

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN EKEGUSII IDIOMS: ITS DIFFERENT TYPES AND ITS MORPHOLOGICAL AND SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE IN AN AGGLUTINATING LANGUAGE OF KENYA¹

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If there is one genre in language that exhibits special features in its compositeness, it is idioms. Their composition, whether it be a string of words or just one word (in agglutinating languages like Ekegusii, a Bantu language of Kenya), is typically based on figurative language such as metaphors, metonyms, similes, hyperboles, understatements, and euphemisms. Ekegusii examples include the following: a) *gotwera amate* (literally ‘to spit saliva on’, which is a metaphor-based idiom meaning ‘to bless someone or something’); b) *goaka ekeranya* (literally ‘to cane someone’, which is a metonymy-based idiom meaning ‘to be nominated for a specific task’ or ‘to tell someone something vexing, be it true or false’); c) *koragera buna omosamaro* (literally ‘to eat like someone from the *Bosamaro* clan’, which is a simile-based idiom meaning ‘to eat a lot’). This paper illustrates the different types of figurative language contained in Ekegusii idioms and shows, through some idioms formed only of verb forms, that the very definition of idiom as a group of words cannot be enough to define idiom in an agglutinating language.

Key words: Ekegusii, idioms, figurative language, structure

1. INTRODUCTION

Skandera (2003: 42) opens his chapter devoted to defining the notion of “idiom” with these words: “Few linguistic concepts are as fuzzy as the notion of idiom”. But before we look at the fuzziness of the notion from linguists’ definitions, let us start with how two specialized dictionaries contextualize an idiom in relation to other constructions which, on the face of it, look similar to it. First, the *Oxford Dictionary*

¹ I would like to appreciate the support I received from the partnership for Africa’s Next Generation of Academics (PANGeA) for a fellowship awarded to me at Stellenbosch University which enabled me to work on an initial project of compiling a dictionary of idioms in Ekegusii (forthcoming). The data for this paper is drawn from the dictionary.

of *Idioms* (2nd edition, 2004), which, in its preface, says that “[This second edition] maintains the first edition’s focus on contemporary and historical phrases, sayings, and proverbs [...]”. It goes on to note that “The formation of new phrases and sayings is one of the most colourful aspects of language development, and by adding idioms such as **chew the scenery**, **be in like Flynn**, and **give someone the hairy eyeball** [...] the new edition hopes to reflect this colour” (p. vii). Second, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* (1998: vi) in its introduction informs the reader that:

It includes:

- traditional idioms (e.g., turn a blind eye to something, throw the baby out with the bathwater)
- idiomatic compounds (e.g., fall guy, turkey shoot)
- similes and comparisons (e.g., as dull as ditch water, swear like a trooper)
- exclamations and sayings (e.g., Bully for you! Over my dead body!)
- clichés (e.g., all part of life’s rich tapestry, there’s many a true word spoken in jest).

It transpires from the quotations from the two dictionaries that while the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* includes sayings and proverbs in its entries, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms* excludes proverbs but includes similes and comparisons, exclamations, and clichés. This “lack of agreement” between the two dictionaries (devoted specifically to idioms) on what exactly the notion of idiom covers is enough indication of the fuzzy boundary between idioms and non-idiomatic expressions. And it is telling that the latter dictionary seems to distinguish between “traditional idioms” and other expressions which it deals with under the umbrella of idioms.

Turning now to non-dictionary sources, Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994: 491) suggest that idioms are usually viewed in terms of “noncompositionality”, a view which the authors feel “[...] fails to recognize several important dimensions of idiomaticity, including, among others, conventionality and figuration”. On figuration, that is the use of figurative language, the authors observe that “Idioms typically involve metaphors (*take the bull by the horns*), metonymies (*lend a hand*, *count heads*), hyperboles (*not worth the paper it’s printed on*), or other kinds of

figuration” (p. 492). It is evident that, unlike the two specialized dictionaries, Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow (1994) consider hyperboles to be part of idioms. On the other hand, they do not include sayings and proverbs (included in the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms*). Philip (2011: 15), citing Kövesces & Szabó (1996: 326), says that “an idiom is a combination of two or more orthographic words whose meaning, taken together, ‘cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent parts’”. This definition considers an idiom to be constituted of at least two words, a definition which applies to analytic languages but not to agglutinating ones.

In the face of the fuzzy picture of what an idiom is, a working definition is necessary for this paper. The paper will adopt Skandera’s (2003) definition² below, as a starting point:

[An idiom] is a conventionalized sequence of at least two words or free morphemes that is semantically restricted so that it functions as a single lexical unit, whose meaning—from a synchronic point of view—cannot or can only to a certain extent be deduced from the meaning of its constituents. (Skandera, 2003: 60).

It is worth noting that Skandera adds that “Even though the gist of this definition is almost identical with that of many others, its practical application is not quite comparable with any of the notions of idioms discussed [under ‘the properties of idioms’]” (p. 60). The “practical application” he is alluding to is that of a non-native variety of English like Kenyan English, which most likely contains idioms that fall outside what Skandera calls “the Anglo-American tradition” (p. 59). Following Skandera (2003), the present author holds the view that definitions based on this tradition (including Skandera’s own above) are not likely to handle the structural complexities of idioms in agglutinating languages. This is because even a single word can be construed as an idiom, as is the case of the Ekegusii idiom *oberekire*³

² The present author appreciates the high degree of scholarship manifested in Skandera’s (2003) discussion (in Chapter 2, pp. 41-60) of the various definitions proposed in the literature for the notion of idiom before coming up with his own (quoted here), a discussion appraising, among other things, “the properties of idioms” (pp. 42-47) and “the cultural dimensions of idioms” (pp. 54-58).

³ In its non-idiomatic use, this verb is usually used transitively and is followed by *omwana*, ‘a child’, as in *Moraa oberekire omwana*. In its idiomatic use, it is used as an intransitive verb, as in *Moraa oberekire*.

‘she has become pregnant’ (but, literally: ‘she has carried a baby astride on the back’). The verb form *oberekire* is composed of the following morphemes, all of which are bound: *o-*, 3 SG; *-berek-* ‘carry astride’, *-ir-* aspect, and *-e*, FV with aspect features (note that the infinitive FV is *a-* in *kobereka* meaning ‘to be pregnant’). Therefore, in order to handle even such cases, the present study will use the following definition, adapted from Skandera’s (2003) quoted above:

An idiom in **Ekegusii** is a conventionalized sequence of at least **two morphemes, whether free or bound**, that is semantically restricted so that it functions as a single lexical unit, whose meaning—from a synchronic point of view—cannot or can only to a certain extent be deduced from the meaning of its constituents. (Emphasis added, through bold type)

Such a definition allows for verb forms like *oberekire* to be treated as idioms. It is worth adding that this definition is consistent with the view, attributed to the semanticist and grammarian Frank R. Palmer by Skandera (2003: 43), that “idioms are composites, but not necessarily composed of words”. Further, Palmer (1981: 79) notes that “Idioms have collocation of a special kind”, whose meaning is usually opaque.

Skandera’s definition offers, in its segment “semantically restricted so that it functions as a single lexical unit”, the advantage of a scope wide enough to cover not only the “traditional idioms”, but also other expressions which are equally semantically restricted. The traditional idioms must be those defined by three criteria (as discussed in Skandera 2003): i) “compositeness” (p. 43), which refers to the idea that an idiom must be composed of at least two words; ii) “semantic opacity” (p. 43); and iii) “semantic (or) pragmatic unanalyzability, or noncompositionality” (p. 44). The “other expressions” seem to be those covered by two additional criteria: iv) “a high degree of mutual predictability [...] among the constituents in conjunction with semantic interpretation, variously referred to as conventionality, institutionality, or lexicality” (p. 45), a criterion which, according to Skandera’s suggestion, accounts for metaphors; and v) “the lexicogrammatical invariability of idioms, also termed frozenness, fixedness, or fossilization” (p. 46). This last criterion would cover even a phrasal verb like *to put up with*, which, arguably, cannot be analysed as a traditional idiom of the kind of *kick the bucket*.

Beyond the issue of definitions, it should be noted that while so much seems to have been written about idioms in the English language, little seems to have on African (including Kenyan) languages. The present study came across only three such studies: Teilanyo (2014), Atichi (2015), and Munyu (2016). Teilanyo's (2014) study compared Nembe (a Nigerian language) and English idioms. Examples of English idioms whose equivalents in Nembe are discussed are *to cry over spilt milk* and *to kick the bucket*. The study reports that the English idiom *to cry over spilt milk* (to waste time worrying about something that has happened that you cannot do anything about) has its Nembe equivalent translated as 'It is when the fish has escaped that the best way of killing it is known'. The English idiom *to kick the bucket* ('to die') is rendered euphemistically as 'to yawn' in Nembe (Teilanyo 2014, p. 134). The author concludes that Nembe and English idioms "[...] employ different lexical items according to the flora and fauna and social cultural nuances of these peoples" (p. 137).

Atichi's (2015) study is a pragmatic analysis of Olunyore (a Bantu language of Kenya) idioms. It analyses idioms from two angles: topic-based and structure-based. According to the author, the topics under which idioms are analysed are: Domain-oriented (such as gender-based idioms and idioms on death and funeral), idiomaticity from human body parts (such as the limbs), idioms on social relationships (such as kinship and family) and social acts (such as condemning). As for the structure-based idioms, Atichi (2015: 189-196) distinguishes between those that are formed from verb phrases (of the following structures: [INF.] + V + NP, V + NP + NP and [INF.] + V + Prep + NP) and those formed from noun phrases (of the structure N + Adj.). Atichi's (2015) discussion of idioms along various 'topics' is quite relevant since it helps to contextualize various realities encoded in idioms. The author's structural classification is equally relevant to the current paper since both Olunyore and Ekegusii are geographically close Bantu languages and both are agglutinating languages.

Munyu's (2016) study analysed the interpretation of idiomatic expressions in Gikuyu (another Bantu language of Kenya). It classifies idioms in terms of them being "transparent, semi-transparent, semi-opaque, opaque and emerging". This classification is based on the (non)compositionality of idioms. The study also acknowledges the use of various figures of speech in idioms. The author notes that

“Idioms employ the use of other figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, proverbs, among others” (Munyu 2016, p. 38). However, these figures of speech are not the primary focus of Munyu’s study: they are not discussed beyond the author’s acknowledgement that they may be considered as idioms. This leaves room for the present study to delve into an analysis of the use of figurative language in the idioms in Ekegusii, another Bantu language like Gikuyu.

So, to go further than the few previous studies on idioms in African languages mentioned above, this paper aims to be an in-depth analysis of the composition of idioms from another African language, Ekegusii, but with their figurative-language nature as the starting point. By focusing on figuration in idioms, the present study wants to bring out the wide coverage of the notion of idiom, which is not so obvious when idioms are analysed purely in terms of their (non)compositionality of their meanings. For its part, the relevance of studying idioms in an agglutinating language lies, as hinted at earlier, in the fact that idioms need not be multi-word strings.

The wide range of idioms in the present study will thus cover not only traditional idioms, like *koirania eriogi inda* (‘to talk quietly’ but, literally, ‘to take the volume to the stomach’), but also **metaphors**, like *omonto ritimbo* (‘a stupid/foolish person’, but, literally, ‘a person who is a beetle’); **metonyms**, like *kobwata ekaramu bokong’u* (‘to work hard in one’s studies/to succeed in studies’, but, literally, ‘to hold the pen firmly’); **similes**, like *gokwana buna eredio* (‘to talk fast and a lot’, but, literally, ‘to talk like a radio’); **euphemisms**, like *okonyekire* (‘She has given birth’, but, literally, ‘she/he has been helped’); **hyperboles**, like *endagera ngotoita ere* (‘There is a lot of food’, but, literally, ‘food is killing us’); and **understatements**, like *omonto obwate etongoro* (‘a person who is wealthy’, but, literally, ‘a person who has a ten-cent coin’). However, proverbs will not be considered in this paper because, although their meanings may not always be easily decomposed from their component words, we are far from consensus on whether proverbs should be included in the list of idioms.

2. THE FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION⁴ OF EKEGUSII IDIOMS

The figures of speech at play in this paper are metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, simile, euphemism, and understatement.

2.1 Metaphor-based idioms

This paper follows Lakoff's (1992: 205) viewpoint on the conceptual metaphor theory that "[...] those concepts that are not comprehended via conceptual metaphor might be called literal [...]. But as soon as one gets away from concrete physical experience and starts talking abstractions or emotions, metaphorical understanding is the norm". For cognitive semanticists like Lakoff, a metaphor is that figure of speech which requires mapping of one idea from one cognitive domain (the source domain) onto another (the target domain).

The Ekegusii idioms in (1) to (7) are metaphor-based.

(1) *Kobongorora amang'ana*

Literal meaning: 'to shell words'

Figurative meaning: 'to talk a lot and carelessly'

The verb *kobongorora* is specifically associated with the shelling of maize kernels off the cob. Thus, likening shelling maize kernels to talking a lot and carelessly conjures up the idea of both quantity (the amount of maize kernels that are shelled off) and manner (the idea of carelessness). Understanding the metaphor in (1) requires borrowing (i.e. mapping) the idea that the activity of shelling maize kernels off the cob does not require much concentration, and, by comparison, so does talking carelessly.

(2) *Koria amang'ana*

⁴ The following morpheme symbols will be used in the discussion of the composition of the idioms: N= noun, V= verb, Adj= adjective, Adv= adverb, Pron= pronoun, Prep= preposition, FV= final vowel, APPL= applicative, BEN= benefactive, CAUS= causative, REC= reciprocal, 3 = third person, SG= singular.

Literal meaning: 'to eat words'⁵

Figurative meaning: 'To talk a lot and carelessly'

Idiom (2) has the same meaning as idiom (1). However, instead of expressing the idea of 'shelling off', it does that of 'eating' (*koría*). The meaning, 'plentiful and careless talk', is contextualized in the everyday activity of 'eating'. Eating is an involuntary activity which does not require much thought. So, one who 'eats words' ends up talking unthinkingly, often to the irritation of his/her listeners.

(3) *Goseboka omobere / omobere goseboka*.

Literal meaning: 'sprouting of the body' / 'the body to sprout' (means: 'The body sprouted')

Figurative meaning: 'To recover from ill-health/an illness/a season of difficulty'

Sprouting is characteristic of plants but in idiom (3) it expresses something that can happen to human beings. People may lose weight or the general healthy look due to illness or due to a season of some difficulty. So, when they recover and regain their former healthy look, they are likened to the sprouting of plants. The idiom implies the sprouting of new leaves, stems and branches after pruning or cutting down trees. Illness is thus metaphorically regarded as something that 'cuts off a branch or a tree', but fortunately either of these can grow back. This is symbolized in the way human beings regain wellness such as lost weight after illness.

The syntactic structure of idioms (1) and (2) is that of V + N. The verbs *kobongorora* and *koría* are in their infinitive form, with *ko*-being the verb-initial infinitive marker, *bongoror-* and *-ri-* being the root ('shell' and 'eat' respectively), while *-a* is the FV as the second element marking the infinitive. *Amang'ana* means 'words' in both idioms. For its part, the structure of idiom (3) shows syntactic flexibility in that it can have a V+N structure or an N+V one, where *sebok-* 'sprout' is the root, *-a* the FV with infinitive features. Notice that in *goseboka* ('to sprout'), the verb-initial infinitive marker is <go->, rather than <ko>-, because Dahl's law obtains in Ekegusii.

⁵ This idiom seems close to the English *eat your words*. However, the two have quite different meanings (since the latter means 'to admit you are wrong') and a structural difference (since in the Ekegusii idiom there is no equivalent of *your*).

In other cases, the structure changes as shown in examples (4)-(7).

(4) *Omonto ore magega*⁶

Literal meaning: 'a person who is behind'

Figurative meaning: 'a stupid/inexperienced/naïve person'

This idiom uses the concept of time to express stupidity. A person who is "behind" does not understand the current issues and, thus, is behind the 'schedule of comprehension'. This contrasts with the idiomatic expression *omonto ore bosio*, 'a person who is ahead', referring to a person who is experienced and knowledgeable. These opposite idiomatic expressions can be used to refer to larger entities than individuals, such as a whole village, a community, a country, or even a continent.

(5) *Omonto ore inse*

Literal meaning: 'a person who is down'

Figurative meaning: 'a poor person'

In this idiom, people are viewed as being on a vertical scale and 'down' might be the starting point for some. A person who is 'down' has to cover a vertical distance which entails wealth accumulation. However, in Ekegusii there is no idiom referring to 'being up' as an expression of prosperity. This is probably because a person can go on climbing the vertical scale of wealth accumulation as long as he/she is alive. Idioms (4) and (5) have the structure of a N (*omonto*, 'a person') followed by a relative clause acting as a post-modifier (*ore magega*, 'who is behind'; *ore inse*, 'who is down'). In actual language use, the idiom is usually used as an adjectival phrase.

(6) *Omonto ritimbo*

Literal meaning: 'a person a beetle'

Figurative meaning: 'a stupid/foolish person'

This idiomatic expression sees a person in the light of a beetle, an insect which is usually seen pushing an oversize mound of earth. The pushing, in the eyes of the Gusii people, is aimless.

This idiom has a N+N structure, with the second noun being a modifier of the first one.

(7) *Onyititokire*

Literal meaning: 'he/she has 'melted''.

Figurative meaning: 'he/she has lost weight'.

Ordinarily, it is solid fats that melt. However, in the context of illness, the process through which one loses weight is viewed as a process of melting away. So, humans are viewed as "a block of fat" which can melt the way fats would, when exposed to heat. This one-word idiom can be broken down to these morphemes: *o-* 3 SG, *nyititok-* melt, *-ir-* aspect and *-e* the FV with aspect features.

2.2 Metonymy-based idioms

On comprehension of metonymy, Kövecses (2006: 98) makes reference to a "vehicle" and a "target". He explains that "there is an entity, [...] "that stands" for another entity, or element." The "vehicle" is the one that stands for another while the "target" is the one it stands for. One of the examples he gives is: *The ham sandwich spilled beer all over himself*. The 'ham sandwich' is the vehicle while 'the person eating it' is the target. This paper borrows this view of metonymy to mean a message that is communicated using a "stand for" concept unlike a metaphor in which the message is communicated using a "mapping onto" concept. The metonyms can be in a "whole and its parts" configuration, where the whole can stand for the part or the part for the whole, commonly referred to as synecdoche (Kövecses 2006: 100-101). There is also the "Part and Part" configuration especially in "[...] action, causation, control, and a kind of frame that arises in many different situations" (Kövecses 2006: 104). Under causation, one of the examples he gives is, "I bought a Ford", where the producer stands for the product (Kövecses pp. 104-105). Ekegusii idioms that are metonym-based use the concept of part for the whole or whole for the part.

Idioms (8)-(10) are examples of part for the whole category:

(8) *Kobwata ekaramu bokong'u*

Literal meaning: 'to hold the pen hard/firmly'.

Figurative meaning: 'to work hard in one's studies / excel in one's studies'.

The word *pen* is just one particular item used in formal education, but it is made to stand for education as a whole. The choice of the 'pen' as the part that stands for the whole may be contextualized to the examination period where success is predominantly based on what one writes. This idiom has the structure of V (*kobwata*, 'to hold') + N (*ekaramu*, 'a pen') + Adv. (*bokong'u*, 'hard/firmly').

(9) *Omonto ore riso*

Literal meaning: 'A person who is the eye'.

Figurative meaning: 'A visionary person'.

The eye is taken to stand for not only the literal organ used for seeing but also for the intellectual qualities that one needs to be visionary. This organ of the human body stands for the concept of far-sightedness, which requires intelligence and good organizational skills. Just as the eye sees what is in front so does a successful future require good planning. This is another example of an idiom that has the structure of a N (*omonto*, 'person') followed by relative clause post-modifier (*ore riso*, 'who is the eye').

(10) *Koria obosie*

Literal meaning: 'to eat flour'

Figurative meaning: 'to put on weight (in an approving way)'

Flour is the main ingredient that is used to make *ugali*, a maize-flour-based main dish which is the community's staple food. This food is usually served with vegetables or other stews like meat and beans or sour milk. However, in this idiom, it stands for all that one can eat for nutritional benefit.

(11) *Koreta egesaku*

Literal meaning: 'to bring forth a clan'

Figurative meaning: 'to give birth'

Unlike the preceding three idioms, idiom (11) belongs to the whole for the part category of metonymy since the birth of a single child is viewed as bringing forth an entire clan. Clan continuity is valued and the only way that this can be done is through the siring of children. Idioms (10) and (11) above have the structure of V+N.

The Vs being (*koria*, ‘to eat’ and *koreta* ‘to bring’ respectively) and the Ns (*obosie*, ‘flour’ and *egesaku*, ‘a clan’ respectively).

2.3 Hyperbole-based idioms

Mahmood et al. (2014: 211) state that “Hyperbole is overstatement or exaggerated language that deforms facts by making them appear much bigger than they are if looked at objectively.” This paper holds the view of hyperbole as a kind of exaggeration but without necessarily aiming at deforming facts. Since its use is analysed from an idiomatic point of view, it can be understood as being part of the decompositional view of idioms.

Examples of hyperbole-based idioms are given in (12)-(16).

(12) *Enchara*⁷ [...] *yangitire/bwangitire*

Literal meaning: ‘hunger has killed me’.

Figurative meaning: ‘I am very hungry’.

This idiom portrays a person as being literally dead due to hunger. The idiom has the structure of N+V.

Idiom (13) is another hyperbolic-based idiom related to food.

(13) *Endagera ngotoita ere*

Literal meaning: ‘food is killing us’.

Figurative meaning: ‘there is a lot of food’.

This idiom is almost the converse of the preceding one: this time round it is the availability of a lot of food, not hunger, that can kill someone. The idiom has the same structure as idiom (11) only that it has a pronoun, *ere*, which refers back to the subject. Its structure is N (*endagera* ‘food’) +V (*ngotoita* ‘is killing us’) +Reflexive Pron. (*ere* ‘it’).

⁷ The noun *enchara*, ‘hunger’, can be substituted by other nouns such as *egasi* (work), *obotaka* (poverty) or even *obote* (the desire to eat/ drink something). The idiom is therefore not frozen and the form of the following verb agrees with the noun. The verb form varies to agree with the noun, that is, it begins with *ya-* for nouns that begin with *e-* (such as *enchara* ‘hunger’ and *egasi* ‘work’) and *bwa-* for nouns that begin with *o-* (such as *obotaka* ‘poverty’ and *obote* ‘a desire to eat/drink something’)

(14) *Risaera irongo*

Literal meaning: 'one who defecates on an *irongo*' ('an attic that was used in the past to store grain, firewood or other household items like pots and baskets').

Figurative meaning: 'a coward'.

It is unheard of, literally, for someone to climb to the attic to defecate on it. This is however used exaggeratedly to refer to someone who behaves/has behaved in a cowardly way. The link between cowardice and defecating on an *irongo*, 'attic', is not straightforward; it could be that a coward will seek to hide in the most unexpected places (like an *irongo*, 'attic') because of fear. The structure of this idiom is Adj+N. *Risaera*, 'one who defecates', is the adjective while *irongo*, 'an attic', is the noun.

(15) *Komera omonto matenena*

Literal meaning: 'to swallow a person while the person is standing'.⁸

Figurative meaning: 'to be very angry with someone'.

A person cannot swallow another person, regardless of the position the other person assumes. But this idiom expresses intense feeling of annoyance that one can have towards another by wishing they would swallow the one who has angered them while he/she is in a vertical position. This multi-word idiom has the V (*komera*, 'to swallow') +N (*omonto*, 'a person') +Adv structure (*matenena*, 'while standing').

(16) *Omonto ong'ana enchogu*⁹

Literal meaning: 'a person, the size of an elephant'.

Figurative meaning: 'a person who is fat (in a disapproving way)'.¹⁰

A person's size is compared to that of an elephant to suggest a big degree of fatness. Although this idiom may partly be viewed as being simile-like or metaphor-like, hyperbole stands out more when a person is compared to an elephant. The structure

⁸ This relates to the English idiom *eat somebody alive*.

⁹ A synonymous idiom is *omonto ong'ana etoto*, 'a person who is the size of a dividing wall in a traditional house'.

¹⁰ There are proper names that are derived from an elephant and from the dividing wall, but which do not have any negative connotation. Those names are: *Machogu* and *Ototo*, respectively.

of this idiom is N (*omonto* 'a person') + Rel. Pron. (*ong'ana* 'who is like') + N (*enchogu* 'an elephant').

2.4 Simile-based idioms

Similes make direct comparison of two things using words meaning 'as' or 'like' like. In Ekegusii, 'as' and 'like' are realized by the free morphemes '*buna*' and '*onga*'/'*anga*'.¹¹ Examples (17) - (20) illustrate these kinds of idioms.

- (17) *Gokwana buna eredio*
Literal meaning: 'to talk like a radio'
Figurative meaning: 'to talk a lot and fast'

Idiom (17), which is used in the context of speech, likens a fast and bountiful talker to a radio. A number of radio presenters talk fast which fits in with the comparison in the idiom. The radio is also never silent since even the commercial breaks are punctuated by music or advertisements. This compares to the way one may talk endlessly.

- (18) *Koigota buna egesiti*
Literal meaning: 'to be full like an inflated ball'
Figurative meaning: 'to eat to one's fill'

Although it looks like an everyday expression, this simile-based idiom communicates the extent of one's satisfaction. The idiom is usually used to talk about a child's eating habits, either to encourage them to eat or to describe their level of satisfaction. This child-directed idiom uses the image of an inflated ball possibly because children like playing with balls. The simile-based idioms in (17) and (18) above give evidence of what may be considered to be more recent idioms since they make mention of, a radio and a ball (especially one that can be inflated or deflated), things that did not exist during the pre-colonial times.

¹¹ *Buna* is used for the verb initial idioms while *onga* is used for the noun initial ones. *Onga* is used with common nouns while *anga* is used with proper nouns. In some cases, both *anga* and *buna* are used for example *Makori anga buna ebarimo* 'Makori is like a mad man'.

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(19) *Koragera buna omosamaro*¹²

Literal meaning: 'to eat like *Omosamaro* (people from *Bosamaro*, one of the Gusii clans)'.
Figurative meaning: 'to eat a lot (often in a disapproving manner)'.

This idiom is derived from stereotypes held about one clan in Gusii land. The people from this clan are believed to be hardworking but also voracious eaters. The idiom is thus used in a disparaging manner to discourage eating too much. One who does not know the *Abasamaro* clan or their presumed eating habits may not comprehend the idiom. The structure of idioms (17), (18) and (19) is V+Prep+N. The verb structure in each is *go-kwan-a*, *Ko-rager-a* and *ko-igot-a*. *Go-/ko-* are the infinitive markers while *-kwan-*, *-rager-* and *-igot-* correspond to 'talk', 'eat' and 'eat one's fill' respectively and *-a* is the FV with infinitive features.

(20) *Omonto onga omogoye*

Literal meaning: 'a person, like a string that has been stripped from a reed'.
Figurative meaning: 'a thin person'.

A string from a reed is usually split into thin strips before it is used for tying purposes. This makes it even thinner to an extent that it compares to a thin person. The structure of this idiom is N (*omonto*, 'a person') +Prep (*onga* 'like') +N (*omogoye*, a string from a reed').

2.5 Euphemism-based idioms

These idioms involve the use of words or phrases that are considered mild or non-offensive to describe something. Yang (2017: 144) suggests that euphemisms "[focus on the] less distressing detail of [an object]." Euphemisms exist around taboo subjects such as bodily functions, sex, pregnancy and birth, and death and burial. Euphemism-based idioms are necessary for any subject that people are uncomfortable to talk about. Examples (21)-(24) are euphemism-based idioms.

¹² I got an explanation for this from Charles Nyandusi (pc, 23 July 2019). He is from the *Bosamaro* clan and was once a logger. He said that the work of logging using long handsaws is so intense that the loggers eat a lot and at short intervals. Since most loggers were from that clan, the idiom became generalized to the entire clan.

(21) *Oberekire*

Literal meaning: ‘she has carried a baby astride on the back’.

Figurative meaning: ‘she is pregnant’.

Although pregnancy is anticipated and celebrated especially among couples, it is a taboo subject because of sex which is its precondition. Palmer (1981: 80) observes that “[...] there are many others [phrasal verbs] that are both idiomatic and not [...]”. This observation is true in Ekegusii too since this idiom has a literal meaning. The non-idiomatic use of *oberekire* (usually transitive and therefore followed by *omwana* ‘a child’) implies the idea of having a child strapped on somebody’s back and never on the front part of the body. The idiomatic expression however implies that a child is strapped in the stomach and not the literal meaning of carrying a child once it is born. Other synonymous idioms of *oberekire* (‘she has carried a baby astride on the back’ but with a meaning of ‘she is pregnant’) are *orosire*, literally meaning ‘she is tired’, *bwebateranirie*, literally meaning ‘she has entangled herself with something’ and *obogoirie omosigo*, literally meaning ‘she has carried a load/luggage’ These three have the idiomatic meaning¹³ of ‘to get pregnant’. The existence of these synonymous idioms possibly shows how difficult and distressing it is to talk about pregnancy. The structure of the one-word idioms is, *o-berek-ir-e* (*o-*: 3 SG, *berek-*: carry astride, *-ir-*: aspect, *-e*: the FV with aspect features), *o-* 3 SG, *ros-* be tired, *-ir-* aspect and *-e* the FV with aspect features and *bwe-* 3 SG but with glide formation, *bwat-* hold, *-er-* BEN *-an-* REC *-ir-* aspect, *-i-* CAUS, *-e* FV with aspect features. The composition of *obogoirie omosigo* is V+N, with the verb being broken down into *o -*: 3 SG, *bogor-*: carry, *-ir-*: aspect and *-e*: FV with aspect features.

It is not only becoming pregnant that is a taboo subject, but giving birth is as well. The euphemistic idioms (22), (23) and (24) relate to giving birth.

(22) *Okonyekire*

Literal meaning: ‘she has been helped.’

Figurative meaning: ‘she has given birth’.

¹³ All the idioms that mean ‘to get pregnant’ can be used non-idiomatically. In their non-idiomatic use *oberekire* and *bwebwateranirie* are always used transitively, while its non-idiomatic use *orosire* is usually followed by an adverb, while *obogoirie omosigo* is usually followed by an adverb or an adjective.

It will be ‘shocking’ to the language users if one spoke non-euphemistically about giving birth. There are several ways of going round this topic besides ‘being helped’. Other idioms that have the same meaning are *otimokire*,¹⁴ literally meaning ‘he/she has rested’, *ogonkirie*, literally meaning ‘she has breastfed’, *oretire omogeni* ‘she has brought a visitor’ and *oikire korwa omote omotambe* literally meaning ‘she has climbed down from a tall tree’. Philip (2011: 16) suggests that the meanings in idioms are “institutionalized” and the language users will thus contextually comprehend these as referring to giving birth. The use of any of these idiomatic expressions lead to the avoidance of using the word *obiarire* which is a blunt way of talking about giving birth. The structure of the one-word verbal idioms is *o-*: 3 SG, *kony-*: help, *-ek-*: APPL *-ir-*: aspect, *-e*: FV with aspect features; *o-*: 3 SG, *timok-*: rest, *-ir-*: aspect, *-e*: the FV with aspect features and *o-*: 3 SG, *gonk-*: breastfeed/give birth, *-ir-*: aspect, *-i-* CAUS, *-e* FV with aspect features.

However, there are times when ‘normal’ births do not happen and this is talked about using euphemistic idioms such as (23) and (24) below.

(23) *Koibora bobo*

Literal meaning: ‘to give birth badly.’

Figurative meaning: ‘to give birth to a dead foetus.’

Every mother looks forward for the delivery of a live baby. However, in the event that the contrary happens, then the literal phrase ‘to give birth badly’ describes this. On the contrary, *koibora buya* which literally means ‘to give birth well’ has nothing to do with whether a child is born alive or not. Instead, it is used to describe adult children who are successful and sometimes the giving birth to both sexes¹⁵. This idiom has the V+Adv structure, with the morphemes in the verb, *koibora*, ‘to give birth’ being *ko-* the infinitive, *ibor-*: give birth, and *-a*: the FV with infinitive features).

(24) *Otenenire*

Literal meaning: ‘he/she has stood.’

¹⁴ In the context of death, this euphemistic idiom would mean ‘to die’.

¹⁵ However, if one gives birth to only one sex, the idiom *koibora bobo* will not be used in such contexts.

Figurative meaning: ‘to take a long time before conceiving a child (especially following a previous delivery)’

Although giving birth in quick succession is not encouraged, taking an extraordinarily long time to conceive after the birth of a child is not encouraged either. A woman who does not conceive as fast as is expected especially after a previous birth will be described literally as ‘having stood’, as illustrated in idiom (24). The “standing” in this context implies a lack of progression towards something, specifically becoming pregnant. The non-idiomatic meaning of *otenenire* will apply to men as well, unlike the idiomatic meaning which refers to women only. The morphemes in the verb *otenenire*, ‘she has stood’, are: *o-*: 3 SG, *tenen-*: stand, *-ir-*: aspect, and *-e*: the FV with aspect features.

People often have difficulty talking about bodily functions such as urinating and defecating. This has led to the creation of euphemistic ways of talking about them, as in (25).

(25) *Gotwera amate inse*¹⁶

Literal meaning: ‘to spit saliva on the ground’.

Figurative meaning: ‘to urinate’.

Urinating is compared to spitting saliva on the ground. Other related idiomatic expressions include *gwekonya*, ‘to urinate’ or ‘to defecate’, literally ‘to help oneself’.¹⁷ If the case of urinating, the expression ‘*goitera amache*’, literally ‘to pour water’, may also be used. However, as Yang (2017: 144) has observed, euphemisms get updated because over time a euphemism ends up sounding offensive since its familiarity provokes the non-euphemistic words that it was initially meant to conceal. For instance, the expression *goitera amache* (with the structure of V + N and literally meaning ‘to pour water’), which is indirect in reference, is no longer as euphemistic as it used to be. The words that directly (and sometimes indirectly) relate to urine and urinate are thus avoided. In addition, a person who has a runny stomach does not talk about it directly but uses the

¹⁶ This idiom can also mean ‘to eat whatever that is available especially when one is hungry’. However, when this is realized as *gotwera amate* (usually in the transitive form), literally meaning ‘to spit saliva on’, then the meaning expressed is to bless someone or something.

¹⁷ This is a common way of expressing ‘relieving oneself’ across many Bantu languages such as Kiswahili, Kamba and Lulogooli.

euphemistic expression *enda ekaminyokia* (N + V), literally ‘the stomach chased me’. Talking directly about the toilet using the word *echoo* is also considered offensive since the same word can also refer to faeces. The euphemistic descriptive expression *enyomba y’obochenu*, ‘the house of cleanliness/hygiene’, has been coined to refer to a toilet. The composition of the idiom (25) *gotwera amate inse* is V + N + Adv., with the morphemes in the verb *gotwera*, ‘to spit on’, being *go-*: infinitive, *tw-*: spit, *e-* the preposition marker-*a*: FV with infinitive features.

2.6 Understatement-based idioms

According to Israel (2006: 139) “[...] an understatement and attenuation involve a way of framing the content of what is said against the background of some informationally stronger content which might have been said, but wasn’t”. It therefore intentionally leaves out some “stronger” message, but this omission may not affect full comprehension of the intended message. One thus that says less but means more in understatements. The construction of idioms based on understatement is for pragmatic modest purposes. It would be repulsive for one to appear as a braggart, so modesty is necessary to avoid blowing one’s own trumpet. (26) and (27) are understatement-based idioms:

(26) *Omonto obwate etongoro*

Literal meaning: ‘a person who has a ten-cent coin.’

Figurative meaning: ‘a person who is wealthy/rich.’

Etongoro, a ten-cent coin, is a small denomination of a currency which became obsolete many years ago. To use this kind of currency as a description of a rich person is an ironical understatement. However, in spite of the ten-cent coin being obsolete, it is still the one that is used to refer to money in general especially by the elderly people.

(27) *Omonto obwate erobia*¹⁸

Literal meaning: ‘a person (who) has a rupee.’

Figurative meaning: ‘a person who is wealthy/rich’.

A rupee is an Indian, not a Kenyan, currency and the term must have come into use during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway by the Indians. However, the value of a rupee is not a concern for many Kenyans and particularly the Abagusii community. To use a currency which is not operational in the day-to-day business of the people, and one which is not among the major world currencies to denote wealth, is also an understatement. The two idioms which relate to wealth, use understatements, to possibly point to the community's cultural view of wealth. The community seems to discourage a show-off attitude as far as wealth is concerned. The composition of idioms 26 and 27 above is N+ relative pronoun+ N.

3. CONCLUSION

The preceding section is a good illustration of the extent to which figurative language is widespread in idioms in Ekegusii: six figures of speech (metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole, Simile, euphemism and understatement) were illustrated. But beyond illustrating the figurative language they contain, some of the examples used also bring to light the fact that in an agglutinating language an idiom need not be a group of words, which is the very definition of an idiom defined based on a non-agglutinating language like English. Indeed, idioms such as *oberekire* (literally meaning 'she has carried a baby astride on the back', but with a figurative meaning of 'she is pregnant') are single words. What is important to point out is that these single-word idioms are, of necessity, verb forms into which are agglutinated several morphemes. Of particular interest among these morphemes are those that are the equivalents of overt noun phrases in a language like English. This is the case, for example, of the morpheme <o-> in the idiom *oberekire*

While a comparison of the structure of Ekegusii idioms with that of idioms in English was touched on in the present study to highlight the agglutinating nature of a language like Ekegusii, such a comparison was not the focus of the present study, unlike what seems to be the case with a study such as Teilanyo's (2014) (mentioned in the Introduction) on idioms in African languages. However, from such a comparison further insight into the nature of Ekegusii could be gained and this could be the subject of a further study on Ekegusii idioms. A good starting point could be statements made by Palmer (1981: 79-80), one of which suggests, for example, that

the noun in an English idiom “cannot be changed” (like changing *kick the bucket* to *kick the buckets*). In Ekegusii, the singular noun *omobere* ‘the body’ (see idiom (3) *goseboka omobere / omobere goseboka*, literally ‘sprouting of the body’) can be changed to plural *emebere*, ‘bodies’, so as to say *emebere goseboka / goseboka emebere* to mean ‘recovery from ill-health/an illness or a season of difficulty’ when talking about two or more people.

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