

Language of Derogation and Conceptualisations of Female Gender in Dholuo, Kenya

Likung' Agnes¹, Robert Onyango Ochieng², Leonorah Mugallah³

^{1, 2, 3}Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

ABSTRACT: Persistent use of derogatory language in everyday communication significantly contributes to the conceptualization and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, particularly within culturally rooted linguistic communities. This study examines how the Dholuo language in Kenya conceptualizes the female gender through proverbs, idioms, metaphors, and speech acts, with a view to identifying their forms, meanings, and impact. The study was guided by three objectives: (i) to categorize derogatory expressions such as proverbs, idioms, insults, and metaphors used to refer to women in the Dholuo language; (ii) to analyse the underlying conceptual metaphors, idioms and cultural contexts that inform these expressions; (iii) to evaluate the impact of linguistic expressions such as proverbs, idioms, insults, and metaphors on gender perception among Dholuo speakers. Anchored in Austin's Speech Act Theory, Searle's classification of illocutionary acts, and Grice's Theory of Implicature, the study employed a qualitative research design to ensure both breadth and depth of understanding. The population comprised Dholuo-speaking communities in Siaya County. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select one hundred (100) respondents. In contrast, purposive sampling guided the selection of fifteen (15) key informants and four (4) focus group discussions (FGDs) involving elders, women leaders, teachers, and youth. Data collection instruments included a structured open-ended questionnaire, interview guides, and FGD protocols. SPSS was used for descriptive statistical analysis, and NVivo was used to support thematic coding and the interpretation of qualitative data. Findings reveal that while many Dholuo expressions are culturally embedded, they disproportionately portray women as emotionally weak, domestically confined, or intellectually inferior. Education and religious affiliation were found to moderate how these expressions are internalized and contested. The study recommends gender-sensitive linguistic reforms, the integration of inclusive civic education, and community dialogues that question and transform harmful cultural narratives embedded in qualitative usage. These reforms are persistent for promoting gender equality within culturally rich but linguistically conservative communities.

KEYWORDS: Language, derogation, conceptualization, gender, speech act, implicature

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, a key subfield of linguistics, explores how people use language in context to perform actions and convey meaning. Globally, scholars have paid increasing attention to how language, particularly derogatory language, shapes perception and social reality. Studies by Croom (2011, 2013) describe derogatory language as purposefully insulting, often used to demean individuals or groups. For instance, Croom examines the term *nigger*, arguing that it functions to dehumanize African Americans by portraying them as lazy, unintelligent, or emotionally shallow. Roadman and Ashmore (2007) identify a wide range of derogatory expressions, including racial slurs, sexist language, and verbal bullying that reveal broader social attitudes and hierarchies.

These scholars emphasize how derogatory language is deeply embedded in social interaction and power dynamics. Research by Bilewicz and Soral (2020) and Brown (2018) focuses on the spread of hate speech via digital platforms. These studies highlight the role of online anonymity and reach in amplifying harmful language. Brown (2018) argues that the persistence of offensive digital content has reshaped societal norms, making hate speech more visible and socially tolerated. Additionally, while they acknowledge group-based discrimination, few of these studies address how such language specifically targets and affects women, particularly in intersectional contexts such as race and religion (Morales *et al.*, 2019; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). This gap presents an opportunity for the present study to explore how derogatory language in pragmatic use contributes to the negative conceptualization of the female gender, especially in non-Western contexts.

Within African contexts, derogatory language is shaped by local cultures, political structures, and colonial histories. Studies show that language use reflects deep-rooted inequalities, and it plays a role in reinforcing group hierarchies and marginalization. For instance, Gopalkrishnan (2013) argues that language exposure shapes how people view themselves and others, often leading to

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internalized inferiority or superiority. This view is echoed in Banks (2013), who notes that language used in speech or writing shapes how people understand and construct reality, and how it is linked to social control mechanisms.

In many African countries, including Kenya, language diversity presents both richness and tension. Kimotho and Nyaga (2016), Kenya's more than forty-seven ethnic groups use language not only as a tool for communication but also for asserting dominance, often at the expense of minority groups. The unrestricted use of language on social media has also led to a rise in slurs and hate speech, often targeting marginalized identities.

Locally in Kenya, empirical research acknowledges that language serves as a means of expressing cultural identity, power, and control. As Banks (2010) noted, Kenya's multiethnic composition creates a platform for examining how language functions across different communities. In practice, language is often used to authorize group hierarchies, exclude outsiders, and enforce norms. Studies have documented the use of derogatory language in political speeches, online discussions, and everyday conversations, particularly targeting women, ethnic minorities, and youth (Douglas, 2007). However, there is still limited research that explicitly connects this language to pragmatic theory, or that investigates its effects on how society conceptualizes women.

A growing concern is the rise in offensive slang, hate speech, and gender-based verbal abuse on social media platforms in Kenya. Kimotho and Nyaga (2016) While existing research captures these linguistic trends, there is a lack of empirical focus on how this language influences perceptions of the female gender and contributes to systemic marginalization (Atieno, 2019). The weakness of local research lies in its descriptive nature. Many studies observe that hate speech and slurs exist, but do not critically examine how these forms of language function pragmatically to perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, or identity disintegration.

Additionally, little is said about the intersectionality of derogatory language how women who belong to ethnic, religious, or economic minorities are especially vulnerable to verbal attacks. Given the global, regional, and local gaps identified above, the current study seeks to examine the pragmatic functions of derogatory language in shaping the conceptualization of the female gender in Kenya. Specifically, the study will investigate how language both online and offline is used to reinforce negative stereotypes, perpetuate gender-based discrimination, and influence public perception (Atieno, 2019). This study focuses on the pragmatics of derogatory speech, with attention to speech acts, context, intention, and audience reception. It draws from prior global and regional research but grounds its analysis in the local Kenyan context, where ethnic diversity and digital media use provide a complex setting for language interaction.

By applying a pragmatic and gender-sensitive lens, this study addresses critical gaps in understanding the social functions of derogatory language. It contributes to the broader field of linguistic pragmatics while offering insights that could inform policies and interventions aimed at reducing verbal gender-based discrimination in Kenya.

THEORY AND METHODS

This study adopts a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This design enables simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. It is ideal for this study because: Quantitative data provide measurable patterns of how widespread derogatory language is and how it correlates with demographic factors. While the Qualitative data uncover deep meanings and context, allowing exploration of implicit gender ideologies embedded in Dholuo expressions. This mixed-methods research design blends qualitative and quantitative approaches. It incorporates the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative methods and gives room for multiple perspectives and research lenses (Shorten & Smith, 2017).

The study was conducted in Dholuo-speaking county in Kenya precisely in Siaya. This area is rich in traditional linguistic and cultural expressions, making it ideal for examining how language reflects and reinforces gender conceptualisation. This area was selected due to its rich linguistic and cultural heritage, which provides a fertile ground for examining gender-related language use. The choice of this region also ensures access to a diverse population of native Dholuo speakers, facilitating a robust data collection process (Ochieng, 2021).

The target population comprised Dholuo-speaking adults aged 18 years and above, including: elders and cultural custodians, youth and students, teachers and clergy, men and women from various religious and educational backgrounds. This population was selected because they regularly use, interpret, and transmit cultural and linguistic content that may contain derogatory gender expressions. The target population for this study is drawn from Siaya County in western Kenya, a region predominantly inhabited by the Luo ethnic group. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, Siaya County had a population of 993,183, up from 842,304 in 2009. Projections estimated the population would reach approximately 1,059,458 by 2023, reflecting a steady demographic growth (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2019). This population is socio-linguistically rich and provides a fertile ground for examining the conceptualization of the female gender within the Dholuo language.

The study specifically targeted adult and youth populations, including both males and females, who are either native speakers or fluent users of Dholuo. The participants included elderly men and women (aged 60 and above) and younger adults (aged 18–35) to ensure intergenerational perspectives on the use and interpretation of gendered derogatory language in Dholuo. The selection of both male and female participants was designed to capture gendered perceptions and usage across demographic lines. Additionally, the population was chosen for its linguistic authenticity, as most residents use Dholuo as their primary or co-primary

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language. This diverse linguistic and generational representation was crucial in generating insights into how derogatory language toward the female gender is constructed, perceived, and transmitted within Luo society.

The sample size for this study consisted of one hundred (100) participants. This number is considered sufficient for qualitative data collection within the constraints of time, logistics, and available resources. This sample was equally distributed between 50 males and 50 females to allow for balanced gender representation and comparative analysis across sex-based perceptions of derogatory language use in the Dholuo context. According to Ogula (2005) and Orodho (2002), a sample size of 100 is adequate for studies of this nature when purposive and stratified random sampling strategies are employed effectively. Pattern (2002) also notes that the appropriateness of sample size in qualitative research is determined by the depth and richness of the data but not the number of participants. To ensure representation across relevant demographic groups, stratified random sampling was employed. The population was first divided into meaningful strata based on age (youth vs. elderly) and gender (male vs. female). This yielded four strata: (1) elderly males, (2) elderly females, (3) young males, and (4) young females. From each of these subgroups, participants were randomly selected using a simple lottery method, ensuring that each individual within a stratum had an equal chance of selection. This approach allowed for intergenerational and gender-sensitive comparisons of language use and perception. Within each stratum, participants were randomly selected using a lottery method, allowing each eligible individual an equal chance of selection. This ensured both representativeness and credibility of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The stratified design was also informed by the socio-linguistic differences in how gendered language is conceptualized and used among different demographic groups in the Luo community.

The primary data collection instruments used in this study included: semi-structured interviews, semi-structured guide containing open-ended questions, audio recordings and observation checklists. A pilot study was conducted in Nyando sub-county in Kisumu County involving 8 participants (2 from each stratum) to pre-test the clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity of the interview guide and FGD prompts. Feedback from the pilot phase led to the rewording of ambiguous questions and the addition of new prompts to address overlooked issues such as contextual usage in marriage and proverbs.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data followed the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were coded using NVivo software into themes such as speech acts of exclusion or control, implicatures implying inferiority, resistance, or reinterpretation of expressions, data from FGDs, interviews, and content analysis were triangulated to enhance validity. Descriptive statistics were used in the analysis of quantitative data.

Speech Act Theory, as advanced by Searle (2007), and Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) have been employed in the analysis of data. Grice's CP is broken down into four maxims: quantity, quality, relation and manner. Originated by Austin (1962) and further advanced by Searle (2007), it focuses on language performance actions as described in locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary terms. It also includes Searle's five types of illocutionary acts – assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarative – and emphasizes the importance of context and social norms for a successful utterance.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are aligned with three specific objectives, namely: (1) to categorize derogatory expressions used to refer to women in Dholuo, (2) to analyse the underlying conceptual metaphors and cultural contexts that inform these expressions, and (3) to evaluate the impact of such linguistic expressions on gender perception among Dholuo speakers. The results were derived from qualitative data sources.

Identifying and Categorizing Derogatory Expressions in Dholuo

Qualitative data showed that 89% of respondents agreed that men frequently use derogatory language targeting women, with expressions such as "nyako mar piny" (a loose village girl), "dhako ma onge gi chike" (a woman without rules), "Nyar orudo" (a local woman), and 'nyar agweng' (local woman) commonly cited. These expressions were qualitatively categorized under four major thematic domains: sexual immorality, economic dependence, domestic failure and sex stigma.

To depict women as sexually immoral, terms like 'Nyako ma wang'e tar' (prostitute), "oodho" (prostitute), and "nyako ma ok jaratiro" (immoral girl) nyar pap (immoral woman) were used. These terms reflect control over female sexuality and stigmatize perceived sexual independence. These findings are in line with Adegbite and Moyo (2021), who identified common Hausa expressions such as karuwa (prostitute) and banza (useless woman), used to control and stigmatize female agency. On the same note, Cameron (2020) highlights how in English and other Indo-European languages, gendered slurs like "slut" or "bitch" objectify and devalue women. However, despite the use of these sexually immoral terms to portray women as sexually immoral in society, these expressions are also used in the Luo community to tame and control some behaviors that society terms as taboos. Hence, these expressions, when used in songs and sayings, serve as a warning towards unwanted behavior or conduct,

These utterances in Dholuo, according to speech act theory, ('oodho, thako ma wang'e tar, nyar pap') convey information but also perform the actions of stigmatization and portraying women as sexually immoral is perlocutionary.

Economic dependence phrases such as "dhako onge pesa" and "dhako ma onge gi pesa" (woman without money) imply that women are financial burdens, reducing their perceived societal value "Pesa dhako tin" (woman has no money). This expression

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conveys more meaning than the speaker's intended meaning: first, it means that women are poor and should rely on men for sustainability; second, it implies that women are financially defenseless. Similarly, Ndung'u (2019) states that derogatory terms in Luhya, Kalenjin, and Maasai languages carry themes of female inadequacy, laziness, or over-dependence. However, on some occasions, especially when used by old women towards their daughters or in-laws, they are meant to make women work hard and be independent to avoid being intimidated by men. Nevertheless, the frequent use of these phrases by men harms women, lowers their self esteem and portrays them as financially dependent.

To portray women as domestic failures, expressions like "min keko, lelo, akoko" (quarrelsome wife) and "dhako ma oketo chiemo e lweny" (one who stirs food in war), nyar bayo (unsettled woman), dhako ma onge chike, (a woman without rule) were employed. They suggest that women are incapable of maintaining peace and order at home. These terms also depict moral deficiency and when women are labeled with these terms, they imply a lack of virtue, wisdom, or emotional control, and reinforce patriarchal moral standards (perlocutionary act).

These four categories resonate with the works of Owiti (2021) and Otieno & Achieng (2023), who highlighted how everyday Dholuo speech reflects rigid gender roles and sociocultural expectations. According to Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962), such utterances are not merely descriptive but perform illocutionary acts—they serve as tools for reinforcing societal norms and expectations about gender. Even though at times these Dholuo expressions are used on women to make them work hard and take their roles and responsibilities seriously, and to warn against some undesired behavior in society, for the most part, they are used to castigate women, rendering them weak and marginalized. Besides, these phrases are used more frequently by men to maintain the societal patriarchal status.

Conceptual Metaphors and Cultural Contexts

The study found strong evidence that Dholuo employs culturally embedded conceptual metaphors that reinforce gender bias. For example, 80% of participants confirmed that women are often likened to objects or animals. Phrases such as "dhako nyar bet" (woman of the house) and "nyako ma ok nyal bedo dhiang" (a girl not worth a cow) metaphorically reduce women to domestic commodities or objects of trade. 'Dhako mwandu' (a woman is wealth) dhako kendo' (a woman is linked to kitchen and cooking), 'dhako kwer pur' These metaphors conform with Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) conceptual metaphors like "WOMAN IS COMMODITY" and "WOMAN IS OBJECT," which frame women in terms of possession, utility, and dependence. These findings are further supported by Awuor and Odhiambo (2023), who noted the normalization of such metaphors through oral traditions and communal rites.

A commonly used Dholuo metaphor, "*Dhako mwandu*" (a woman is wealth), exemplifies the conceptual metaphor **A WOMAN IS AN ECONOMIC ASSET**. This metaphor appears to uphold the value of women by equating them with wealth. Similarly, "*Dhako malong'o en dhiang*" (a good woman is a cow) complements this economic lens framing, maintaining that a well-behaved, honored, and respectable woman brings an essential dowry and, more profoundly, uplifts her family status in terms of respect. Within the cultural context, these metaphors reflect the role of marriage as a transaction where a woman's worth is perceived in the way she contributes to the social, familial wealth, and how she maintains the social standard. However, when these metaphors are evaluated more critically, an underlying objectification is revealed. This pervasively reduces women to a perceived economic and reproductive utility within a patriarchal system. Rather than being celebrated as autonomous individuals, women are framed as commodities exchanged through marriage, reinforcing gender inequality.

More explicitly, metaphors such as "*Dhako oluth kuon, kendo, dhiang*" (a woman is a cooking stick, hearth, or cow) employ the conceptual metaphor **A WOMAN IS A DOMESTIC OBJECT OR ANIMAL**. These expressions situate women firmly within domestic and reproductive roles. By equating women with kitchen tools or livestock, the language strips them of agency and identity, reflecting a cultural norm that confines women to household duties and positions of subservience. These metaphors naturalize gender roles, making them appear inherent or biologically determined rather than socially constructed.

Such metaphors, therefore, are not merely figurative language; however, they act as societal or cultural norms to shape how women are viewed, perceived, treated, and expected to conduct themselves or behave in a manner that society accepts. However, the use of this derogatory Dholuo metaphoric language not only influences social expectations but also reduces women's role to domestic spaces and reinforces their dependence on male authority.

The expressions "*Dhako mwandu*" (a woman is wealth), 'dhako malong'o en dhiang' (a woman is a dowry) can show compliment or praise, in alignment with the maxim of **quality** (speak the truth). However, these expressions imply different meanings in a cultural context; the implicature is that a woman's worth is economic. The speaker may not clearly say that a woman is to be married off for dowry, but that is what is implied. Besides, this flouts the maxim of relation, as it seems to be more of a praise but it is actually about commodity.

Similarly, the metaphor "*Dhako oluth kuon*" (a woman is a cooking stick) carries implied assumptions about gender roles. The implicature is that the woman's primary domestic role of cooking, cleaning, taking care of the children, and serving suggests that a woman's primary function is domestic—cooking, cleaning and serving. Although not explicitly stated, the utterance reinforces gender norms by implying that deviation from these roles is unnatural or unacceptable. Such implicatures, often unchallenged in

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everyday speech, subtly uphold patriarchal expectations. “*Dhako malong’o en dhiang’*” (a good woman is a cow), can be analysed using speech act theory as developed by Austin (1962) and expanded by Searle (1969) in three levels:

- **Locutionary:** The literal claim equates a good woman with a cow.
- **Illocutionary:** The speaker intends to **praise** women who conform to domestic and submissive ideals.
- **Perlocutionary:** The audience may internalize this metaphor as a cultural norm, shaping expectations and reinforcing the idea that women are valuable only when they behave “properly.”

Over time, repeated use of such metaphors makes them **performative**; they do not just describe reality, they **create** and **maintain** it. While some metaphors may seem to praise or honor women (“*Dhako mwandu*”), they often carry **implicatures** that reduce women to economic assets. Others, such as “*Dhako oluth kuon*”, use metaphor and indirect speech to reinforce traditional gender roles without overtly stating them. These metaphors function as **indirect speech acts** that both reflect and perform cultural expectations, subtly influencing societal norms about femininity and domesticity.

Additionally, Grice’s Theory of Conversational Implicature (1991) was instrumental in interpreting how seemingly benign statements carried hidden derogatory meanings. For instance, “nyako ma odoko gi nyathi mang’eny” (a woman with many children) may appear neutral but, in context, implies moral looseness or lack of self-control. These findings validate Grice’s assertion that meaning often lies in what is culturally implied rather than explicitly stated.

Impact of Derogatory Language on Gender Perception

The study’s findings revealed that derogatory language significantly affects how women are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Key statistics included: 54.3% of respondents strongly agreed that derogatory language enhances prejudice. 50% believed such language devalues women’s dignity. 80% acknowledged that it leads to the marginalization of women. 42.4% confirmed that language promotes a rigid social hierarchy privileging men.

Furthermore, 31.5% strongly agreed and 55.4% agreed that offensive slurs are used against those considered of low status, primarily women. Many respondents noted emotional and psychological effects, including feelings of social exclusion and diminished self-worth. These outcomes strongly support Cameron (2020) and Holmes and Schnurr (2020), who describe language as a mechanism of gendered social control. In the Dholuo context, women internalize societal messages that they are inferior or secondary, which negatively influences their access to leadership, education, and personal agency. This supports Bar-Tal and Hammack’s (2012) theory that language is a tool of delegitimization used to maintain unequal power structures.

The use of derogatory slurs on men also indicates a deep gender perception that reinforces traditional roles and perceptions. “*Dichuo ma nya dhako*” (a man with a woman’s characteristic) is a slur used to criticize men who are perceived as weak and do not portray expected masculine behavior. Speech act theory, this slur ‘*dichuo manya dhako*’, has a perlocutionary act of portraying a man as weak, effeminate, and may not be incapable of protecting his family. On the same note, ‘*dhako*’ (woman) carries a negative connotation that one is inferior and has a weak character, implying the notion that women must be protected. Therefore, the derogatory slurs in Dholuo not only have a negative impact on women. As such, these slurs, when applied to men, serve not only to demean women indirectly but also to intimidate men by equating them with perceived feminine weaknesses. The result is a reinforcement of gender stereotypes and a broader social devaluation of anyone associated with the terms. Therefore, these slurs have a deeply negative impact on individuals regardless of gender, shaping behavior through intimidation and social stigma.

Education, age, and religious belief emerged as moderating factors. Educated respondents and those with strong religious teachings were less likely to endorse or perpetuate derogatory language, pointing to potential areas for linguistic and cultural intervention. Uneducated or semi-literate respondents did not consider the terms derogatory. Instead, they appeared to defend terms associated with women as culturally instigated. Young respondents, between 18 and 29, were particularly uncomfortable with the usage of these terms. They regarded those who use them as conservative and retrogressive.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Dholuo language encodes a wide range of derogatory expressions that contribute to the negative conceptualization of the female gender. These expressions function not only as descriptions but as social tools for enforcing gender roles, perpetuating stereotypes, and legitimizing inequality. Findings align with Austin’s Speech Act Theory and Grice’s Theory of Implicature in demonstrating how language acts upon social realities. The use of conceptual metaphors, such as “WOMAN IS COMMODITY,” further affirms that linguistic patterns reflect deeper cultural ideologies. This study highlights the significant emotional, psychological, and social impacts of such language, and identifies moderating factors education, age, and religion that can influence perceptions.

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