act of dying, therefore, corresponds to the act of leaving. The submappings mentioned above are used to target the experiential domain of death. Crespo-Fernández (2006) adds that the final destination of the journey, that is, encounter with God in Heaven, is based on the Christian belief of a joyful meeting with the

<sup>8</sup> Lakoff (1993, p.275) notes that “[c]omplex events in general are understood in terms of a source-path-goal schema, [that is], complex events have initial states (source), a sequence of intermediate stages (path) and a final stage (destination)”.

Saviour as in (4) and (5). The Christian belief in meeting God in Heaven constitutes the source of reward. The metaphorical phrase expressed in (3) is a clear example of the metaphor death as eternal life (Marín, 1996). This is further expressed in (6) below:

(6) ‘Gũthiĩ ũthamakinĩ’ – going to the Kingdom.

In (6), a hyperbole with a metaphorical basis is used to attenuate death. This metaphor conceptualizes an ardent sense of religion as it has its origin in the belief of life beyond death where the deceased will live forever in eternal happiness in the Kingdom. What may be perceived as a contrast to (6) is explained in the following example:

(7) ‘Gũthengio’ - to be moved.

Metaphor (7) evokes death as an event that human beings cannot control, leaving them vulnerable in the face of the unavoidable event. Death is thus seen as a result of an action performed by some external agent or someone to help bring about departure (Lakoff, 1993, p.232).

A periphrastic metaphorical statement about death in which death is paradoxically viewed as an ideal state for the deceased as in (2) and (3) with the aim of providing some solace to those left alive, is discussed in (8) below. Since there is happiness in death, as stated in (2) and (3), this conceptualization is built on a metonymy as it comprehends death via one of its effects. From a Christian point of view, this metaphor also presents a positive overtone to mitigate the target domain of death:

(8) ‘Gũthiĩ kũrĩa gũtarĩ ruo kana thĩna’ - to go to where there is no pain or care.

The metaphors below also have a Christian bearing as people believe that God has prepared a home for them in heaven. For example:

(9) ‘Gũthiĩ mũciĩ ũrĩa tũthondekeirwo nĩ Mwathani’ - to go to the home specially made for us by God,

(10) ‘Kũinũka’ - to go home,

(11) ‘Guthama’ – to leave.

However, there is mystery in the conceptualization of death as in (12). This metaphor portrays the journey as inevitable and imputes that once the

deceased reaches her / his destination, there is no chance of coming back to the physical world. Therefore, this metaphor may also help us understand human death in terms of finality:

(12) ‘Gūthiī kūdū mūdū atagacoka’ - go to a place where one will never come back.

What may be a metaphor conveying a dysphemistic approach to human mortality, rather than a euphemistic one, may be argued for as in example (13) below<sup>9</sup>. However, our study agrees with Burrige (1996) that words are not mathematical symbols and for that case no term is intrinsically dysphemistic nor euphemistic as they entirely depend on context. Consider the following example which evokes a richer scenario of metaphorization:

(13) ‘Gūthiī kwa huko’ - going to the mole’s place.

Metaphor (13) may be considered to be a relatively recent euphemism for death since according to the Agikūyū customs, people would abandon the dead in the open to be devoured by wild animals. However, the basis of the metaphor (13) stems from the belief that since a mole stays underground and one is normally buried after death in recent times, therefore, when a person dies, one is flippantly said to have left for the mole’s place.

Metaphor (14) may also be said to have a twinge of dysphemism as discussed below:

(14) ‘Gūtherera’ - to disappear down a river when one drowns.

This is because despite being a journey metaphor used to conceptualize death, the metaphor conveys unfavourable connotations since it views death as a cruel enemy which can destroy us (Marín, 1996, p.43).

Another metaphor used in this cognitive network in which the deceased is conceptualized as undertaking a journey to a new world for a beginning, is the well-worn metaphor:

(15) ‘Gūthiī gatwe’ - going to the horizon.

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<sup>8</sup> A dysphemism is an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or both, and it is substituted for a neutral or euphemistic expression for just that reason (Allan & Burrige, 1991, p.26).

‘Gatwe’ or horizon is the place where the earth and the sky appear to meet, and in that connection, a place where one has never been before. This correspondence is also understood as a process with a starting, an end point and a time span by virtue of the Source-Path-Goal schema into which our everyday experience may be organized (Lakoff, 1987).

Let us also consider the metaphor below which is an understatement for death that has a Christian perspective:

(16) ‘Gũcekeha’ - to get thin.

It is believed that when one dies, the spirit which is smaller and thinner than the body goes to heaven and leaves the body.

#### **4.2 Death Is An End**

In this cognitive mapping, human mortality is conceptualized as the final stage of human life. Lakoff (1987) postulates that complex events like death are normally understood in terms of the source (initial state), path (a sequence of intermediate stages) and destination (the final state). Our study identified 16 metaphors (34%) of the total metaphorical euphemisms which conceptualize death in terms of finality after an earthly existence (cf. Table 4.1).

In (17) below, one’s life or work in the world is conceptualized to have come to an end. This metaphor interprets death as the final stage of our lifespan by means of the image mapping death as the end. This is what provides the foundation of attenuating death:

(17) ‘Kũrĩkia wĩra’ - finishing one’s work.

It is important to note that causation in (17) above is caused by the morpheme (-i-) which comes between the root word and the final vowel. Metaphor (17) just like (18) belongs to this cognitive network in the sense that it helps us understand human death in terms of finality (Bultnick, 1998). In this way, metonymic expressions related to the physiological effects of death like:

(18) ‘Gũikia thari’ - to kick involuntarily when in death throes, can be considered to present the same metaphorical basis. This interaction between metaphor and metonymy is a reflection of how effective they are

in the conceptualization of abstract concepts.

The deceased is also said to have left the living as in (19a-d) below. This conceptualization of death as a loss is classified under death as an end metaphor since bereavement may also be understood as such in this mapping. Therefore, one's life is understood as having come to an end as in the following correspondences:

- (19a) 'Gūtūtiga' - to leave the living,
- (b) 'Mūtiga-irī' - a woman or man, who has died and left children,
- (c) 'Mwendwo nĩ - irī' - a man / woman has died and is loved by society,
- (d) 'Mūimwo nĩ irī' - a man or a woman who has died and does not leave children behind.

In the above submapping (19a), the deceased is absent in the conceptualization, given the fact that the -ed participles in left and bereaved emphasize the role of the survivors rather than that of the deceased. According to Itotia (1937), a woman or man who has died and left children of good – standing in society is referred to as (19b), while a man or woman who has died and is loved by society because of his or her good behaviour but has not left children behind is referred to as (19c). However, when one is hated by society because of his or her unbecoming social behaviour and dies, and he or she does not leave children behind, one is derogatively referred to as (19d) above. The usage of (19d) is so because “mūimwo” comes from “kūimwo” which means to be denied something.

Further evidence of a metaphor with a twinge of dysphemism in the cognitive network includes the following flippant expression:

- (20) 'Gūtirima mūkūyū' - touching the fig tree.

This metaphor stems from the practice in traditional Gikūyū customs that when a person died, the body would be transported to the forest at night and placed at the foot of a fig tree. Scavengers would have a field's day devouring the body.

For (21) below, we agree with Bultnick (1998, pp.44-45), that the conceptual basis of such a mapping lies in that “life is perceived as a valuable object and death is thus seen as the loss of this possession”. This

implies that the deceased will never get an opportunity to put his hand into a container (a calabash) that contains food. Thus, for the deceased:

(21) ‘Ndagaikia koiga njara’ - the deceased will never again put his hand into the food calabash.

Metaphor (21) is culture-specific. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) put it, “[t]he mind is not merely corporeal, but also passionate, desiring and social. It has a culture and cannot exist culture-free” (p.325). That death is a heavily culture-dependent phenomenon can, thus, be clearly seen in the above conceptualisation.

In (22), the expression constitutes an instance of conceptual metonymy while (23) is a flippant correspondence for death that perceives the deceased as having got rid of sandals.

(22) ‘Gükūnja ndira’ - to fold one’s heels,

(23) ‘Gūte nyamūga’ - to have got rid of sandals.

Metaphor (22) above is intended as a damning statement of the physiological effect of death. It is based on the belief that when one dies, the legs are said to fold up and no amount of force can straighten them. On the converse, the basis of the metaphor (23) stems from the belief that the deceased gets rid of the sandals because he or she has no need for them ever again.

#### 4.3 Death Is A Rest

The domain of death in Gīkūyū is also conceptualized as a rest. This study identified six occurrences in this cognitive network which is 13% of the metaphors mitigating death in Gīkūyū (cf. Table 4.1). Within this conceptualization, we have also included death as sleep (a rest) conceptual correspondence. The underlying notion of the metaphors in this conceptual mapping stems from the fact that a rest, or sleep are temporary, and therefore, death is also conceptualized as a temporary event. For example:

(24) ‘Kūhurūka’ - to rest,

(25) ‘Gūkoma’ - to sleep.

Metaphors (24) and (25) imply that the cessation of bodily functions and speech are not automatically identified with the symptoms of physical death, as they are also present in peaceful sleep (Crespo-Fernández,

2006). It may also be interpreted as a rest from the problems of the world. The conceptual mapping can also be interpreted from the perspective of Christianity. That is, one has only slept awaiting resurrection after Christ's second coming (Luke 8:52; 1Cor 15: 51; 1Thessalonians 4: 13). Wheeler (1994) argues that the mitigation of death is based on the Christian hope of the resurrection of the dead. Thus, there is a projection from a source domain (REST) onto a target domain (DEATH) and the associations that constitute the metaphor map our feelings about sleep onto our perception about death. It is this correspondence between the source and the target domains where cognitive conceptualization fulfils its euphemistic function. This cognitive association adopts a diametrically opposed perspective from the death as a journey. Metaphors (24) and (25) are based on the positive effects of death as a means of relief.

Another conceptual correspondence in this mapping is metaphor (26), which is an understatement to euphemize the target domain of death:

(26) 'Kūhinga maitho' - of the deceased having closed his or her eyes.

This metaphor stems from the fact that when one dies, the eyes are believed to have been closed for a moment awaiting resurrection. That is the idea of temporariness evident in the metaphor.

The metaphor 'to hide' is another occurrence in this mapping which also employs understatement to attenuate death:

(27) 'Kwīhitha' - to hide.

This metaphor may also be interpreted as a temporary event just like we have conceptualized in (25) and (26) since the deceased has only hidden himself probably from the troubles of this world or as he waits for Christ's resurrection.

A metaphor that understates death as a state of unconsciousness is exemplified in (28) below:

(28) 'Kūng'ang'a', 'gūthang'ata' or 'Kung'ata' - a state akin to unconsciousness.

This is a situation like the one a person finds himself in when hypnotized. The word is an appropriate metaphorical substitute for death since it looks

at death as a temporary event.

Another sub mapping in this conceptual metaphor is when the deceased is conceptualized as:

(29) ‘Kūhoria matawa’ - having put the lights off.

In this metaphor, understatement is used to perceive the target domain as a temporary event.

#### **4.4 Death As A Summon / Call**

In this conceptual mapping, it is the deceased who receives a summon. This mapping is founded on the Christian belief that when one dies, one is assumed to have been called by God to go and rest in heaven. Some Agĩkũyũ always maintain a close and vital relationship with spiritual beings. This conceptual mapping is the source to three occurrences which is 6% of the total metaphorical substitutes mitigating death (cf. Table 4.1). For instance:

(30) ‘Gwĩtwo’ - to be called or summoned,

(31) ‘Kūhenerio’ - to be beckoned,

(32) ‘Kwoyo nĩ Ngai’ - to be taken by God.

These are correspondences which as stated earlier, imply that it is God who calls people to go and stay with him. The passive morpheme in (30) is realized by the addition of ‘-w-’ to the verb immediately before the final vowel ‘-a’. It is the correspondence between the source domain and the target domain that euphemistic effect is created. The metaphor (30) has a high lexical frequency and as such, it has become lexicalized and acceptable by majority of Agĩkũyũ (cf. Table1).

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper set out to interrogate how the Agĩkũyũ conceptualize DEATH. First, the study identified 47 metaphors of death in Gĩkũyũ (cf. Table 4.1). This high number of metaphors is an indication of the importance of metaphor in the conceptualization of death in Gĩkũyũ. This concurs with Fernández’s (2006) argument that “Metaphor is, by far, the most powerful mechanism in the formation of euphemisms for the taboo of death” (p.111).



Similarly, Crespo-Fernández (2011) notes that “metaphor thus plays a crucial role in the way we manage forbidden concepts and manipulate the taboo....” (p.54).

Second, the study noted that the metaphors of death in Gikūyū are well accounted for in terms of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Using the principles of the CMT, this study identified the following four conceptual domains for death in Gikūyū: DEATH IS A JOURNEY (47%); DEATH IS AN END (34%); DEATH IS A REST (13%); AND DEATH IS A SUMMON (6%) of the total metaphorical conceptualizations of death in Gikūyū. The finding is in consonance with past studies on metaphor (Machakanja, 2006; Crespo-Fernández, 2013; Sauciuc, 2009) which have proved that the CMT is an effective framework for the analysis of metaphors.

In particular, the DEATH IS A JOURNEY metaphor, as earlier noted in Section 4.1, may be concluded that it is the deceased who embarks on a journey and, for that reason, he / she is considered to be somehow alive. This implies that the Agikūyū believed that life continued after death. The same conclusion may be extended to the DEATH IS A REST and DEATH IS A SUMMON / CALL metaphors. Opati and Rungu (2016) argue that Africans generally “believed that death was just a passage to a new stage of life in the spirit world where the living-death and ancestors dwelt in” (p.20). Since death was not an end in itself, some communities buried their dead with their belongings to enable them to live comfortably in the spirit world (p.20). The Agikūyū, therefore, believe that death is only a transition. It is only a means of passing from the world of human beings to the world of spirits. However, the DEATH IS AN END metaphor in Gikūyū helps us look at death in terms of finality after an earthly existence.

The results of this research can be used to compare or contrast the metaphors of death across cultures and language. Moreover, exploring the taboo of death can provide a basis to examine social variables like age, social status and education and their influence on the usage of metaphors of death.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this interview schedule is to get your views on metaphors of death in Gĩkũyũ. Any information that you give will be treated with confidence and will only be used for the success of this academic research.

Your name (optional) .....

There are words / metaphors/ phrases that Gĩkũyũ speakers use to avoid mentioning human death. Name any 5 such terms in Gĩkũyũ.

#### A. DEATH

i. \_\_\_\_\_

*Why?*.....  
ii. \_\_\_\_\_  
*Why?*.....  
iii. \_\_\_\_\_  
*Why?*.....  
iv. \_\_\_\_\_  
*Why?*.....  
v. \_\_\_\_\_  
*Why?*.....  
(Any other) \_\_\_\_\_  
*Why?*.....

