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## Mapping the distribution of euphemisms across taboo themes in Swahili

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Lazaro Charles<sup>1\*</sup>, Dunlop Ochieng<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, The Open University of Tanzania, Tanzania,

[lazaro.charles@out.ac.tz](mailto:lazaro.charles@out.ac.tz)<sup>1</sup> [dunlop.ochieng@out.ac.tz](mailto:dunlop.ochieng@out.ac.tz)<sup>2</sup>

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract:** Euphemisms are vital elements of language, especially in polite speech training, tracing language change and use. Hence, the lack of studies on the distribution of euphemisms in Swahili denied stakeholders knowledge of what Swahili speakers consider sensitive and less sensitive. In this regard, the current study determined the distribution of Swahili euphemisms by taboo themes. The data were collected from 384 Swahili speakers using a questionnaire. The euphemisms were categorised by taboo themes, whereas the ranking was based on the volume of euphemisms per theme. The finding reveals that the theme of "dead body" had the highest concentration of taboo phrases, followed by themes of "burial" and "farting." The least euphemised themes in Swahili are "female sexual organ," "semen," and "orgasm." The hierarchy implies that speakers should trade carefully on topics of dead body, burial, and farting in Swahili communication. Contrarily, relaxation is permitted in conversations around sexual organs, semen and orgasm in the Swahili culture. The findings might be useful to native people who are upbringing their children according to the Swahili culture, diplomats and orienters of foreigners in the Swahili culture.

**Keywords:** Euphemisms, Politeness, Swahili culture, Swahili, Taboo

**Biographical notes:** Lazaro Charles is an Assistant Lecturer and a Ph.D. in Linguistics student at The Open University of Tanzania.

Dr. Dunlop Otieno Ochieng is a senior lecturer and dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at The Open University of Tanzania. He received his Ph.D. for his research on the indirect influence of English on Kiswahili in Tanzania from TU Chemnitz in Germany. He has since been teaching and researching language and gender, language attitudes and language use in Tanzania, developments in contemporary literature and language in social media. He is also interested in the use of technology to improve academic writing among university students and academics. Dunlop Ochieng also writes novels, reviews and edits academic documents. Currently, he serves as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at The Open University of Tanzania.

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### 1. Introduction

Language users circumvent certain expressions during communication to ensure they communicate smoothly and harmoniously. They usually use expressions that cannot distort the face of those engaged in communication. One of the strategies they use to achieve this goal is substituting rude and unpleasant expressions with relatively pleasant and less offensive expressions. The use of euphemisms is what serves this aspect in various communication contexts. The appropriate use of euphemisms contributes significantly to effective communication, whereas inappropriate use of euphemisms can lead to communication breakdown. Figuratively known as "a whitewashing device" (Ren & Yu, 2013), euphemism softens an unpleasant and embarrassing idea. Several scholars (Burridge, 2012; Hudson, 2000; Wardhaugh, 2010) consider euphemism an enabling expression to talk about offensive topics or unpleasant things in interaction. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2014) view euphemisms as antonyms of taboo expressions, which is close to the mainstream definition of the concept. Exceptionally, Wang (2013) considered it a cultural strategy to bring peace and tranquillity to society. Pavlenko (2005) shares Wang's opinion that euphemisms are meant to protect the speaker from unwanted emotional arousal. In light of these multiple definitions, we regard euphemisms as alternative expressions used to talk about an unpleasant topic to avoid loss of face and shame and conflict. The definitions confirm that euphemisms work in tandem with taboos in a language. As a result, the current study focused on the distribution of euphemisms by taboo themes. The study finding would establish different sensitivity levels to various taboo themes, a

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knowledge that might facilitate effective communication in various communicative contexts. That is, it informs users of the themes to talk about more cautiously and the ones to discuss with relaxation.

## **2. Literature review**

Euphemism is an old concept and has been studied from many angles. Scholars have focused on the meaning of the concept (Burridge, 2012; Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2014; Hudson, 2000; Pavlenko, 2005; Wang, 2013; Wardhaugh, 2010), categories of euphemisms (Ji-gang, 2005; Lee, 2011; Qi, 2010; Rawson, 1981) and strategies for forming euphemisms (Warren (1992; Allan & Burridge, 1991; Rawson, 1981). Others have focused on the functions (Bowers & Pleydell-Pearce, 2011; Burridge, 2012; Linfoot-Ham, 2005; Wardhaugh, 2006), whereas others have connected euphemisms with a taboo (De-Klerk, 1992; Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Swan, 2005; Thompson, 1999), language teaching and learning (Altakhaineh & Rahrouh, 2015; Bakhtiyorov, 2020) and media (Al-Gharrawi, 2017; Fitriani, Syarif, & Wahyuni, 2019; Ong'onda, 2018; Simamora, 2012; Winita & Ermanto, 2019). Euphemisms have also been linked with language dynamism and change (Alpher & Nash, 1999; Burridge, 2012; Dixon, 1980) and politeness and intercultural communication (Aboh, 2018; Al-Khasawneh, 2018; Fernández, 2005; Fraser, 1990; Fukada & Asato, 2004; Goffmann, 1967; Held, 1992; Jdetawy, 2019; McGlone & Batchelor, 2003; Ndhlovu & Botha, 2017; Rabab'ah & Al-Qarni, 2012; Watts, Sachiko, & Konrad, 1992; Yoshimura & MacWhinney, 2010).

There is also substantial research on the use of euphemisms by social attributes such as age, education, sex and place (Alotaibi, 2015; Brandt, 2014; Drissi, 2020; Habibi & Khairuna, 2018; Mofarrej & Al-Haq, 2015; Nilwati, 2012; Rosadi, Tiarina & Rosa, 2013). The recent work by Charles (2023) on using euphemisms by different groups in Swahili bridged the gap in the use of euphemisms by social groups in the Swahili language. However, it did not cover the distribution of use by themes that appeared to researchers exciting and novel. Against this backdrop, the current study set out to observe and describe the distribution of euphemisms by themes. On the one hand, the findings of the study contribute to the understanding of euphemisms and, on the other hand, inform the teaching of politeness and intercultural communication. The study also provides insights for other studies on language change.

## **3. Theoretical framework**

This study used Distributional Semantic Model developed by several figures, the notable being Harris (1954). The model is founded on the idea that the meaning of a word or a phrase can be determined by the context in which it appears. The model provides multidimensional, graded, empirically induced word depictions that effectively capture many aspects of meaning in languages, as manifested in a large body of work in linguistics. The Distributional Semantic Model is a striking model of meaning as it captures conceptual aspects and is automatically induced from natural language data. Distributional Semantics is based on the distributional hypothesis, which states that similarity in meaning results in the similarity of linguistic distribution (Harris, 1954). It claims that words in the same contexts tend to imply similar meanings. The distributional hypothesis advocates that the more semantically similar words are, the more they tend to co-occur. It emphasises using statistics in singling out the most noticeable contextual features to describe a word's distributional behaviour. The current study capitalised on the statistical tenet of the theory to establish the hierarchy of euphemisms by theme. The occurring euphemisms were coded, classified, tallied and counted to determine the hierarchy (sensitivity levels) of the predetermined themes.

## **4. Research methodology**

### **Participants**

The current study involved 384 (192 male and 192 female) Swahili speakers aged 18 years and above. The respondents were purposively selected. The study was conducted in Zanzibar (specifically in Unguja Urban District). This area was selected due to its virtue of being where this language originated, giving the advantage of coming up with the data that truthfully portray the forms of euphemisms that speakers of this language prefer to use.

### **Materials**

Data for the study were collected from the Swahili language using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was constructed with columns A and B. Column A comprised a list of taboo themes (for which euphemisms are used), while column B comprised a list of euphemisms used for such a theme. The respondents were requested to tick from the list the euphemisms they use for the specific theme. The respondents were also allowed to add other euphemisms they use for the specific theme. The responses from the respondents were written down for analysis. Some of the euphemisms used to make this questionnaire were derived from the researchers themselves, since the researchers have adequate knowledge of this language. Other euphemisms the researchers found in various publications where euphemisms were used to talk about different taboo themes.

### **Design and procedure**

The study used a descriptive design. During the analysis, the number of euphemisms for each taboo theme and their frequencies of use were determined. The frequencies were used in computing the percentage of each euphemism used for a particular theme (see Table 1). Then, the mean percentage of using euphemisms for a particular taboo theme was computed to rank the distribution of euphemisms by themes. The themes with a high mean percentage were ranked as the most taboo themes (appearing high in the hierarchy), while those with a low mean percentage were ranked as the

less taboo themes (appearing low in the hierarchy; see Table 2). After getting the statistical figures, descriptions were given to the patterns that emerged during the analysis.

## 5. Findings and discussions

This section presents and discusses the findings obtained from the respondents through the questionnaire. The presentation focuses on taboo themes and their corresponding euphemisms and the percentage indicating the preference for respective euphemisms by the respondents.

**Table 1:** Taboo Themes and Corresponding Percentage of Euphemisms usage

<i>Euphemism</i>	<i>Gloss</i>	<i>Fraction</i>	<i>(%)</i>	<i>Theme</i>
<i>Kujamiiana</i>	to socialize	351/384	91.4	Sexual act
<i>Kutafunana</i>	to chew one another	273/384	71.1	Sexual act
<i>Kulalana</i>	to sleep over one another	169/384	44	Sexual act
<i>Kufanyana</i>	to do one another	147/384	38.3	Sexual act
<i>Kufanya tendo la ndoa</i>	to do marital duty	376/384	97.9	Sexual act
<i>Kupata haki ya ndoa</i>	to get conjugal right	368/384	95.8	Sexual act
<i>Kula mzigo</i>	to eat luggage	191/384	49.7	Sexual act
<i>Kupata unyumba</i>	to get marital right	351/384	91.4	Sexual act
<i>Kulala</i>	to sleep	367/384	95.6	Sexual act
<i>Kukunana</i>	to scratch one another	135/384	35.2	Sexual act
<i>Kula tunda</i>	to eat fruit	305/384	79.4	Sexual act
<i>Kula uroda</i>	to eat something beautiful	315/384	82.0	Sexual act
<i>Kukutana kimwili</i>	to meet bodily	367/384	95.6	Sexual act
<i>Kufanya mapenzi</i>	to make love	378/384	98.4	Sexual act
<i>Kukamuana</i>	to squeeze one another	142/384	37.0	Sexual act
<i>Kutifuana</i>	to wrestle one another	234/384	61.0	Sexual act
<i>Kutafuta watoto</i>	searching for children	314/384	81.8	Sexual act
<i>Kupasana</i>	to tear each other	201/384	52.3	Sexual act
<i>Kudonoana</i>	pecking each other	231/384	60.2	Sexual act
<i>Kuingiliana</i>	to enter one another	370/384	96.4	Sexual act
<i>Dudu</i>	Worm	120/384	31.3	Male sexual organ
<i>Jogoo</i>	Cork	355/384	92.4	Male sexual organ
<i>Mhogo wa Jang'ombe</i>	Cassava	230/384	59.9	Male sexual organ
<i>Muwa</i>	Sugarcane	299/384	77.9	Male sexual organ
<i>Ume</i>	Manhood	384/384	100	Male sexual organ
<i>Kiboko</i>	Whip	319/384	83.1	Male sexual organ
<i>Ukuni</i>	Wood	244/384	63.5	Male sexual organ
<i>Mtaimbo</i>	Crowbar	368/384	95.8	Male sexual organ
<i>Mpini</i>	the handle	240/384	62.5	Male sexual organ
<i>Mkongoyo</i>	walking stick	298/384	77.6	Male sexual organ
<i>Uke</i>	Womanhood	383/384	99.7	Female sexual organ
<i>Utamu</i>	Sweetness	157/384	40.9	Female sexual organ
<i>Tunda</i>	Fruit	222/384	57.8	Female sexual organ
<i>Mzigo</i>	Luggage	148/384	38.5	Female sexual organ
<i>'K'</i>	short form for female sexual organ	26/384	6.8	Female sexual Organ
<i>Chini</i>	Down	171/384	44.5	Female Sexual organ
<i>Kulawitiwa</i>	Buggery	382/384	99.5	Sodomy
<i>Kufanyiwa ufirauni</i>	to be harassed sexually	349/384	90.9	Sodomy
<i>Kuingiliwa kinyume na maumbile</i>	to be entered contrary to nature	364/384	94.8	Sodomy
<i>Kunajisiwa</i>	to be defiled	370/384	96.4	Sodomy
<i>Mbegu (za kiume)</i>	(male) seeds	381/384	99.2	Semen
<i>Watoto</i>	Children	242/384	63.0	Semen
<i>Mkojo mweupe</i>	white urine	139/384	36.2	Semen
<i>Mkojo mzito</i>	heavy urine	124/384	32.3	Semen
<i>Kufika kileleni</i>	to get to the peak	374/384	97.4	Orgasm
<i>Kukojoa</i>	to urinate	243/384	63.3	Orgasm
<i>Kurusha maji</i>	to throw water	176/384	45.8	Orgasm
<i>Kumaliza safari</i>	to finish the journey	374/384	97.4	Orgasm
<i>Kuridhika</i>	to get satisfied	177/384	46.1	Orgasm
<i>Kutoa wazungu</i>	to produce whitemen	187/384	48.7	Orgasm
<i>Kutoa oili</i>	to give out oil	117/384	30.5	Orgasm
<i>Jogoo kuwika</i>	rooster crowing	382/384	99.5	Erection
<i>Kusimamisha</i>	Erecting	353/384	91.9	Erection
<i>Jogoo kupanda mtungi</i>	cock up	378/384	98.4	Erection
<i>Kuwa katika siku</i>	to be on days	383/384	99.7	Menstruation
<i>Kunyesha mvua</i>	to shower rain	342/384	89.1	Menstruation
<i>Kuwa mchafu</i>	to be dirty	354/384	92.2	Menstruation
<i>Kupata wageni</i>	to be visited by strangers	372/384	96.9	Menstruation
<i>Kuwa mwezini</i>	to be on the moon	383/384	99.7	Menstruation
<i>Kuvuja</i>	to leak	327/384	85.2	Menstruation
<i>Kujisaidia</i>	to help oneself	384/384	100	Defecation
<i>Kusafisha tumbo</i>	to clean the stomach	379/384	98.7	Defecation

<i>Kunyoocha utumbo</i>	to stretch the intestine	363/384	94.5	Defecation
<i>Kutoa vyakula</i>	to eject food	197/384	51.3	Defecation
<i>Kukata gogo</i>	to cut log	168/384	43.8	Defecation
<i>Kupunguza uzito</i>	to reduce weight	352/384	91.7	Defecation
<i>Kuchimba dawa</i>	to dig up herbs	381/384	99.2	Defecation
<i>Kwenda msalani</i>	to go to the toilet	384/384	100	Defecation
<i>Kwenda chooni</i>	to go to the toilet	383/384	99.7	Defecation
<i>Kukamua utumbo</i>	to squeeze intestine	328/384	85.4	Defecation
<i>Kwenda haja kubwa</i>	to go for a long call	382/384	99.5	Defecation
<i>Kupumua</i>	to breath	373/384	97.1	Farting
<i>Kutoa hewa chafu</i>	to release dirty gas	379/384	98.7	Farting
<i>Kutoa upepo</i>	to release wind	382/384	99.5	Farting
<i>Miwaya</i>	Wires	375/384	97.7	AIDS
<i>Umeme</i>	Electricity	337/384	87.8	AIDS
<i>Ngoma</i>	Drum	364/384	94.8	AIDS
<i>Malaria ya kisasa</i>	modern malaria	360/384	93.8	AIDS
<i>Moto</i>	Fire	319/384	83.1	AIDS
<i>Kuaga dunia</i>	to leave the earth	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kuhitimisha safari ya hapa duniani</i>	to end the journey on the earth	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kuitwa na Mungu</i>	to be called by God	382/384	99.5	Death
<i>Kulala usingizi wa mauti</i>	falling asleep to death	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kuwatoka watu</i>	to leave people	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kuzima</i>	to halt	162/384	42.2	Death
<i>Kufumba macho</i>	to close eyes	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kunyamaza</i>	to keep quiet	383/384	99.7	Death
<i>Kulala</i>	to sleep	369/384	96.1	Death
<i>Kutangulia mbele za haki</i>	to go forth for justification	384/384	100	Death
<i>Kupata msiba</i>	to get tragedy	384/384	100	Death
<i>Mgonjwa amemaliza</i>	to complete (the journey)	373/384	97.1	Death
<i>Kuhitajika</i>	to be needed	168/384	43.8	Death
<i>Kufika hatma</i>	to get to the end	383/384	99.7	Death
<i>Kupumzika</i>	to rest	383/384	99.7	Death
<i>Kufariki dunia</i>	to pass away	384/384	100	Death
<i>Mwili</i>	Body	384/384	100	Dead body
<i>Mfu</i>	Corpse	384/384	100	Dead body
<i>Marehemu</i>	the deceased	384/384	100	Dead body
<i>Kuhifadhi mwili</i>	to preserve the body	384/384	100	Burial
<i>Kusindikiza</i>	to see off (the body)	383/384	99.7	Burial
<i>Kumiweka (marehemu) kwenye nyumba yake ya milele</i>	to put the body to its eternal home	382/384	99.5	Burial
<i>Kupumzisha mwili</i>	to rest the body	384/384	100	Burial
<i>Malaloni</i>	sleeping area	382/384	99.5	Grave
<i>Nyumba ya milele</i>	eternal home	296/384	77.1	Grave
<i>Mavani</i>	burial place	383/384	99.7	Grave
<i>Mwanandani</i>	an enclave in a grave	381/384	99.2	Grave
<i>Mmlungula</i>	a bribe	172/384	44.8	Bribery
<i>Takrima</i>	hospitality allowance	373/384	97.1	Bribery
<i>Ubadhirifu</i>	Embezzlement	374/384	97.4	Bribery
<i>Matumizi mabaya ya ofisi</i>	misuse of office	375/384	97.7	Bribery
<i>Ufisadi</i>	Corruption	384/384	100	Bribery
<i>Kitu kidogo</i>	a small thing	381/384	99.2	Bribery

Table one shows the tallies of each euphemism reported by the respondents. The euphemisms were later classified by taboo themes reported by Charles (2023) among Kiunguja speakers of Swahili. Table 2 presents the established ranking of euphemisms by theme.

**Table 2:** Ranking the Distribution of Euphemisms by Theme

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Mean percentage</i>	<i>Rank</i>
Dead body	100	1
Burial	99.8	2
Farting	98.4	3
Erection	96.6	4
Sodomy	95.4	5
Grave	93.9	6
Menstruation	93.8	7
Death	92.4	8
AIDS	91.4	9
Bribery	89.4	10
Defecation	87.6	11
Male sexual organ	74.4	12

Sexual act	72.73	13
Orgasm	61.3	14
Semen	57.7	15
Female sexual organ	48	16

Taking into account the figures presented in Tables 1 and 2, it is observed that "dead body", "burial", and "farting" are ranked higher in the hierarchy, while the themes of "female sexual organ", "semen", and "orgasm" are at the bottom. The following sub-sections discuss these findings.

### Dead body

The theme recorded the highest mean percentage in the use of its euphemisms, with a mean percentage of 100. This indicates that, apart from this theme being sensitive among speakers of this language, many of its speakers significantly understand the euphemistic expressions used for it. It is unsurprising for this theme to have a high mean percentage of sensitivity in this society because the issue of being dead is not talked about much. After all, almost the entire human race is afraid of the state of being dead. In some cultures, like Australian tribes, it is sternly prohibited to even utter the name of someone who has passed away (Gross, 1985). This informs that most people are hesitant about openly discussing dead bodies, making the matter highly euphemised.

### Burial

This activity is closely associated with the topic that has already been elucidated. As is the case with dead bodies, burial often frightens people. This is probably due to the ideas built on what will happen in the grave after a person is buried; furthermore, probably because once a person is buried, he stays alone and will not be seen again in the world. The thought about the state of the body after being buried is another thing that catches the attention of many people. The fear generated from these thoughts makes this issue one of the most euphemised themes in this community.

### Farting

In Table 2, the theme of "farting" also stands higher in the hierarchy of the most euphemised themes in this speech community. Although this process is prevalent biologically, it seems that the speakers of this language are still not very used to uttering this action in public using its definitive word. As is known, farting involves emitting dirty gas from the stomach through the back opening (Robertson, 2021). This gas often comes out with a foul smell, although it is not always the case. Irrespective of how this gas comes out, most people are uncomfortable talking about farting in public. Probably the biggest reason for their reluctance is the smell accompanying the act and the path this gas uses to leave the body. Thus, it is not a surprise for it to have a high mean percentage of sensitivity.

### Erection

The next theme down the hierarchy is "erection." As is known, erection involves the penis, among the male's sexual organs. Often, this act involves sexual feelings, which also have some taboo connotations in this society. Not many people like to talk openly about the issue of erection in any civilised society, let alone the Swahili-speaking society. Due to the sensitivity of the matter, even when a person feels he has erected, he looks for a way to hide so that people cannot see if he is going through such a situation. It is not astounding for the theme of "erection" to have a high mean percentage as one of the most euphemised themes in this society.

### Sodomy

This is the anal-copulation with a member of the same or opposite sex (Merriam-Webster, 2022). In many societies, the act is considered cruel and detestable. In most religious domains, it is an abomination and disgusting. This study noticed that the euphemisms used for sodomy reflected the same tone in the Swahili community. The negative regard of the act implies that Swahili speakers are more sensitive in speaking about it. This explains the higher concentration of euphemism witnessed in this theme.

### Grave

A grave (*kaburi* in Swahili) is where dead bodies are buried. The analysis in Table 2 has shown that the theme of "grave" had a high mean percentage of the use of their euphemisms. The high concentration of euphemisms suggests the high rank of the grave in the hierarchy of taboos in this society. It is the highest taboo because many people are afraid of dying. In many African societies, people are so afraid even of talking about a place where dead bodies are buried. Some people are afraid even to pass by graveyards. This also comes from the belief that the graveyards are fields of evil spirits (as captured in different genres of African literature).

## **Menstruation**

In Table 2, the theme of “menstruation” appears with a high mean percentage of the use of its euphemisms. The process involves monthly bleeding by a mature woman through her sexual organ (Njoroge & Mukhwana, 2015). Due to the manner this blood flows, and some religious beliefs, the act is discussed with great care in this community to save the face of communicators. Sometimes, due to the pain associated with this condition, people avoid talking about it explicitly. Likewise, the blood that comes out is considered impure, making speakers of this language look for dignified and respectful words for the woman during this period. The sum of all these factors makes this act very sensitive.

## **Death**

The other theme in the hierarchy is death. Although people die every day in all communities, many people still are afraid of the situation. This has prompted people to invent various words that reduce the harshness of the word that directly mentions the concept of death. When people die, they get separated from their relatives. This leads to severe emotional pain and grieving, making this issue uneasy. That is why when a person dies, mourning reigns in the community affected by the tragedy in question. In the same vein, Allan and Burridge (1991) argue that death is a "fear-based taboo" emanating from different fears, such as fear of the loss of loved ones, fear of the corruption of the body, fear of evil spirits, and fear of what comes after death. Thus, it is conceivable finding this theme among the themes ranking high in the hierarchy of euphemised themes in this society, given the emotions and fears associated with the demise of someone.

## **AIDS**

AIDS (shortened form of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is one of the most dangerous diseases the world has ever experienced. Since its occurrence, it has cost the lives of many people and has caused many families to lose their loved ones. The analysis has shown that the disease is euphemised as *ngoma* (drum), *malaria ya kisasa* (modern malaria), *miwaya* (wires) and *moto* (fire) due to its destructive nature. Due to the catastrophic nature of the disease, it is not easy even for a doctor to tell his patient that he has contracted it. That is why counseling services exist for people diagnosed with this disease (Petersen et al., 2014). Sometimes, relatives hide the cause of their sibling's death, if it is AIDS. They incriminate other illnesses as the cause of their relative's death. Therefore, it is not surprising that AIDS is one of the highly euphemised themes in this society.

## **Bribery**

Another theme in the hierarchy is "bribery." Although not seen as a serious problem in society, it is one of the inappropriate and evil issues in the society of civilised people. Regrettably, bribery is everywhere and in almost every aspect of life. Perhaps due to its outcomes in society, the issue appears in the list of themes that should not be discussed openly. Due to bribery, many qualified people have been denied access to employment while the unqualified get jobs (Kirya, 2020). Similarly, the act has caused many people's rights to be denied (Minkailou & Kone, 2021). Society has ended up getting bad leaders due to corrupt and bribery practices. Due to the direct upshots of bribery, the theme has emerged as one of the unpleasant themes in the Swahili-speaking community that most people are reluctant to talk about openly.

## **Defecation**

Another issue that appears in the hierarchy is defecation. This is a common biological process in which feces leave the body through the back opening. Although it is a normal biological process, it has certain taboo connotations in many communities, including Swahili-speaking. With that in mind, this issue has given rise to several euphemisms in an attempt to tone down the harshness associated with it. Due to the sensitivity of this act, it is usually done in a private area called *choo* (toilet), sometimes euphemised as *maliwato*. The act often happens privately when a person is alone behind closed doors. It is only in China that it can be done in a company (George, 2008). Possibly the process involved in defecating (it involves taking off clothes) and the way the excrement passes (through the back opening) make it have such taboo connotations among Swahili speakers.

## **Male sexual organ**

The male sexual organ is among the themes that people refrain from mentioning in public. This is doubtless because the organ is involved in the sexual act, which is taboo in this society. It is in this area that special clothes called pants are worn to hide this organ from being seen in any way. However, due to social changes, many people, especially young people, have become less concerned about concealing themselves and avoiding mentioning a man's genitalia in public. Most young people have been mentioning the male sexual organ openly without euphemising it due to the erosion of social values. From time immemorial, sexual organs have been mentioned in code, that is, by using euphemisms.

### **Sexual act**

A sexual act between a woman and a man is one of the themes that are not often talked about using direct terms as it is considered socially and morally insensible (Hazirdinov & Lee, 2021). Considering the unpleasantness of the act, it is often done secretly. Even for married people, it is very difficult to know when they are doing this act. This is not only happening in the Swahili-speaking community but also in other communities. However, due to social and cultural changes and interactions, it is unsurprising to hear people, especially young people, mentioning this act in public using plain language. However, this often happens in communication exchanges involving young people themselves, especially those familiar with each other, or young people with people of other ages who know each other. Nevertheless, in general, this is an act that people who respect each other refrain from talking about in public using straightforward terms. It is rare, for instance, for parents with their children to talk about this act, even using a euphemism.

### **Orgasm**

The orgasm, the act of releasing sperm after reaching the peak of sexual excitement, is not mentioned publicly, likely because it is related to other sexual acts, which are also frowned upon in many communities, including Swahili speakers. Instead, euphemisms are used to talk about this issue. Although it is close to the base of the hierarchy, this does not mean it can be pronounced without caution. As it is a matter related to sexual feelings and emotions, it should still be discussed using euphemisms to protect the face and dignity of the communicators.

### **Semen**

As they contain proteins responsible for conception, "semen" is one of the themes related to sexual activity that should be discussed with great caution. As Table 2 indicates, this theme has a low mean percentage (57.7 %), insinuating that it is a less euphemised theme in this community. However, like other themes, it should be discussed considering the values of this society so that it does not upset the communicators, which may ultimately lead to losing the face of communicators and communication breakdown.

### **Female sexual organ**

Based on the themes in this study, the analysis in Table 2 demonstrates that this theme sits at the base of the hierarchy of euphemised themes (with only a 48 mean percentage). However, being at the bottom of the hierarchy does not make it a theme that people can barely talk about without euphemising. This is one of the themes that was supposed to be discussed with great attention to maintain respect between the speakers. Due to social and cultural changes, some people, especially the young generation, sometimes use the direct term to refer to the female sexual organ. Consequently, in different societies, the theme has been overtaken by other themes like death (see Allan & Burridge, 1991) as one of the most taboo themes. However, as with other themes, this happens when the interaction involves members of the same age who know each other. Therefore, even though it is at the bottom of the hierarchy, it does not mean people can mention a woman's genitalia without using euphemisms.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study has unearthed that Swahili speakers are aware of the presence of sensitive topics in their society. The study embarked on determining the distribution of euphemisms from 16 taboo themes since no study had addressed the issue. To achieve this, the present study utilised the mean percentage of the use of euphemisms for each topic in ranking these topics in the hierarchy of sensitivity levels based on the usage of their euphemisms. As Table 2 indicates, some topics have high mean percentages of usage of their euphemisms while others have low mean percentages. Topics with high mean percentages were positioned high in the hierarchy, while those with low mean percentages were positioned at the bottom. The study shows the hierarchy of sensitive topics as dead body > burial > farting > erection > sodomy > grave > menstruation > death > AIDS > bribery > defecation > male sexual organ > Sexual intercourse > orgasm > semen > female sexual organ. This finding informs that although all these themes have taboo connotations, they differ in their sensitivity levels, as the finding reveals. However, as Table 2 indicates, the mean percentage difference in using euphemisms between one topic and another is insignificant, especially for the topics at the top of the hierarchy. This enlightens us that to ensure effective intercultural communication, it is safer to consider the correct usage of euphemisms for a specific theme. Also, given that these euphemisms have different levels of formality, it is very useful for the interlocutors to consider the overall social context to ensure harmonious interlocution. If a particular topic has even a small level of unpleasantness, it is very useful for communicators to consider the context to guarantee that interaction takes place effectively without losing one's face in the process of communicating. More attention, however, should be paid to the most taboo themes. These results are vital as they could be used to enhance communication between the native speakers of Swahili and foreigners, who are using this language in interaction, to communicate carefully, especially on most sensitive topics, to save their face during the communicative exchange, or else they will lose it (their face). Since this study also shows the euphemisms used for a particular topic, it could be a guideline for non-natives in picking and using euphemisms that suitably match a specific taboo theme. This study could also be useful in the curriculum of diplomacy colleges, especially in intercultural communication. It can guide foreigners' orientation in cultural aspects considered taboo in this community. It can inform diplomats of DOs and DON'Ts in

enhancing communication using this language. This study could also be used in the language teaching curriculum, especially regarding language change. As the data shows, there is a change in the meaning of some words when they are used in different contexts.

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