# A Semantic Analysis of Absent Subjects of Idioms in Gĩkũyũ

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## ABSTRACT

Idioms have been studied for a considerable time by linguists with a view of explaining their meaning. In Gĩkũyũ, for example, the meaning of most idioms can be derived from constituents that form them. However, in some Gĩkũyũ idioms, the meaning is hindered by the absence of the subject in the idiomatic utterance or sentence. It is against this background that this study sought to conduct a semantic analysis on selected idioms in Gĩkũyũ. Thus, the objective of this study was to establish the absent subject in the selected Gĩkũyũ idioms through etymological elaboration and then conduct a semantic analysis of the idioms. The study was based on the Conventional Figurative Language Theory (Dobrovol and Elisabeth). The study employed the descriptive research design and purposively targeted 20 Gĩkũyũ idioms. Data was collected through focus group discussions involving 10 participants who are native speakers of Gĩkũyũ. The study used the content analysis method, which is within the qualitative research paradigm. The data was presented in form of tables and themes. The Gĩkũyũ idiomatic expressions and the established subjects were listed and their gloss provided. Through etymological elaboration, a semantic analysis of the idiomatic expressions was conducted. The findings of the study are that the absence of the subject in idioms greatly hinders their comprehensibility. Further, etymological elaboration is required in order to establish the absent subject. The findings therefore imply that whenever the comprehensibility of an idiom is compromised by the lack of the subject in the utterance, cognitive linguists should process the meaning by using etymological elaboration The study concludes that interpretation of idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ can be enhanced by establishing the absent subject through etymological elaboration which provides clues that aid interpretation .Secondly, semantic analysis of the idioms enhances comprehensibility. The study recommends further research on absent subjects in Gĩkũyũ idioms that were not part of this study. Secondly, other idiom processing strategies for example contextualization (Copper, 2004) can be used to establish the absent subjects in idiomatic expressions. Thirdly, further research can be conducted to establish other aspects of idioms that hinder comprehensibility of idioms not only in Gĩkũyũ but also in other languages. The study will not only provide valuable linguistic knowledge on the study of idioms in Gĩkũyũ but will also encourage further research on idioms in other languages.

## INTRODUCTION

Semantics is the branch of linguistics and logic concerned with the meaning of language (Lobner, 2002). Semantics is central to communication which is a crucial factor in any social organization; hence, the need for linguists to understand it (Saeed, 2003). Semantics is interrelated with other disciplines of study, for example, philosophy (Saeed, 2003). According to Lobner (2002), the term semantics is used in two senses. On the one hand, theoretical or pure semantics aims at formulating an abstract theory of meaning in the process of cognition and, therefore, belongs to logic or more precisely to symbolic logic while on the other hand, the empirical semantics studies meaning in natural languages, that is, the relationship between linguistic signs and their meaning. Of the two senses of semantics, empirical semantics significantly falls within the scope of linguistics.

There are various branches and sub branches of semantics. Firstly, Formal Semantics (FS) which studies the logical aspects of meaning, for example, reference, implication and logical form. Secondly, Lexical Semantics (LS) which studies word meanings and word relations. Finally, Conceptual Semantics (CS) which studies the cognitive structure of meaning (Thomason, 2012). The current study was anchored on conceptual semantics.

Formal semantics (FS) aims at associating each natural language sentence with a meta-language description of the conditions under which it is considered as true. It studies the logical aspects of meaning for example, reference, implication and logical form. The task of FS is to arrive at the truth

conditions for sentences from the fixed meaning assigned to the individual words and the fixed rules of syntax. FS seeks to understand the linguistic meaning by constructing precise models of principles that speakers use to define relations between word expressions in natural language and those that support meaningful discourse.

Lexical Semantics (LS) studies word meanings and relations (Thomason, 2012). It is concerned with meanings of words and lexical units. Lexical units include sub-words or sub-units such as affixes and prefixes, phrases and compound words. LS deals with fundamental questions such as how to describe the meaning of words; how to account for the variability of meaning from one context to another and how to create new meanings by combining words to make figurative units such as metaphors and idioms. Lexical semantics also inquires about vocabulary in language, sense relations in words such as antonymy, hyponymy and incompatibility.

According to Jackendoff (2002), Conceptual Semantics (CS) strives for a comprehensive account of linguistic knowledge provided by the lexical units, syntax and the psychological reality of linguistic information. The objective of CS is to provide a characterization of the conceptual elements that guide one to the interpretation of meaning. In other words, CS describes how human beings express their understanding of the world through language. According to Croft (200I), CS is based on two theoretical concepts. First, linguistic meaning is to be described in mentalist or psychological terms and neuro-scientific terms like is the case in generative syntax and phonology. Second, linguistic meaning is described to be that which the speaker intends to convey through language. This concept, therefore, includes the historical and cultural knowledge of the world, pragmatics and semantics. This forms the basis of the current study.

According to Fodor (2001), CS relates the mental structures or images encoding the linguistic expression and the language users' conceptualization of the world which can either be through hearsay, memory, inference or perception. The mental structures are culturally or historically grounded in the world. This has led to the development of various theories of interpretation of meaning of figurative units such as idioms. They include the conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the Dual Coding Theory by Paivio (1991) and the Conventional Figurative Language Theory by Dobrovol and Elisabeth (2005). The study was guided by the Conventional Figurative Language Theory (CFLT).

Idioms, the topic of the current study, have been defined in a number of ways by different scholars. Moreno (2007), defines an idiom as a constituent or a series of constituents for which semantic interpretation is not a compositional function of the formativeness of which it is composed. Second, Glucksberg (2001) defines an idiom as a fixed expression made up of a single word or a string of words whose meaning is not derived from the literal meaning of the constituent words because it has a figurative meaning.

Idioms have therefore, an underlying principle of figurativeness. The literal meaning of the words that form an idiom is therefore different from the implied meaning

(Kavka, 2004). This means that the words that form the idiomatic expression are used in a non-literal sense which can be semantically opaque. However, in transparent idioms the constituents of the utterance can provide clues that can aid in interpretation of meaning. According to Glucksberg (2001), such idioms are said to be compositional, because the words that form them provide clues to the interpretation of the meaning.

In some idioms the constituents do not provide any clue that can enhance interpretation. These idioms are regarded as non –compositional. In some non-compositional idioms however, the interpretation and comprehensibility of meaning is made even more complex by the absence of the subject that forms the topic of the idiom. This forms the hypothesis of the current study. The study assumes that there are idioms with absent subjects. According to Oxford Dictionary ( Ayto, 2012), the term subject refers to the thing that a symbol, a word or a sign stands for .According to Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (Rundell, 2007), a subject refers to what is being talked about in an utterance.

The absence of the subject hinders interpretation of meaning and comprehensibility of idioms. This creates a semantic gap because the listener lacks the clue that can otherwise aid in processing the implied meaning of the idiom. It is against this background that the current research study identifies a linguistic lacuna that needs to be addressed. The study acknowledges that the absence of the subject in an idiom makes it difficult for a listener to interpret the meaning. This therefore explains the importance of conducting a semantic analysis of absent subjects in idioms. The objective of this study was therefore to establish the absent subjects in select Gĩkũyũ idiomatic expressions in order to enhance the interpretation of meaning. The choice of Gĩkũyũ as the language of study is based on the reason that Gĩkũyũ, a language from the Bantu language in Africa, is principally spoken majority of the people (Thompson, 2014). Gĩkũyũ is the widely spoken language in Kenya with the exception of English and Kiswahili (Webb & Kembo, 2000).According to population census (2019), there are 8.1million Gĩkũyũ speakers. Although Gĩkũyũ has elicited a lot of interest for research by linguists, it has relatively been understudied compared to other major languages (Webb &Kembo, 2000). As a result, there exist significant language gaps. A study on absent subjects in idioms in Gĩkũyũ is, therefore, a significant way of bridging these gaps.

The research will employ etymological elaboration as an idiom processing strategy. This will involve establishing background information on the historical and cultural inferences that motivated the use of each of the idioms under study. The aim is to identify the subject(s) which will enhance the interpretation of the meaning of the respective idioms under study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Various studies on Conceptual Semantics have been conducted particularly on idiomatic expressions.

Munyu, (2016) conducts a study on the interpretation of Gikuyu idiomatic expressions: A cognitive Approach.

The study aims at investigating selected Gikuyu idiomatic expressions with the view of establishing the contribution made by individual words and their role in enhancing interpretation. The study acknowledges that every word significantly contributes to enhancing the interpretation of meaning. This lays the foundation for the current study which seeks to establish the absent subjects in selected idioms. The study employs the Conceptual Metaphor Theory whose principle is that meaning is a concrete object which can be metaphorically grasped. It assumes that metaphors have target and source domains that are semantically linked and assumed to be stored together in the mind. In the study, the idioms are interpreted through a conceptual structure that is organized by cross-domain mappings or correspondences.

The researcher studies 51 idiomatic expressions in Gikuyu. The findings demonstrated that mapping is done on the metaphor from physical and familiar domain to a more concrete domain which represents the abstract meaning. The study however, realized that opaque idioms are difficult to analyze because some of them do not have a source that can easily be mapped to a target while some have absent referents which require to be established for mapping to be done. The researcher therefore recommends that the context requires to be established first in order to ensure that all the constituents and referents are present in the idiom.

This study relates to the current study because it involves a semantic analysis of Gikuyu idiomatic expressions just like it is the case in the current study which however, is limited to studying idiomatic expressions in Gikuyu with missing subjects. The study also lays a foundation for the current study because it suggests a research gap in the semantic analysis of idioms in Gikuyu whose subject is unknown. The researcher therefore recommends for the establishment of the context and etymological elaboration of the cultural and historical references that motivated the use of the idiom.

The study however differs from the current study because it employs the Conceptual Metaphor Theory while the current study employs the Conventional Figurative Language Theory which acknowledges that the knowledge of underlying conceptual metaphors is not the only knowledge relevant in the interpretation of idioms but other concepts that are culturally and historically based play a significant role in enhancing meaning in idioms. The present study uses etymological elaboration to establish the absent subjects providing a foundation for semantic analysis of the selected Gikuyu idiomatic expressions. However, only 20 idiomatic expressions have been discussed which reveals that there are research gaps that can be addressed in further studies. In the next section, the study highlights the methodology, findings and discussions, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theories have been used in the study of idioms. These include the Dual Coding Theory by Paivio (1999), the Conceptual Theory of Metaphor by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and the Conventional Figurative Language Theory by Dobrovol and Elisabeth (2005).

The Dual-Coding Theory (DCT) by Paivio is a theory of cognition that is based on the principle that verbal and mental codes in language can be used simultaneously to retrieve information. The theory therefore assumes that cognition is motivated by words and images. It does not consider the possibility of cognition being motivated by something else other than words and images (Reed, 2010). The DCT therefore does not account for figurative units such as idioms whose surface meaning is different from the underlying meaning.

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on the other hand, operates on the fundamental tenets that metaphors have target and source domains that are semantically linked and assumed to be stored together in the mind. Although they are important in interpreting meaning, they may not effectively account for the meaning of irregular units such as idioms.

This study employed the Conventional Figurative Language Theory by Dobrovol & Elisabeth, 2005. The choice of CFLT in the study is because unlike the other theories, CFLT acknowledges that the knowledge of underlying conceptual metaphor is not the only type of knowledge that is linguistically relevant in interpreting the meaning of figurative units. In order to describe how figurative units such as idioms, function, other concepts that are culturally and historically based should be taken into account. According to Grant (2004), the historical and cultural concepts can be derived by establishing the literal usage from the original contexts that motivated the use of the figurative unit through etymological elaboration.

The CFLT also acknowledges that idioms are motivated and not arbitrary. According to Boers (2005), it is necessary to establish the original literal concepts that motivate figurative units such as idioms. The Conventional Figurative Language Theory is therefore an appropriate theory for semantic analysis of Gĩkũyũ idioms where the cultural and historical references will be established to enhance interpretation.

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study employed the descriptive research design. The descriptive research design was appropriate for the study because it allows for the description of a particular subject, ( Palton, 2002). It also allows the researcher to collect qualitative data through observation, survey, case study and interviews, (Trochim, 2005)

In the current study, the data was collected by the use of a focus group discussion involving 10 elderly native Gĩkũyũ speakers.

A focus group discussion schedule was used to collect data. Ten (10) native speakers of Gĩkũyũ participated in focus group discussions to generate the elicited data. The discussion lasted for 1 hour. Questions were asked about the nature of idioms and the missing subjects. The group established the etymology of each of the 20 idiomatic expressions under study. This was done by tracing the cultural and historical references that motivated each idiom. The FGDs were tape-recorded in Gĩkũyũ, translated into English, and transcribed prior to the analysis. Discussions were conducted by a moderator / research assistant trained in qualitative research

methods. All focus group discussions were recorded on audiotape and a detailed transcript prepared after each discussion; notes were taken during the focus group discussions to supplement the transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed by the researcher to identify key themes and subthemes.

The researcher also participated in the focus group discussions as a participant observer. Participant observation is a qualitative research method in which the researcher not only observes the research participants, but also actively engages in the activities of the research participants. This requires the researcher to become integrated into the participants' environment while also taking objective notes about what is going on Lobner, (2002*). The participants' observations and focus group discussions assisted the researcher to obtain a more valid result regarding the absent subjects and semantic analysis of the 20 idiomatic expressions under study. The choice of a focus group discussion for the study is because it is an effective method of collecting in-depth data or information. It allows a researcher to cover all dimensions of investigation through probing of informants whereby any ambiguities can be clarified and incomplete responses followed up (Mc Leud, 2014).

The participants were selected through purposive sampling as it is the most effective technique when research needs to study certain historical and cultural domains of language, (Bernard, 2002). The current study is grounded on cultural and historical concepts of Gĩkũyũ. The participants were also selected on the basis of knowledge, exposure and willingness to provide information (Sheppard, 2006).The participants' mastery of the Gĩkũyũ language had not been affected by immense language shift due to ideologies of education and westernization.

The raw data was reduced after initial editing in order to convert it into more classified forms that were appropriate for further analysis and presentation. Qualitative data requires be meaningfully reducing and reconfiguring in order to make it more manageable, (Saldana 2014).

Ten participants also analyzed the reduced data.

According to Krueger & Casey, (2000), the optimum number of participants may vary. However, the number generally suggested as manageable is between six and ten participants; large enough to gain a variety of data and small enough to be well organized, hence the choice of ten participants in the focus group. The focus group used qualitative data analysis and content analysis to achieve the initial objective of the study. The focus group analysis involved categorizing the reduced data in order to list the Gĩkũyũ idiomatic expression with absent referents. The focus group discussion established twenty absent subjects for each of the respective idioms under study. According to (Krueger & Casey (2002), the purpose of the study should drive the analysis hence, it is important to get rid of extra and irrelevant information.

The next procedure involved a focus group discussion involving descriptive analysis whereby etymological elaboration was carried out to establish the meaning of each of the twenty listed Gĩkũyũ idiomatic expressions. Having established the absent subjects in each of the listed idioms, semantic interpretation of the idioms under study was

done. According to Strauss & Corbin (1998), the process of qualitative analysis aims to bring meaning to a situation or subject rather than search for the truth. The content analysis was systematic, sequential and continuous in order to guarantee quality and credibility. This procedure was necessary in order to reduce any instance of bias in focus group data. Following this procedure provides credible data that can be verified hence increasing the extent of dependability, consistency and conformability (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Data presentation was done in form of themes and tables. The data collected was presented in the Gĩkũyũ orthography and a gloss provided in English.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The objective of this study was to establish the absent subjects in Gikuyu idiomatic expressions in order to enhance the interpretation of meaning. The Table 1 below highlights the twenty idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ with absent referents and the absent referents as established through focus group discussions using etymological elaboration as an idiom processing strategy.

**Semantic Analysis of Idiomatic Expressions In Gĩkũyũ**

Below are the translated and elaborated Gikũyũ idioms after establishing the absent subjects.
*(1)  Ĩgĩtunyuo (nũgũ) mwana nĩ ĩikagĩrio mũngũ*
     (When the baby is being snatched from it (monkey) it is given a pumpkin)

The idiom is motivated from the practice of mothers in the Agikuyu community .The mothers would excavate abit of the earth where they could place their babies as the women worked on the farm. Due to the vast forest cover, there were numerous wild animals and particularly monkeys. The monkeys would, therefore, play with the babies .In some instances, some monkeys would carry or drag the babies or at times they would become wild if the mothers attempted to take the babies away .This was a traumatizing moment for the mothers who would devise all ways to get their baby back .The women, therefore, would entice the monkey with goodies such as pumpkins and other fruits. The monkeys would pay attention to the pumpkin thereby leaving the baby. The idiom refers to the act of giving a gift in order to entice the other person to give something in exchange.

***If you want to take something precious from someone you must give a replacement or an incentive***

*(2)  Ndahonoka(nderi) ciarera.*
     (I have been salvaged from them (vultures) in the last minute)

The idiom is motivated from the practice of dumping the dead in the forest to be devoured by the wild animals. It is only the kings would be buried. As such, vultures and other birds of prey would hover around the dead body and after confirming there was no sign of life, they would eat up the flesh. Due to lack of modern medical care, there cases of very ill people being dumped in the forest, the villagers having assumed them

**Table 1.** Idiomatic expressions with absent subjects: Absent subjects in Gĩkũyũ Idioms

| S/No | Idiomatic expression | Absent subject |
|------|----------------------|----------------|
| 1. | *Ĩgĩtunyuo mwana nĩ ĩikagĩrio mũngũ* (when the baby is being taken from it, it is given a pumpkin) | *Nũgũ* (monkey) |
| 2. | *Ndahonoka ciarera* ( I have been salvaged /saved from them when they have hovered) | *Nderi* (vulture) |
| 3. | *Gũtua ma ndarwa* (Spitting off the night ) | *Mata* (Saliva) |
| 4. | *Ĩrĩaga na mbugi ona kũrĩ na ũgwati* (They graze bells even when there is danger) | *Ng'ombe* (Cows) |
| 5. | *Nĩ githĩu njenga* (It has ground coarse maize flour) | *Gĩthĩi* (The grinding stone) |
| 6. | *Gwĩtema na gaku* (Injuring with your own) | *Kahiũ* (knife) |
| 7. | *Kĩraita na ndumo* (It is leaking with the stitches) | *Kĩnya* (Guard) |
| 8. | *Gũkunya itarĩ* (You have pinched that is not yet mature) | *Mbembe* (Maize) |
| 9. | *Gũkuua na ikundo* (Carrying with knots) | *Kĩondo* (a clean shaven head carrying a knotted basket) |
| 10. | *Gũtharia ya magi* (Destroying what belongs to the wasp) | *Nyũmba* (House) |
| 11. | *Gũthoma matume* (Reading sealed one) | *Marũa* (Letters) |
| 12. | *Kũracia igatuga* (Giving the best to them thus getting the reward) | *Mbũri* (Goats) |
| 13. | *Kurwara njũĩ gũtema* (You will suffer what I know to cut) | *Mũrimũ* (Illness) |
| 14. | *Mũndũ ũtoĩ rũkĩera* (One who does not know when it is slipping out) | *Rũhiũ* (Panga) |
| 15. | *Nĩ thĩmbaga na nduure* (It can gather but fail to ra) | *mbura* (Rain) |
| 16. | *Nĩ ũkũruota* (You will be forced to use it to light the fire) | *Rũgiri* (Fence) |
| 17. | *ũrĩ na rwaku* (You have your own) | *Rũgano* (Version of a story) |
| 18. | *Wĩringie nĩ rwa nyarĩrĩ* (Cross it is knee high) | *Rũi* (River) |
| 19. | *Waga ma kwĩhaka ndwaga ma gwĩthirima* (If you fail to get enough to apply ,you will get little to rub) | *Maguta* (Oil) |
| 20. | *Ciakorire wacũ mũgũnda* (They found wacũ in the garden) | *Irio/Nyama* (Food/Meat) |

as dead. However, in some cases, critically ill people would regain their strength and find their way back to their homes. As such, the person would have been said to have been rescued from the hungry vultures that had been hovering around the sick person with the hope of devouring the body once the person died. The idiom, therefore, refers to a situation where a person is salvaged from a very dangerous or fatal happening in the last minute. The idiom also compares to another Gikuyu idiom' Gutahikwo ni hiti' which literally means to be vomited by the hyena. The hyena being a carnivorous animal is known to attack human beings. The hyena is also associated with greed and gluttony such that it cannot regurgitate food or prey .Hence if a hy-ena vomits somebody, the person must have had a very narrow escape from death. Hence one can be said to have come out of the door of death.

### To be saved from a deadly situation

*(3) Gũtua (mata) ma ndwara*
   *(Spitting off (saliva) of the night.*

The idiom refers to the aspect of taking the first meal of the day which drains the saliva that may have accumulated in the mouth during sleep. One is assumed to be spitting the stale saliva in preparation for a new day.

### Taking the first meal of the day or breakfast.

*(4)  Ìrĩaga (ngombe) na mbugi ona kũrĩ ũgwati.*

(They graze (cows) even with bells when there is danger.)

The idiom derives its use from the culture of some farmers to bell the lead cow or goat in herd or flock respectively in order to keep track of the animals as they graze. The noise of the bell however, is the same one that guides the cattle raiders on the whereabouts of the animals because the cattle will still carry on with their activities oblivious of the lurking danger .To the animals life goes on.

### One must carry on with life even when there are many risks or challenges.

*(5)  Nĩ githĩu (githei) njenga .*

 (It (the grinding stone) has ground coarse maize flour)

In the traditional Gikuyu setting, milling of cereals was done by two grinding stones against each other .The end product would be fine flour that would be used to prepare porridge or meale meal also referred to as ugali. However, the stones would wear off with time and fail to grind the cereals in to fine flour. The end product would be broken pieces of cereals that could not prepare a good meal. This would therefore be a sign that all was not well and one needs to replace the stones or look for an alternative.

### Things will not work out as expected because the crucial aspects are missing.

*(6)  Gwĩtema na (kahiũ) gaku .*

(Injuring yourself with your own (knife).

The idiom borrows from a scenario where one takes time to sharpen a knife only for the same knife to injure the person. It may hence appear that was on the path to self destruction.

### To be the cause of your own tribulations.

(7)  *(Kĩnya) Kĩraita na ndumo .*

The (gourd) is leaking with the stitches.)

The idiom draws its motivation from the gourd, a natural container grown from an indigenous plant in central parts of Kenya. In the event that the gourd got broken, it would be skillfully repaired by using sisal fibre to stitch up .In most cases the gourd would be usable. However there were instances where leaking would continue .This showed that the problem had not been resolved.

### The problem is still in existence even after major interventions.

*(8)  Gũkunya (mbembe) ĩtarĩ.*

(You have pinched the (maize cob) that is not yet mature.)

Farmers are in the habit of checking if the maize crop is ready. This is done manually by using the thumb to make a small opening on the upper part of the maize cob. If the cob is not ready it would be left in the field. However, if it was too green it would attract the opening would attract birds which would end up destroying the whole maize field. The farmer would therefore be at a loss on why he /she was not

patience enough to wait for the maize to mature at its own pace.

### To be deceived by the outward appearance only to discover the sad reality.

 *(9) Gũkuua ( kĩondo ) na ikundo.*

(Carrying (the basket on a clean shaven head) with knots.)

In the Agikuyu community, married women would shave their heads clean. In the event that they needed to carry a basket, they would make knots on the rope attached to the basket in order to prevent it from slipping over their heads to the neck because of the smooth clean-shaved head The knots would enhance the grip. However , this turned out to be a painful experience as the knots would press hard on the scalp causing a lot of pain and suffering especially if the load was heavy. The women would however bear the pain as this was one of their chores. There was no other choice.

### To undergo a lot of pain in a matter that is beyond your control.

*(10) Gũtharia (nyũmba) ya magi.*

(Destroying (the house) belonging to wasps)

Wasps are feared because of their stinging effect as a defense mechanism .Most people will therefore avoid interfering with their nests. One is therefore portrayed as daring if he/she attempts to destroy the nest.

### To be daring.

(11) *Gũthoma (marũa) matume.*

(Reading (a letter) that is sealed.)

The idiom borrows from the ability for some messengers to guess the contents of a letter even before it is opened. Such people were portrayed as being too nosey and yet intelligence.

### To be very intelligent such that one is able to read between the lines.

*(12) Kũracia (mbũri) igatuga.*

 (Giving the best (goats) thus getting the reward.)

In the Agikuyu community, dowry was paid in terms of goats to the bride's family. It was interpreted as a token of appreciation. It was expected that the flock would reproduce. In some cases the flock would reproduce significantly such that the bridegroom would be greatly honoured for giving the best dowry ever. He would receive a token.

### Working effectively and therefore getting a good reward.

*(13) Kũrwara (mũrimũ) njũĩ gũtema*

(You will suffer (an illness) I know the cure.

The idiom draws its motivation from the practice of making incisions on the part of the body that was ailing in order to drain the 'bad blood'. This practice was done by the traditional medicine men and traditional healers. In some instances the members of the community would disregard certain healers particularly if the treatment failed

to work. The healer would then advise them not to undermine him because sooner or later they would require his services on an ailment which only he knew the cure.

***A reminder that people may undermine somebody at the moment only to require his or her help later.***

*(14) Mũndũ ũtoĩ (rũhiũ) rũkiera.*

    (One who does know when (the panga) is slipping out.)

   Emotional intelligence was highly valued in the traditional African society. It was however, common to find ignorant people who would fail to keep a safe distance from another person using a panga. The person was likely to get injured in case the panga accidentally slipped from the user.

***One who is very ignorant of the prevailing risk or has a low emotional intelligence.***

(15) *Ni thimbaga (mbura) na nduure.*

   (It (rain) can gather and yet fail to give a down pour.)

   The idiom draws from the analogy of how rain clouds at times gather in the sky predicting an impending heavy downpour .In some cases the clouds end up being dispersed by strong winds leading to lack of rain.

***Not all predictions come to materialize/ some early signs may be deceptive.***

*(16) ( Rũgiri) ni ũkũruota .*

   (You will be forced to use (the fence) to light the fire and warm yourself.)

   The Gikuyu homestead was always fenced using locally available poles. This was a symbol of security and ownership. However, in the event of disputes, some people in their bout of anger would uproot the timber posts and use them as firewood. This would spark fear among the people because it was a bad omen .This act portrayed that things had gone out of hand or a situation had reached its worst level due to anger.

***Your problems have gotten out of hand because of your poor conflict resolution skills.***

*(17) Urĩna (rũgano) rwaku .*

   (You have (a version) of your own.)

   The idiom is derived from the controversial nature of some people. Such people will always come up with their own version of any story which is not always true. These people are disregarded by the society and perceived as having poor interpersonal skills.

***You have your own problems which are not known to us.***

*(18) Wĩringie (rũĩ ) nĩ rwa nyarĩrĩ .*

   (Cross (the river) it is knee high.)

   The idiom draws its motivation from how people are expected to find their way out during floods. This is particularly so when the water level is knee high and one has to develop survival tactics in order to cross over. The idiom therefore urges everyone to use their emotional intelligence to resolve the problems affecting them.

***It is man for himself and God for us all.***

*(19) Waga (maguta) ma kwĩhaka ndwaga ma gwĩthirima.*

    (If you fail to get enough (oil) to apply you will get a little to rub.)

   The idiom borrows from the common oil skin that was used in the traditional African setting. Althoug it would in the end run out of oil, there always seemed to be some little oil remaining with each use.

***Do not give up on something instead keep trying as you may succeed in a small way that will ease the problem.***

*(20) Ciakorire(irio/nyama) wacũ mũgũnda .*

   (They (food/meat) found Wacũ in the shamba.)

   The idiom draws its motivation from a woman by the name Wacu who was despised by her husband and co wife. She would be sidelined on a lot of matters.Wacu would go on with her duties such as farming. One day her husband held a feast in her absence,. As he was roasting meat, a bird of prey grabbed a chunk of hot meat. Unfortunately the hawk was forced to drop the piece of meat because it could not withstand the heat. The meat was dropped near where Wacu was working .Wacu was more than glad to enjoy the delicious meat. Later she came to learn that indeed the piece was from her home ***No one can bar you from receiving up your blessings even if they set several barriers.***

## CONCLUSION

The study set out to conduct a semantic analysis of absent subjects in idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyû. The study was guided by two objectives: to establish the absent subjects in idioms under study and to conduct a semantic analysis of the idioms with the complete constituents. The study analyzed twenty idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ with absent subjects with the objective of establishing the subjects and interpreting the meaning of idioms under study. This study confirmed that the interpretation of meaning in idiomatic expressions can be hindered by the absence of the subject in the utterance. It is therefore necessary to establish the absent subject in idiomatic expressions in order to have complete utterances as this provides cues that enhance interpretation.

   The study notes that establishing the cultural and historical references that motivate particular idioms in Gĩkũyũ through etymological elaboration is an effective way of establishing the absent subjects. The study also acknowledges that the Conventional Figurative Language Theory is an appropriate theory for semantic analysis of Gĩkûyũ idioms. This is because the theory acknowledges that there is a relationship between the figurative meaning of a lexical unit and the mental image that forms its concept basis. The image component is a conceptual structure that is historically and culturally grounded. These cultural and historical concepts govern the inference from literal to figurative meaning of idioms.

   This study therefore concludes that there are idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ with absent subjects. This hinders the interpretation of meaning. However, when the subjects are

established through etymological elaboration, interpretation of meaning is enhanced. The study also concludes that unlike other idiom processing strategies, etymological elaboration is a more effective strategy for semantic analysis of idioms with absent subjects as it provides the necessary background information that semantically motivated the use of the respective idiomatic expressions. This information the provides the clues that aid in processing the meaning of idioms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study elicited certain recommendations:

First, the study employed the Convectional Figurative Language Theory by Dobrovol and Elisabeth (2005) on twenty idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ with absent subjects, the theory can therefore be employed on other idiomatic expressions which were not part of the study.

Secondly, etymological elaboration was used to establish the absent subjects in the idioms, other idiom processing strategies for example the use of contextualization as recommended by Copper(2004) can be used.

Thirdly, the study was limited to Gĩkũyũ, other research studies can be done to indentify absent subjects of idioms in other languages with the objective of enhancing the interpretation of meaning.

Fourthly, the study was limited to 20 idioms; more idioms can be studied with the objective of establishing glossaries which can be used as reference sites by the younger generation whose mastery of the language has experienced immense language shift and hence may be interested in learning Gĩkũyũ.

Lastly, further studies on semantic analysis can be done to establish other aspects that hinder the interpretation of meaning in idiomatic expressions in Gĩkũyũ and other African languages with the view of enhancing interpretation of idioms.

This research study forms the basis for further research on idioms in Gĩkũyũ. Semantic analysis can be carried out on other idioms that were not selected in the study. The researcher can further classify the absent subjects in to certain categories such as animal, plant and objects for further semantic analysis.

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