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Politeness In Disguise: A Lexico-Pragmatic Analysis Of Euphemistic Expressions In Gigicugu Social Contexts

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Abstract
This paper investigates the use of politeness strategies manifested through euphemistic use of language in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. Euphemisms, commonly employed to address sensitive or potentially offensive subjects, also serve to reinforce culturally embedded norms of respect and social decorum. While euphemism is a well-documented phenomenon across languages, its pragmatic functions and structural patterns within indigenous African languages, particularly Gĩgĩcũgũ, remain underexplored. Anchored in Politeness Theory, the study adopts a qualitative lexico-pragmatic approach to analyze euphemistic usage across various social contexts. Data collected through ethnographic methods, including natural conversation recordings and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), is analyzed to show how euphemistic expressions in Gĩgĩcũgũ follow systematic, context-sensitive patterns rather than being arbitrarily chosen. The findings indicate that euphemisms function to mitigate face-threatening acts, express deference, and uphold communal values, often through metaphorical and culturally resonant language. As such, euphemism emerges as a central politeness strategy within the Gĩgĩcũgũ speech community, enabling speakers to navigate delicate topics without violating social norms. The study underscores the significance of contextual factors in the use and interpretation of euphemistic language and calls for the integration of indigenous pragmatic knowledge into language education and documentation initiatives.

Keywords*: Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, euphemism, politeness strategies, pragmatics, indigenous languages, ethnographic methods, Focus Group Discussions.*

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I. Introduction

Euphemism in Gĩgĩcũgũ and its Cultural Relevance

Euphemism is a universal linguistic strategy used to navigate sensitive, taboo, or potentially offensive topics in a manner that aligns with cultural norms and expectations. In many societies, such indirectness in language is not merely a matter of politeness but reflects deeper social, moral, and relational codes. Within the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, a variant of the Kikuyu language, which belongs to the Bantu language family and is spoken in central Kenya, euphemism plays a critical communicative role, particularly in culturally significant domains such as health, death, sexuality, and spirituality.

Despite the richness and complexity of euphemistic expression in African languages, much of the existing linguistic scholarly work has remained focused on Indo-European languages, often overlooking indigenous African dialects. This study addresses this gap by examining how euphemism operates in Gĩgĩcũgũ as a pragmatic tool for expressing respect, maintaining social harmony, and managing interpersonal relationships. In doing so, this paper sheds light on the everyday ways' speakers of Gĩgĩcũgũ use language to navigate social life, revealing how deeply euphemism is tied to cultural values and lived experience, an aspect often missed in Eurocentric linguistic research.

Politeness, Indirectness, and Social Norms

Drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, supported by Scollon and Scollon's (1995) view of politeness as shaped by social roles and distance, and Fraser's (1990) typology of politeness models, this paper explores how euphemistic expressions mitigate face-threatening acts (FTAs) within various social contexts. In Gĩgĩcũgũ-speaking communities, politeness often takes precedence over clarity, especially when addressing taboo or emotionally sensitive subjects. In such cases, euphemisms serve as essential tools for protecting face and preserving social cohesion.

This paper adopts a qualitative, lexico-pragmatic approach, analyzing naturally occurring conversations and Focus Group Discussions to investigate how euphemism is deployed in everyday communication. Special attention is given to contexts such as initiation, marriage, sexuality and childbirth, where euphemism not only

reflects but actively reinforces cultural values and norms. Through this lens, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the interplay between language, politeness, and sociocultural identity in underrepresented speech communities.

Perspectives on Euphemism and Dysphemism Across Contexts

A comprehensive analysis of how euphemisms and dysphemism function in response to social taboos is provided in the work of Allan and Burridge (2006). They argue that euphemisms evolve to align with shifting societal attitudes toward sensitive topics such as sex, death, and disability. As a result, their theoretical framework on euphemisms and taboo language improved lexico-pragmatic understanding of how the Kikuyu community employs euphemisms to skirt socially acceptable bounds.

Allan and Burridge (1991) examine the use of euphemisms as a linguistic tactic to avoid objectionable words in public discourse in their work. Their research shows how euphemistic language is chosen based on cultural and societal standards, whereas dysphemisms are used as instruments of control or protest. Their subject of dysphemism is pertinent, even in case where the focus of the study is on euphemisms. This study considered dysphemism, drawing attention to the lines separating courteous and unpleasant speech, which was crucial to comprehending Kikuyu social hierarchies particularly Gĩgĩcũgũ, for this study. In these hierarchies, certain words are purposefully avoided in particular situations in order to establish authority or convey disapproval.

Another aspect is how language reflects human cognition and social norms, which is explored in great depth by Pinker (2007). Pinker examines euphemisms as tactful linguistic choices used to ease socially awkward conversations. His analysis reveals that words have multi-layered meanings, both literal and figurative, that shift depending on context. This semantic flexibility provides an understanding into how euphemisms function among Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers. Pinker's findings on meaning modification help trace the pragmatic transformations that euphemisms undergo in the dialect.

On their part, Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss politeness strategies arguing that euphemisms are employed to preserve social peace particularly in hierarchical or power- imbalanced situations. They contend that euphemisms maintain the social faces of the speaker and the listener by reducing the severity of face-threatening activities (FTAs). Their Politeness Theory further provides a strong foundation on which to examine how Kikuyu euphemisms are employed to preserve social harmony, avoid offense, and handle delicate subjects. These ideas about indirectness, face-saving techniques, and positive and negative politeness were useful in lexico-pragmatic interpretation of euphemisms in Kikuyu Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect.

Previous studies have shown that euphemisms in political and media discourse serve persuasive, image-enhancing, and ideological functions. Hasyim et al. (2020) identified strategies like metaphorical substitution and lexical mitigation in Indonesian election campaigns, while Putra and Widodo (2020) highlighted nine types of euphemisms in presidential debates, used to protect face and appeal to voters. Similarly, Jaganegara et al. (2020) found that American political reporting used metaphor and lexical remodeling to soften sensitive topics, and Ahmed and Jomaa (2022) showed that euphemistic framing in U.S. newspapers helps shape public perception. Unlike these studies, which focus on public discourse, the present paper shifts attention to the lexico-pragmatic use of euphemisms in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, exploring how meaning is shaped by cultural context and everyday interaction.

Theoretical Framework

This paper applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory to examine euphemism in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. The theory is crucial in this study for understanding how speakers manage social relationships through language, especially when addressing sensitive or taboo topics. At the core of the theory is the concept of face, which refers to an individual's public self-image. Brown and Levinson distinguish between the positive face- the desire for approval and inclusion, and the negative face- the need for autonomy and freedom from intrusion. Certain communicative acts, known as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), pose a risk to either form of face. These include requests, criticisms, and references to culturally sensitive subjects such as death, sexuality, or bodily functions.

Euphemism functions as a key strategy for mitigating the impact of FTAs. By expressing potentially offensive content in indirect or softened terms, speakers reduce the likelihood of social discomfort or conflict. Within the Gĩgĩcũgũ speech community, euphemisms are shaped by shared cultural norms that discourage explicit language in particular contexts, especially during rites such as marriage, circumcision, and funerals. Politeness Theory helps explain how these euphemistic choices are guided not only by linguistic structure but also by broader social dynamics, including age, status, and power relations. By analyzing euphemism through this lens, the study reveals how language reflects and reinforces community values, interpersonal hierarchies, and expectations of respectful conduct. Ultimately, Brown and Levinson's framework allows for a deeper understanding of euphemism as both a pragmatic and culturally embedded communicative strategy in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect.

II. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive survey design to examine the use of euphemisms in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect of the Kikuyu language. This methodological approach was selected for its effectiveness in facilitating an in-depth exploration of naturally occurring linguistic phenomena, thereby enabling the collection of rich, contextual data (Creswell, 2014). This approach allowed the research to stay close to how people actually speak and interact in their everyday lives.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to ensure representation of broader patterns of euphemistic usage within the speech community. In line with Oso and Onen (2008), descriptive survey designs are particularly appropriate for investigating specific language practices within defined cultural settings. The study focused on euphemistic expressions relevant to socially sensitive domains such as circumcision, childbirth, sexual relationships, religious practices, and marriage, contexts in which euphemisms are culturally salient among speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect.

The target population comprised adult native speakers who are fluent in the dialect and possess a deep understanding of both traditional and contemporary euphemistic usage. Participants were deliberately selected based on their linguistic fluency and familiarity with cultural norms and communicative etiquette. These criteria were assessed through preliminary informal conversations in which potential informants responded to open-ended questions in Gĩgĩcũgũ. Their ability to use culturally embedded expressions appropriately and explain their meanings and social functions served as indicators of both linguistic competence and cultural knowledge.

Data collection was conducted in the rural Rung'eto region, a linguistically conservative area where the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect remains relatively uninfluenced by urban vernaculars such as Sheng. As a native speaker, the researcher played a facilitative role in moderating focus group discussions and recording naturally occurring speech, consistent with the principles of qualitative inquiry. This insider perspective helped build trust with participants, allowing for more open and nuanced conversations.

Focus group discussions were conducted with fluent speakers to elicit euphemisms commonly used in relation to key social events, including birth, circumcision, marriage, sexual and romantic relationships, church life, and death. In addition to these discussions, natural conversations were recorded in situ to capture euphemistic expressions as they occur organically in everyday communication. These moments of everyday speech often revealed more than structured interviews ever could, offering a window into the rhythms of real-life interaction.

III. Findings

Negative Politeness

Negative politeness plays a central role in minimizing the risk of face loss in communication among speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. It involves the deliberate avoidance of direct references to topics considered uncomfortable, sensitive, or socially inappropriate. As Qadi (2009) noted, speakers tend to avoid lexical items associated with taboo subjects, even though such terms exist within the language. Their limited use in everyday conversation reflects a shared awareness of their potential to cause discomfort or social tension.

Politeness constitutes a fundamental aspect of communicative competence, developed through processes of language socialization, according to Brown and Levinson (1987). Within their framework, "negative face" refers to an individual's desire for autonomy and non-interference. When conversational topics threaten this sense of personal space, such as references to death, bodily functions, or social transgressions, speakers often employ indirect language to mitigate the impact.

This section examined how Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers utilized negative politeness strategies to navigate culturally sensitive interactions. These strategies served not only to maintain social equilibrium but also to uphold the listener's dignity, particularly in contexts where direct speech might have undermined interpersonal harmony. Such practices reflect a broader cultural orientation toward indirectness and discretion, where linguistic choices are carefully tailored to align with communal expectations of respect and propriety.

Sexuality and Child Bearing

Childbearing and by extension, human sexuality remains one of the most valued yet culturally sensitive subjects within many African societies. While its biological importance in the continuation of life is unquestionable, conversations around sexuality are often veiled in discretion, guided by long-standing cultural norms that discourages open discussion. Pinker (2007) attributes this sensitivity to a range of socio-cultural concerns, including the potential risks associated with sexual activity, such as emotional vulnerability, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, or the moral implications of infidelity. These factors contributed to a broader social tendency to treat sexuality as a private, even taboo, topic.

Pinker also highlights a gendered aspect of the usage of taboo words, pointing out that males are more likely than women to discuss such subjects in public. This disparity is frequently influenced by varying social positions and expectations. The majority of euphemism sexuality-related idioms in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, the study's emphasis, were provided by female speakers, possibly as a result of their need to preserve their modesty

and emotional distance from overt or explicit language. Building on Qadi's (2009) classification of politeness into positive and negative forms, the study found that Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers employ both strategies. Positive politeness is used to affirm shared values and build rapport, while negative politeness serves to avoid offense and reduce social imposition. Notably, the data revealed a stronger reliance on negative politeness, especially in contexts involving sexuality, where the risk of face-threatening acts was particularly high.

Erection

The direct term for erection, *gukia*, is largely avoided in everyday communication, as it is considered taboo within this community. In line with Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory, speakers employ euphemisms to mitigate face-threatening acts associated with discussing sexual matters. For men, euphemisms commonly used as indirect substitutes to erection are: *kuhanda* (to wake), *gũkiria* (to wake), or *kũratha* (to shoot)-which is metaphorically used.

Similarly, for women, expressions used in formal and polite communication regarding erection were employed. They reflect both negative politeness strategies (to avoid offense) and the cultural norms that shape gendered discourse around sexuality. They include: *ũrugari* (feeling hot), mũruki (smell), or *kuimba* (to swell).

Pregnancy and Childbearing

When referring to conception, the dialect revealed further linguistic sensitivity. While the terms *kũgia nda* (to get a stomach), *ihu* (pregnant), *nda* (stomach) are understood, they are viewed as offensive. More socially acceptable alternatives include *gũtetheka/kũrathimwa* (to be blessed). Phrases like *ee na nda* (she has a stomach) are rarely used in polite discourse. Instead, expressions such as *nĩ mũrito* (she is heavy) or *nĩ mũkuu* (she has carried), *ni mubũnu* (has eaten enough) are preferred, reflecting a continued reliance on negative politeness.

The pattern persists during childbirth. The term *gũciara* (to give birth) is typically avoided, especially by family members or in formal settings. Euphemistic alternatives include: *kũgĩa mwana* (to bear a child), *kũbewa mwana* (to be given a baby), *gũtetheka* (to be assisted), *kũrathimwa* (to be blessed), *gũtanahirwo* (be blessed), or *kwĩbingũra* (to open oneself). Afterbirth is also subject to euphemism. The word *thigiri* (placenta) is replaced with *nyomba ya mwana* (baby's house), a more culturally acceptable term that avoids triggering FTAs. The study confirmed that negative politeness is the preferred strategy for discussing afterbirth among Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers, due to the cultural sensitivities surrounding the topic.

Human Reproductive Anatomy

In discussing human reproductive anatomy, direct terms are almost never used. Male genitalia are referred to with metaphors. M*ũthino/muthiita* (penis) becomes: *mũcuthi* (tail), *mũtĩ* ("stick/tree"), *cuuma* (metal), *indo ciake* (his things), *mũcinga* (gun), *gikingi* (post), *itimũ* (spear), *mũgwi* (arrow), *karamu* (pen), *cindano* (needle), *njoka* (snake), *ũrũme* (manhood), *kanyamoo/kinyamoo* (small thing/big thing),or *gĩkonde* (foreskin). The testicles, *ntheke/nyee/heke/ndendere* are replaced with: *matumbi* (eggs) or *mĩrigo* (goods).

For female genitalia, *mbĩnĩ/kanyee/kiino* (vagina) is euphemized with: *nyamũ* (animal), *mũgũnda* (garden), *kĩbuyu* (thermos flask), *mũgũnda wa kĩanda* (the lower garden), *indo cia mũtumia* (things for woman), *njĩra ya ũciari* (birth canal), *mwanya* (opening), *mũtaro* (trench)*, ngwacĩ* (sweetpotato), *murĩo* (sweetness), *kanyũngũ* (pot), *kĩthima* (well), *kĩbĩngo kĩa mũcĩĩ* (gate to home) or *irio* (food). The clitoris, *kang'ura*/*kagego*, therefore becomes: *mboco* (bean) or *karubia* (horn). Pubic hair, *huyo,* is euphemized with *njũiri* (hair) or *guoya* (fur). Buttocks, *matina*, is often replaced with the more polite variants: *ndũnu, thutha* (behind) or *njĩkarĩro* (the sitting apparatus). Also, *nyondo* (breast) is substituted with: *kĩthũri* (chest), *kĩthũri kĩnene* (chest big), or *kĩthũri kĩnini* (chest small). These substitutions reflect cultural taboos and an emphasis on maintaining social propriety. Consistent with Qadi's (2009) definition, these euphemistic practices exemplify negative politeness, avoiding explicit, potentially pejorative language to preserve social cohesion and prevent discomfort. In the context of the Gikuyu culture, such linguistic choices serve to mitigate FTAs and reflect deeply held communal values regarding decorum, gender, and respect in communication.

Body Effluvia

According to Watts (2003), encounters that conform to dominant sociocultural standards give rise to the communicative practice of politeness. Direct references to body excretions, including urine and feces, are often avoided in public conversation or in socially sensitive situations in many cultures. According to a research on the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, speakers seldom often, if at all, use the specific names of various body processes. In order to respect their interlocutors' personal limits and sensibilities, speakers intentionally steer clear of potentially objectionable terminology. This linguistic conduct was viewed as an example of negative politeness.

Euphemisms for Toilets and Defecation

The term *kīoro* (toilet) was regarded as impolite or vulgar by speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, and is therefore rarely used in public or polite conversation. To maintain decorum and social propriety, the following euphemistic expressions were used: *nyomba ya gwitethia* (house to help oneself), *nyomba ya bata* (house of need), *nyomba ya kabinda* (house of call), *nyomba ya mũndu ũmwe* (house of one person), *nyomba ya kabinda* (the house of need), *obisi* (office). Brown and Levinson (1987) classify this form of politeness whereby a speaker deliberately avoids the use of taboo language to protect the interlocutor's face as an instance of negative politeness. Among speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, references to biological functions, particularly excretion, were observed to elicit discomfort and pose a threat to the listener's face needs. For example, the lexical item *kūmĩa* (to defecate), *mai* (feaces), are considered inappropriate for direct usage in everyday conversation. As a result, speakers tend to substitute them with euphemistic expressions such as: *gwītethia* (to help oneself), *kuna mwīgua* (to cut a thorn), *ḳũuna* (to cut it), *kabinda kanene* (long call), *kuthi bata* (Going for a need), *gutema muti* (to cut a tree), or *ngindo* (feaces).

Euphemisms for Urination

The term *kūthuguma* (to urinate) is similarly considered impolite in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. The study revealed that this term is rarely used in polite conversation. Instead, speakers preferred euphemistic alternatives such as: *gūcucu* (to urinate), *kūmatua* (to spit), *gūtua mata* (to spit saliva), or *kabinda kanini* (small call). Notably, within the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, there is a striking euphemism in which urine is metaphorically referred to as saliva in such expressions.

Gendered Euphemisms for Urination

The findings further shed light on the use of gender-specific euphemisms in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, reflecting both linguistic nuance and cultural perceptions of gender roles. For men, the euphemism *kūrūgama* (to stand) is commonly used, acknowledging the typical male posture during urination. In contrast, women are associated with the expression *kuna īru* (to bend the knee), which aligns with the squatting or crouching position often assumed by females. These euphemisms not only serve to maintain politeness but also subtly reinforce traditional gender norms through language. This distinction highlights how even bodily functions are linguistically shaped by societal expectations and gendered behavior.

Euphemisms for Flatulence

Also, as per the data collected, observation was made regarding the euphemism for farting/flatulence referred to as *kūthuria/kūthiota/ndore* in the dialect. The Gĩgĩcũgũ study revealed that the terms are hardly used in polite conversations. Instead the speakers preferred more acceptable terms which include: k*ūthūkia riera* (spoiling the air) or *riera rĩũru* (bad air).

Euphemisms for Orgasm

In regard to orgasm, the data showed that *guitukwo* (orgasm) is a taboo and is hardly used in polite or formal communication. The speakers prefer socially acceptable terminologies which include: *guita* (to pour) or g*ūka* (come). The mention of *ubai/njokoyo* (semen) is usually tabooed therefore euphemized with: *hinya wa urume* (the strength of a man) or *mbegu cia arūme* (the seeds of men). These alternatives reflect the cultural restraint surrounding sexual expression

Euphemisms for Menstruation

The speakers stated that it is a taboo to refer to menstruation directly. *Kura* (bleed) is a taboo term that is highly avoided and replaced with euphemistic words like: *mweri* (moon), *mithenya ya atumia* (days of women), *machiru* (name of woman, Wanjiru), *kabinda ka mweri* (period the month), *kuona mweri* (see the moon), *ageni a mutumia* (the visitors to woman), *ageni a mweri* (monthly visitors), *ibinda riu ria mweri* (that period of the month), *gucererwa* (to be visited), *mweri* (moon), *kuona* (to see), or *kuona mweri* (to see the moon).

Diseases

The data collected revealed that euphemisms play a crucial role in how Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers handle socially sensitive topics. Among the most significant areas where euphemistic language is employed are discussions related to mental illness and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as HIV/AIDS and gonorrhea. These subjects are culturally marked by shame, stigma, and discomfort, and as a result, direct references are often avoided in everyday communication.

Mental Illness

Participants in the FGDs consistently emphasized that terms such as *mũgũrũki* (mad person) and *mũndũ wa ngoma* (person of Satan) are considered deeply disrespectful and are rarely used unless in extreme anger or judgment. Instead, speakers opt for less direct, more metaphorical expressions that convey the idea of mental instability without sounding harsh or accusatory. Commonly used euphemisms include: *kũrogota maratathi* (to collect the papers), *gũta mbau* (to throw away a board), *kurũta nguo* (to remove clothes), *kwĩariria* (to talk to oneself), *gũta laini* (to get off track), *kũthũka kiongo* (to lose the head), *kũthũka* (to lose control), *gũchanganyikirwa* (to be confused), *murĩmu wa kiongo* (illness of the head), or *kũrogota takataka* (to collect trash). These expressions are often used with caution and empathy, especially when the subject of the conversation is present or known to the speaker, reflecting a strong cultural emphasis on preserving dignity and social harmony.

Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory helps explain this linguistic behavior. The use of euphemisms in this context aligns with negative politeness strategies, which aim to avoid face-threatening acts by minimizing imposition and showing respect for the listener's personal and social identity. By using indirect language, speakers demonstrated sensitivity to the emotional weight of such topics and the potential consequences of speaking too bluntly. In some cases, off-record strategies are used, where the meaning is implied rather than stated explicitly, allowing the listener to infer the topic without the speaker taking full charge for naming it.

HIV/AIDS

The avoidance of direct language was highly evident when discussing sexually transmitted infections, particularly HIV/AIDS. Participants in both FGDs and natural conversation recordings rarely used the term *mũkingo*, a word often linked with shame, fear, and social exclusion. Instead, they preferred terms such as: *kagũnyo* (small insect), *m*ũ*rimu* (illness), *mũrũaru* (the unwell one), *m*ũ*rimu wa thirikari* (government disease), *kimemendi* (that thing / the destroyer), *m*ũ*rimu uyu* (this disease), *homa* (common cold), or *mutinu wa uriri/gitanda* (bed accident). These phrases not only reduce the emotional charge of the conversation but also allow for the expression of concern or inquiry without causing embarrassment to the person affected or those listening.

Gonorrhea

This is another stigmatized condition. It is often referred to with euphemisms like: *gichununu*, *gatego* (trap), *m*ũ*rimu wa gatagati* (disease at the center), *m*ũ*rimu wa thiri* (the secret disease), *gĩchũĩ* (itch), *irĩa* (milk), or *m*ũ*rimu wa ũmamari* (disease of promiscuity). These terms, derived from symptoms or cultural associations, allow speakers to talk about the condition indirectly, especially in mixed company or formal settings. The euphemisms also serve as a coded language among peers, helping maintain social boundaries and avoid moral judgment.

Euphemisms for Prostitution and Sexual Deviance

Certain terms associated with prostitution and sexual deviance are regarded as taboo among Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers. The use of such words directly in conversation is considered impolite or socially inappropriate, especially in formal or respectful settings. As such, speakers employ euphemisms to mitigate the negative connotations and avoid face-threatening acts. The word *mumaraya* (prostitute) is highly tabooed and avoided in polite discourse. Instead, the following euphemisms are used: K*iumbani* (one who keeps a woman) referring indirectly to a man who keeps a mistress. G*ītharia* – used for a male prostitute, derived from the verb *gūtharia* (to erase or destroy), metaphorically implying destruction or shame. M*ūkoma thīī* – euphemism for an unmarried mother, often used to imply sexual looseness or association with prostitution. N*jangiri* (the wrongdoer) but contextually used to refer to a prostitute. These lexical choices demonstrated the use of negative politeness strategies, as they allowed speakers to discuss morally and culturally sensitive topics without causing embarrassment or offense.

Positive Politeness

Positive politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), incorporates social and cultural norms as well as sympathy with the addressee. Moreover, they claim that positive politeness is the hearer's good self-image. The Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect speaker must be aware of the hearer's facial wants in order to recognize and respect them. The addressee wants the speaker to respect these facial gestures, which include camaraderie and warmth. In order to avoid encroaching on the hearer's personal space and independence, the speaker must exercise restraint. Another component of good politeness or face is the hearer's desire to be welcomed by others during interactions. In some social situations, speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect employ positive politeness to show sympathy with the addressee, while in most verbal exchanges, they use negative politeness to save face (Qadi, 2009; Brown and Levinson, 1987). On the speaker's side, positive politeness shows support for the addressee. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), positive politeness is frequently employed to enhance or color reality.

Euphemisms for Death and Burial

Diverse civilizations around the world have diverse perspectives on death. Nonetheless, a characteristic that is nearly universal is the use of euphemisms when discussing this natural occurrence known as death and the actions that accompany it. This widely accepted fact also applies to the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. Positive politeness, according to Qadi (2009), is used while demonstrating solidarity with the addressee and taking into account societal standards.

Death Euphemisms

Field data revealed that Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers rarely refer to death directly. Instead, they use euphemisms that gently mark the journey toward death, reflecting both emotional sensitivity and cultural values. Expressions like *kubuciabucia* or *kuminjiaminjia* (blinking) were commonly used to describe the final seconds before death, allowing families to acknowledge the nearness of death without bluntness. As one elder noted, "We don't say someone is dying, we say they are blinking." Similarly, *ihinda ria mwĩco* (the time of final agony) was used to describe the painful last moments, in place of *mathaa make ma gũkua (the hour of death).*

Further data showed that instead of using *gũkua* (to die), which is seen as too upsetting and may therefore jeopardize the speaker's face needs, Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect speakers utilize more inoffensive phrases when discussing death. When discussing death, polite phrases like the following are used rather of *gũkua: kwĩtwa* (to be called), *Gũtũtiga* (to leave us), *kũburũka* (to rest), *kũthira* (to end), *kũthiĩ mbere* (to go first), *kũmama* (to sleep), *kwambata* (to go up), *kũthi matwini* (to go to the sky), *kũthi igurũ* (to go up), *kũthi kwi ngai* (to go to God), *kũbinga metho* (to close eyes), *kuminjia* (to close eyes), *iburuko ria tene na tene/iburuko ria mindi na mindi* (permanent peace), *kuthiaga* (to go before), *toro wa tene na tene/toro wa mindi na mindi* (permanent/forever sleep),*mwico wa rugendo/thabari* (end of the journey), *kuthii gwitu kwega* (going to a better place), *gukoma* (to sleep), *kumagara* (to leave), *kũmathima* (to measure them), *kwambata ĩgurũ* (to go up), *kubanda mĩrĩo* (to plant arrowroots), or *gũtua mianga* (to cut cassavas)

Euphemisms for the Corpse

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of making an upsetting statement or object appear less offensive, speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect allude to a dead body using euphemized terms. Since the word *kiimba* (corpse) is seen as offensive, it is improper and degrading to the deceased. Furthermore, the respondents stated that the speaker would be suggesting social separation from both the addressee and the deceased if the word *kiimba* (corpse) was used. This runs counter to Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that positive politeness strengthens the bond between the addressee and the speaker. Therefore, when referring to the deceased, speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect use more polite phrases like: *mwĩri* (the body), *mũtĩga-irĩ* (a man who has left), or *mwendoniiri* (a woman, someone loved, who has left).

Euphemisms for the Grave

This study also confirmed that speakers of the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect employ positive politeness strategies in specific social contexts. Analysis of participants' responses revealed that the use of such politeness aligns with the societal and cultural expectations of the Kikuyu community. For instance, although the term *mbĩrĩra* (grave) is generally considered taboo, speakers often opt for euphemisms like: *nyumba ya kũburũka* (house of rest), or *kaburi* (grave). These soften its emotional impact. This use of euphemism reflects a form of positive politeness, as it demonstrates the speaker's intent to maintain harmony and express empathy by avoiding distressing or offensive language.

Euphemisms for Grave Diggers

Individuals tasked with grave digging, who could be referred to directly as *enji a mbĩrĩra* (grave diggers), are instead described with the more respectful term such as: *abarĩria a ĩrima* (those who prepare the hole) or *enji a kaburi* (diggers of grave). This linguistic choice not only elevates the social perception of the grave diggers but also reinforces solidarity between speaker and listener. Such findings support Lakoff's (1989) view that language functions as a tool for fostering relationships and minimizing conflict. By referring to grave diggers as *acimbi a ĩrima* (diggers of the hole), speakers symbolically enhance the value of their labor, thus upholding both cultural sensitivity and social cohesion.

Euphemisms for Burial

Positive politeness was also demonstrated when the speakers chose to express potentially sensitive or distressing topics using more considerate or refined language. It was evident in the context of burial practices. The direct term *kũthika* (to bury) was perceived as harsh or offensive. As a result, speakers employed alternative expressions such as: *gũkinyia mwiri* (to make the body arrive) or *kumagaria mwiri* (to escort the body), *kũmugira kwaheri* (to say goodbye). These euphemistic choices served to soften the emotional weight of the topic, allowing

the speaker to show empathy and maintain social harmony. In this way, the speaker acknowledges and respects the emotional needs of the listener, fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding.

Euphemisms for Initiation and Marriage Rites

Another instance of positive politeness was noted in the context of initiation rites. During interactions with respondents, it became evident that, among the Agikuyu, certain terms related to initiation and initiates are considered taboo. As a result, Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers often use alternative expressions to soften the impact of these terms and to show solidarity with the initiates.

Circumcision

The circumcision ceremony is traditionally referred to as *kūrua* (to be circumcised), but because this term is regarded as offensive or inappropriate in polite conversation, the preferred term was *kūgimara* (to become mature). Similarly, while *arui* (initiates) is a direct term, it is also considered impolite and is typically avoided. Instead, speakers use *agimari* (those undergoing initiation), a more respectful and socially acceptable alternative. Additionally, uncircumcised individuals are often stigmatized, and derogatory terms may be used to refer to them. For the uncircumcised boy, he is referred to as *kivici/kivii* a term considered tabooed and can lead to fight .When females used to be circumcised an act that is no longer carried out in women, the uncircumcised ones were referred to as *irigu/kirigu*-plural/singular respectively, a term that is tabooed. These linguistic choices reflect a clear case of positive politeness, where language is used strategically to maintain social harmony, express empathy, and uphold cultural and societal norms.

Marriage

It is evident that all rites of passage among Gĩgĩcũgũ speakers are deeply embedded with euphemistic language, a reflection of the community's cultural values and belief systems. The marriage rite, like other stages of transition, is particularly characterized by the use of euphemisms that serve to align communication with social norms and expectations. For instance, the literal term for marrying, *kūgūrana* (to buy each other), is perceived as inappropriate, as it implies commodification of human relationships, a notion that is culturally unacceptable. Instead, more socially acceptable alternatives that offer a softened and respectful depiction of the marriage process are used. They include: *kūbikania* (to marry), *kūgīa mũndū* (to get someone), or *kūgīa andū* (to get people).

Similarly, terms used to describe marital roles are subject to euphemistic reformulation. The term for husband, *mūrūme* (the one who bites or eats), is considered impolite and is often replaced with *mūbikania* (bridegroom), a more respectful expression. The traditional term for wife, *mūka* (one who has come), is regarded as potentially offensive, particularly in light of contemporary concerns around gender equality. Critics of dowry practices argue that such language reinforces outdated notions of ownership and commodification of women. In response, Gĩgicugu speakers often use the term *mūbiki* (bride) instead. After marriage, the terms used continue to reflect this polite reformulation: the husband is referred to as *mūthuri* (one who organizes), while the wife is called *mūtumia* (one who keeps secrets), both of which carry connotations of respect and social harmony.

Politeness in Gĩgĩcũgũ Exclamations

Exclamations are a natural part of everyday speech, often used to express surprise, frustration, excitement, or disbelief. However, in the Gĩgĩcũgũ-speaking community, not all exclamations are considered socially acceptable. Findings from organized groups revealed a marked preference for restrained, polite exclamatory forms over more emotionally charged or confrontational ones. For instance, the exclamation *kangura!* typically used to express shock or anger, is often avoided in polite conversation due to its harsh tone and perceived aggressiveness. It can come across as abrupt or disrespectful, especially in mixed company or formal settings. Instead, speakers tend to use milder alternatives such as *kabiri!* or *kaamundu!* which carry similar expressive weight but are softer and more socially acceptable.

These choices are not merely stylistic, they reflect deeper cultural values about how emotion should be expressed in public. In Gĩgĩcũgũ culture, there is a strong emphasis on emotional restraint, mutual respect, and maintaining social harmony. As a result, language is carefully moderated to avoid confrontation or drawing unnecessary attention to oneself. This is particularly evident in emotionally charged moments, where speakers consciously choose exclamations that convey feeling without threatening the listener's comfort or dignity. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this tendency aligns with both positive and negative politeness strategies**,** as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). On one hand, the use of gentle exclamations like *kabiri!* serves a positive politeness function, creating a sense of shared understanding and social cohesion. On the other hand, avoiding potentially offensive exclamations like *kangura!* functions as negative politeness**,** minimizing the risk of offending or imposing on the listener.

The choice of exclamatory forms also reflects broader social norms regarding age, status, and setting. For example, younger speakers are especially cautious when using exclamations around elders, often opting for

neutral or humorous expressions to show deference. In formal gatherings, emotionally neutral expressions are preferred, while in more relaxed, peer-to-peer settings, slightly stronger exclamations may be tolerated, though still moderated. Overall, the use of polite exclamations in Gĩgĩcũgũ reveals how language is finely tuned to the emotional and social dynamics of the community. Rather than serving purely as linguistic tools for expressing emotion, exclamations in this context become a way of signaling respect, preserving relationships, and upholding cultural expectations around appropriate speech behavior.

The Function of Euphemism in Conveying Meaning

This section examines the role of euphemism as a pragmatic and culturally embedded communicative strategy within the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect. Euphemisms are used to navigate socially sensitive subjects, such as sexuality, death, excretion, initiation, and marriage, by allowing speakers to address delicate topics without breaching cultural norms or causing discomfort. In contexts where direct expression may be considered inappropriate or offensive, euphemism serves to preserve both clarity and politeness, with the latter often prioritized in line with community expectations.

Facilitating Communication

Euphemisms help maintain respectful interaction in emotionally charged or taboo conversations. In the Gĩgĩcũgũ community, expressions for acts such as sexual intercourse, defecation, or childbirth are replaced with more acceptable terms that preserve social harmony. This aligns with Lakoff's (1973) notion that politeness can supersede clarity, and with Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of face-saving acts.

Promoting Politeness

Euphemism supports politeness by reflecting social distance, roles, and relational dynamics. Terms related to death, initiation, and marriage are softened to avoid offense and maintain interpersonal respect. For instance, instead of using direct terms like *gũkua* (to die) or *kũgũrwa* (to be bought in marriage), speakers prefer euphemisms that convey the same meaning with greater sensitivity.

Avoiding Taboo

Deep-rooted social taboos shape the avoidance of certain lexical items, particularly those referring to reproductive anatomy or private bodily functions. Speakers are socialized from an early age to use metaphoric or symbolic language such as *mũtĩ* (tree) for the male organ or *nyamũ* (animal) for the female, thereby aligning language use with communal moral codes. These euphemisms are not just linguistic choices, they are social tools that allow individuals to talk about sensitive subjects without violating expectations of modesty or decency. In everyday conversations, especially around elders or informal settings, such indirect expressions help maintain respect, reduce discomfort and uphold the cultural values of discretion and propriety.

Softening Harsh Realities

Euphemisms also function to mitigate the emotional weight of difficult experiences, particularly death. Expressions such as *kũthiĩ rũgendo* (to go on a journey) and *kumagaria* (to escort) reframe death and burial in gentler terms, offering comfort to speakers and listeners alike. This figurative language serves both to honor the deceased and to shield the living from psychological distress.

IV. Conclusion

This part explored the strategic use of euphemism in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect as a sociolinguistic tool shaped by cultural norms and guided by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. It examined how speakers navigate sensitive domains such as sexuality, excretion, death, initiation, marriage, and social identity by employing euphemisms that reflect both positive politeness (emphasizing solidarity and empathy) and negative politeness (avoiding offense or intrusion). The analysis revealed that euphemism serves four key communicative functions: facilitating respectful interaction, promoting politeness, avoiding taboo, and softening harsh realities. These functions highlight euphemism not merely as a linguistic substitution but as a culturally anchored mechanism for preserving social harmony, emotional sensitivity, and moral decorum in communication. Hence, they underscore euphemism's essential role in maintaining face and fostering culturally appropriate discourse within the Gĩgĩcũgũ speech community. To support the preservation of euphemistic expressions in the Gĩgĩcũgũ dialect, educational institutions should incorporate indigenous pragmatics into language and cultural curricula. Community-led initiatives are encouraged to document and archive euphemisms along with their cultural contexts for future generations. Local media and cultural platforms can aid in revitalization by showcasing traditional euphemisms through storytelling, radio, and drama. Finally, fostering intergenerational dialogue will promote the transmission of euphemistic language and reduce communicative gaps between age groups.

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