

# The Polysemy Of The Gĩkũyũ Nouns That Denote Celestial Bodies

Florence Gathoni Gachugi

Muranga University of Technology, Department of Liberal Studies,  
Muranga, Kenya

**Abstract:** *This paper examines from a Cognitive Linguistic approach the polysemy of the Gĩkũyũ nouns from the semantic field of celestial bodies namely: mweri “moon”, njata “star” and riua “sun”. These nouns have multiple meanings among them the literal and extended meanings. From the data analysis it was observed that the literal meanings of these nouns are extended to have related meanings which are found in the semantic fields of animals, human beings and seasons. Metaphor and metonymy are the two mechanisms that motivate formation of polysemous meanings from these nouns.*

**Keywords:** *Polysemy, Celestial bodies, metaphor, metonymy, semantic extension, source domain, target domain, mapping.*

## I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

### THE CONCEPT OF POLYSEMY

According to Antunano (1999), polysemy is the term that is used in semantic analysis to describe the situation in which a word has two or more related meanings. Taylor (1995) argues that polysemy or the association of two or more related meanings with a single linguistic form is ubiquitous in a language. Taylor (2000) also observes that polysemy is a very common phenomenon, especially for the most frequent words which exhibit a range of different meanings which can be viewed as being related to one another.

The current paper is based on the polysemy of Gĩkũyũ which is a Bantu language of the Niger- Congo group spoken in Kenya. The paper examines the polysemy of the nouns mweri ‘moon’, njata ‘star’, riua ‘sun’ which are from the semantic domain of celestial bodies with a view to highlighting the varieties of the related meanings they have, the semantic domains that these meanings belong to and the motivations behind the relationships among these meanings.

Metaphor and metonymy which are regarded as the most vital mechanisms underlying meaning extension in Cognitive linguistics (Cuyckens & Zawada 2001, Nerlich (2003), Traugott & Dasher 2002 ), are the mechanisms that are used to account for the relationships among the polysemous

meanings of these nouns. Cognitivists see metonymy as an intra- domain mapping in which the source acts as a vehicle that provides mental access to the whole, with the part- whole as the typical relation between the source and the target (Radden & Kovesces 1999). Cognitivists have long recognized the connection between metonymy and polysemy (Lakoff 1987, Taylor 2003) and they regard metonymy to be an important resource in word formation and the metonymic transfer plays an important role in the process of the formation of some lexical polysemy.

Cognitivists see metaphor as a central feature of human language and an important source of meaning extension (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). According to Lakoff (2003), metaphor often accounts for polysemy and he concludes that the conceptual metaphor explains the systematicity of polysemy of polysemy and correspondingly the systematic polysemy provides evidence for the existence of metaphor. From the aspect of Cognitive Linguistics, metaphor is viewed as an across domain mapping where there is a source and a target domain (Kovesces 2002: 33). Mapping is the cognitive process that relates literal meanings to the extended meanings.

## II. DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis of the nouns is conducted according to the following steps: First sentences are constructed to show how the nouns are used in their original (literal) meanings and then other sentences are constructed in order to examine how the extended meanings are related to the original meanings through metaphor and metonymy.

### THE LITERAL MEANING OF MWERI 'MOON'

The original or literal meaning of mweri in Gikūyū is moon which is a celestial body as shown by the following expression:

- ✓ Ūmūthĩ mweri ndūroneka  
Today moon cannot be seen.  
Today the moon cannot be seen.

### THE METONYMIC AND METAPHORIC MEANINGS OF MWERI "MOON"

- ✓ mweri wa kerĩ warĩ na mbura nene  
Month of the second had rain heavy.  
The month of February had heavy rains.  
There was heavy rainfall in February.
- ✓ Ngooka mweri ikūmi  
I will come date ten.  
I will come on tenth
- ✓ Ena mweri  
She has month  
She has the monthly period.
- ✓ Ng'ombe itũ itagwo mweri  
Cow our is called moon  
Our cow is called moon.

In 2a), mweri refers to the month and it has the season sense.

This meaning is derived from the literal meaning moon via metaphoric extension. These two meanings are closely connected in that, traditionally, the Agikūyū people used to observe the cycle of the moon in order to mark days and seasons. From the first appearance of the moon, the cycle began and they would observe this cycle when the moon rose and set. When the moon completed its cycle after so many days, that period was referred to as mweri – season or month.

In 2b 'mweri' refers to the date. This meaning is derived from the 'month' meaning. The month is made of many dates, thus in 2b, 'mweri' is applied to mean date via the PART FOR WHOLE METONYMY.

2c. 'mweri' refers to the monthly period or the menstrual discharge that women have every month. It is taboo in Gikūyū to refer to body effluvia and anything that is related to the reproductive functions of the human body directly. In this case 'mweri' is euphemistically used to refer to menstrual discharge.

2d) 'mweri' refers to an animal (cow). This meaning is derived from the 'moon' sense via metaphoric extension due to the similarities between the cow and the 'moon'. The cow which is white is called 'mweri' cause it is as bright as the moon. In the second case the cow can be referred to as

'mweri' if it was born on a moonlit night. The metaphoric relationship here arises due to the time the cow was born.

In this metaphoric extension, there is mapping between the sources domains of celestial bodies which are inanimate objects to the target domain of animals which are animate beings.

### THE LITERAL MEANING OF NJATA 'STAR'

The original or literal meaning of 'njata' in Gikūyū is star which is a celestial body as shown in the following example:

- 3. kwĩna njata nyingĩ igūrũ.  
There are stars many in the sky  
There are many stars in the sky.

### THE METONYMIC AND METAPHORIC EXTENSIONS OF NJATA 'STAR'

- 4a) we ni we 'njata' yakwa

You are you star mine

You are my star.

- b) kwĩ 'njata' nyingĩ muno kwoguo mūdũ

There stars many very so person

Ethuragĩra ĩrĩa ekwenda

Chooses for himself/herself the one he/she wants.

There are many stars so a person chooses for himself the one he wants.

There are very many stars so a person chooses the one that he wants.

- c) Ng'ombe yakwa ĩtagwa 'njata'

Cow mine is called star.

My cow is called star.

In the above example the literal meaning of 'njata' is extended to other meanings via metaphoric extension.

In 4a) 'njata' is used to refer to a person who is a celebrity because just like there are many stars in the sky all over the world, this person is also known all over the world due to her/his success or fame. Here there is mapping from the source domain of celestial bodies to the target domain of human beings.

- In 4b) 'njata' has the 'special woman' sense

Among the Agikūyū people, women are regarded to be as many as the stars and each man is supposed to choose a special woman to be a long time partner from them. The one who is chosen is regarded to as his star that will illuminate his world even during the darkest moments. Here there is mapping between the source domain of celestial bodies and the target domain of human beings

In 4c) 'njata' has the animal sense. Among the Agikūyū any cow that is born on a starlight night or which has two different patches of colour is referred to as 'njata'. These patches could be black and white or brown and white on the back, the stomach and/or the head.

In this example, there is metaphoric mapping between the source domain of celestial bodies (inanimate objects) and the target domain of animals which are animate objects.

As a result of these meaning extension, 'njata' originally designating a star acquires other related meaning thus becoming polysemous.

### THE LITERAL MEANING OF RIŪA 'SUN'

The literal meaning of riŭa in Gikũyũ is sun which is a celestial body that provides heat and light for the earth as illustrated in the following example:

5 Riŭa nĩ ihumbĩre nĩ matu.

Sun is covered by clouds.

The sun is covered by clouds.

### THE METONYMIC AND METAPHORIC EXTENSIONS OF RIŪA 'SUN'

6 (a) Ũmũthĩ gutirĩ riŭa

Today there is no sun.

Today there is no sun.

In 6a, riŭa refers to the heat and light that the earth receives from the sun.

This meaning is derived from the literal sense by metonymic transfer and has a PART- WHOLE relationship with the literal sense.

b) mũirĩtu ũyũ nĩ riŭa rĩa mwanake ũcio

Girl this is sun of young man that.

This girl is that young man's sunshine.

In 6b) riŭa is derived from the literal sense via metaphoric extension because just like the sun illuminates the earth the person being referred to is bright and illuminates the other person's world. In this metaphoric relationship, there is mapping between the source domain of celestial bodies which are inanimate objects to the target domain of human beings who are animate objects. Through these meaning extensions, riŭa, originally designating a celestial body, acquires other related meanings thus becoming polysemous.

### III. CONCLUSION

From the above of the analysis of the data it can be noted that Gikũyũ nouns from the semantic field of celestial bodies have varieties of meanings which are polysemous.

These metaphor and metonymy are the semantic mechanisms that motivate the formation of the polysemous meanings. Metaphor is the main mechanism that motivates the

formation of the polysemy of these nouns and the following metaphoric mappings were observed:

Mapping from the source domain of celestial bodies (inanimate objects) to the target domain of animals (animate objects).

Mapping from the source domain of celestial bodies (inanimate objects) to the target domain of human beings (animate objects), the PART-WHOLE metonymic relationship also contributes to the formation of polysemous meanings.

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