

CONCEPTUALIZING LOVE AS A FORCE IN MUGITHI SONGS: A COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS APPROACH

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Abstract

Mugithi songs play an important role in Gikùyù cultural preservation by conveying social meanings through metaphorical expression. Despite this linguistic richness, limited research has examined metaphors of love conceptualized as a force in mugithi songs from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Most studies on Kenyan music have focused on socio-cultural and historical concerns, leaving cognitive analyses underexplored. Against this backdrop, this study employed the principle of conceptual mappings within Cognitive Linguistics to analyse metaphors of love as a force in mugithi songs. The study adopted a descriptive research design. Primary data were collected from 44 purposively sampled Gikùyù native speakers selected by gender and age. An interview schedule elicited interpretations of metaphorical expressions in the songs. The songs were also purposively sampled based on richness in metaphoricality. The Metaphor Identification Procedure *Vrije Universiteit* (MIPVU) was used to identify metaphors. The identified metaphors were translated into English and presented in tabular form. Eight metaphors conceptualizing love as a force were identified. The findings reveal that the abstract emotion of love is understood through concrete domains. The study concludes that mugithi songs reflect structured cognitive patterns in conceptualization of love and contributes to cognitive linguistics and Gikùyù music discourse.

Key Words: Mugithi songs; Gikùyù; Cognitive Linguistics; Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Love as a force.

Introduction

Mugithi music is a popular and influential genre among the Gikùyù people of Kenya's central region. The term mugithi, meaning *train*, refers both to the musical style and to a distinctive dance in which participants move rhythmically while holding one another by the hips in a circular formation (Njogu & Maupeu, 2007). According to Mutonya (2014), mugithi performances originated from prayer night vigils, where gospel songs were sung collectively, but were later adapted into secular contexts through lyrical modification and reinterpretation. A case in point is the song *Kuma Ndaiga Mirigo Thii*, which originally articulated spiritual joy but was later reworked by the artist Mike Murimi to express secular romantic advances. Within popular discourse, particularly among Gikùyù youth, the term *mirigo* (burdens) has acquired euphemistic meanings, including reference to genitalia, demonstrating the genre's creative and symbolic use of language. Such usage

reflects a broader pattern in Kenyan popular music where metaphor, symbolism, and idiomatic expressions are employed to communicate sensitive themes indirectly while resonating with shared cultural knowledge (Joel Atuti Osubo & Charles Kebaya, 2023). Over time, mugithi songs have continued to perform important social and communicative functions within the Gikùyù community. Notably, love emerges as a dominant thematic concern in this genre and is frequently articulated through rich and imaginative metaphorical expressions.

In Mugithi songs, love is often conveyed through vivid and embodied imagery that enables abstract emotions to be experienced concretely by listeners. These songs articulate a range of sentiments, including affection, desire, courtship, and heartbreak, thereby capturing the emotional complexity of romantic relationships. Mugithi artists frequently employ metaphors as powerful linguistic resources that resonate with audiences

and enhance the expressive quality of their music. Such metaphors reflect culturally shared understandings of love within the Gikùyù community and provide a framework through which abstract emotions can be interpreted in more tangible terms, linking language, cognition, and social experience. As Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. (2017) argues, metaphor functions as a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which meaning is structured and understood. Its pervasive use in Mugithi songs demonstrates the role of creative language in shaping listeners' perceptions and emotional engagement, extending beyond mere artistic expression into performance practices and oral traditions.

Despite their ubiquity, metaphors are often used unconsciously and become naturalized in everyday language, which increases the risk of misinterpretation or oversimplification, particularly in relatively underexplored domains such as Kenyan popular music. Recent scholarship in Cognitive Linguistics highlights that metaphors encode cultural models and embodied experiences, making them essential for understanding how emotions are conceptualized across contexts (Vyvyan Evans, 2019; Zoltán Kövecses, 2020). This study is anchored within the Cognitive Linguistics paradigm and guided by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which explains how abstract domains such as love are structured through experiential domains like force and containment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Primary data were drawn from selected Mugithi love songs performed in Gikùyù, where love (*wendo*) reflects both individual emotion and broader social relationships. This underscores the need for a systematic, theoretically grounded analysis of metaphor to uncover the cognitive and cultural conceptualizations of love in Mugithi musical discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The study was based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) whose main proponents are Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The CMT was developed by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*. CMT posits that metaphor operates at the level of thought and shapes how individual conceptualise and reason

about the world. According to Murimi and Ong'onda (2021), metaphors are used to map certain aspects of the Source Domain onto the Target Domain, to produce a new understanding of that target domain.

One of the fundamental tenets of CMT examines the underlying structure of metaphorical mapping processes. This mapping has a three-part structure: two endpoints (the source and target domain) and a bridge between them (the mapping). The conceptual mapping is a systematic correspondence between elements of the SD and the TD (Gathigia, Orwenjo and Ndung'u, 2018). Another tenet of CMT is that abstract concepts are structured and interpreted through concrete experiences thereby enhancing understanding. In the metaphor LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE, the source domain *force* is mapped onto the target domain *love*. This mapping demonstrates how conceptual metaphors structure our understanding of abstract experiences.

CMT was applied in the discussion of conceptualizing LOVE AS A FORCE through the mapping of the source domain onto the target domain in mugithi songs. CMT provided a principled framework for explaining why force imagery was repeatedly used to describe love and how such imagery reflected both embodied cognition and culturally shared understandings within the Gikùyù community.

Methodology

This study used a descriptive research design to analyse metaphors of love as a force in Mugithi songs. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), a descriptive research design is intended to obtain information about existing phenomena and to draw valid conclusions from the facts discussed. It aims to accurately and systematically describe a phenomenon or a population as it is. The study identified metaphorical expressions in Mugithi songs using the Metaphor Identification Procedure *Vrije Universiteit* (MIPVU). In addition, the conceptual mappings of these metaphors were described using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT).

The study targeted native speakers of Gikùyù of varying gender and age. Gender and age were considered significant variables because they

influence how metaphorical expressions are interpreted and understood. Gender was treated as important because, as Huma (2010) explains, individuals often form different impressions of abstract concepts based on their gender. Likewise, Koller and Semino (2009) observe that gender functions as a lens through which people interpret and respond to cultural phenomena. In this study, the sample included 44 participants, with 22 males and 22 females, aged between 18–34 and 35 years and above. The sample size aligns with Yin (2011), who argues that 42–50 participants facilitate the generation of sufficient data for thick and rich description in a descriptive study.

Purposive sampling was used to select Mugithi songs that contained rich metaphorical expressions related to love. Eight love metaphors were collected through interviews and audio recordings. The interview schedule included semi-structured questions, which were administered to all 44 participants. Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate because they allow the researcher to explore participants' responses in depth (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Participants' responses were recorded using an audio recorder and subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

The identified metaphors were then categorised into conceptual mappings using CMT and verified with MIPVU. In CMT, a metaphor involves two conceptual domains: a concrete source domain (SD) and an abstract target domain (TD). In this study, any metaphorical expression that systematically mapped human or physical traits (SD) onto the abstract concept of love (TD) was identified as a conceptual metaphor. The identification process involved carefully reviewing the lyrics and interview data to detect instances where love was portrayed as exerting force, influencing emotions, or acting upon individuals.

Once the metaphors were identified, they were mapped to their respective conceptual domains, linking the human-like or physical SD to the abstract TD of love. This mapping revealed how speakers of Gikùyù conceptualize love as a physical force that acts upon individuals. All eight expressions analyzed were marked as conceptual

metaphors based on the presence of systematic correspondences between the SD and TD. The use of CMT was valuable for understanding how abstract concepts such as love are conceptualized through concrete experiences, which, according to Kövecses (2010), is essential for analyzing how metaphors reflect cultural cognition. The identified metaphors were subsequently interpreted through conceptual mappings to uncover underlying cognitive and cultural structures.

Research Findings

Eight metaphors conceptualising love as a force in selected Mugithi songs were identified. Force metaphors represent emotions as exerting influence that is often beyond human control. They allow abstract experiences to be understood in terms of more familiar physical or natural phenomena. Of the eight metaphors, two were categorised as tangible physical force metaphors, while six were classified as intangible force metaphors. Tangible force metaphors are drawn from concrete and material sources that can be seen or touched. Intangible force metaphors, on the other hand, represent abstract or natural forces that are invisible but perceptible through their effects.

These metaphors were subjected to analysis using Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). CMT provides a framework in which one concept, the target domain (TD), is metaphorically structured in terms of another, the source domain (SD). This enables abstract concepts, such as love, to be understood through more familiar experiences. In this study, LOVE served as the TD, and a tangible or intangible force served as the SD. Under the general metaphor EMOTIONS ARE FORCES (Perović & Vuković-Stamatović, 2021), love is conceptualized as a force, akin to magnetism, gravity, or electricity, which, according to (Abdullah, 2016), humans find difficult to resist. Tangible force metaphors conceptualize love through material objects, while intangible force metaphors, such as wind, represent natural or abstract forces, highlighting love's invisible yet powerful influence. The next section presents a discussion on tangible force metaphors.

Tangible Force Metaphors in Mugithi Songs.

Love is described as a physical force. Physical things are described as tangible and concrete, conceptualizing love to be understood in terms of tangible objects. Since the term physical also relates to objects that can be touched or felt, this

metaphor implies that love involves interaction between people (Kövecses, 2010). Table 1.0 displays tangible force Metaphors in mugithi songs

Table 1.0 Tangible Force Metaphors in Mugithi Songs

NO	Gikùyù	Gloss
1	<i>Wendo ùrathima ta dawa</i>	Measure love like medicine
2	<i>Wendo wì ngoro gùkìra mbeça</i>	Love is more valuable than money

The metaphors are discussed based on how they appear in table 1.0 above. In metaphor (1) above, the medical metaphor of medicine is employed to conceptualize love. This suggests that love functions as a remedy that heals emotional emptiness or distress. Therefore:

(1) *Wendo ùrathima ta dawa* - (Measure love like medicine).

The metaphor *Wendo ùrathima ta dawa* (Measure love like medicine) conceptualizes love as a controlled dosage, where medicine corresponds to the lover’s cautious regulation of affection. From the perspective of Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), this expression instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS MEDICINE, in which elements from the concrete source domain (SD) of medicine are mapped onto the abstract target domain (TD) of love. Within this mapping, medicine corresponds to love, dosage to emotional intensity, and overdose to excessive affection that results in emotional harm. This framing suggests that love, like medicine, has the capacity to heal. However, when taken in excess, it can also cause harm and therefore must be rationed to prevent betrayal or emotional overdose.

This interpretation extends Zoltán Kövecses (2020), who argues that emotion metaphors arise from embodied experience, by showing how such experiences are further shaped by moral and social expectations. Similarly, Charteris-Black (2017) notes that medical metaphors often encode strategies for managing vulnerability, a pattern clearly evident in this context. Therefore, metaphor (1) portrays love as both a remedy for emotional emptiness and a potential threat if indulged without restraint.

Love is presented as a tangible thing that is more valuable. Valuable is something important or worth a lot of money. Thus:

(2) *Wendo wì ngoro gùkìra mbeça* – (Love is expensive than money).

Metaphor (2) conceptualizes love in terms of economic value. It portrays it as something that surpasses money in worth. From the perspective of CMT, this expression instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS MONEY/WEALTH, in which elements from the SD of money are mapped onto the abstract TD of love. Within this mapping, money corresponds to value, expenditure, and limitation, while love corresponds to an abstract emotional experience that exceeds material worth. As Li and Chi (2020) observe, when “valuable” is applied to love, the expression signals that the object of love is deeply treasured and highly esteemed. This framing presents love as a powerful force that outweighs material wealth and dominates monetary value. Therefore, love is depicted as priceless and more “expensive” than money, in the sense that it cannot be bought. Instead, it demands continuous investment of time, effort, and emotional commitment to sustain the relationship.

Intangible Force Metaphors in Mugithi Songs.

Intangible forces are neither be seen nor touched, such as love. They are compared to natural forces like wind to express their invisible yet powerful influence. Table 1.1 below displays metaphors denoting intangible force metaphors in mugithi songs.

Table 1.2 Intangible Force Metaphors in Mugithi Songs

NO.	GIKUYU	GLOSS
1	<i>Wendo nì ùtumumu</i>	love is blindness
2	<i>Wendo nì njamba</i>	Love is bravery
3	<i>Wendo ndùrì guoya</i>	Love does not have fear
4	<i>Wendo nì ùrimu</i>	Love is foolishness
5	<i>Wendo nì mùrimù ùtakoragwo na ndawa</i>	Love is disease that doesn't have medicine
6	<i>Korwo wendo nì riera ingiakwire tene</i>	If love is air, I'd be long dead

Metaphors of love as intangible forces are assigned numbers according to how they appear in table 1.1 above. Love is conceptualized using characteristics associated with the physical state of *ùtumumu* (blindness), as illustrated in metaphor (1). This metaphor portrays a person in love as unable to perceive faults, overlook red flags, and ignore potential dangers in the lover. Therefore: (1) *Wendo nì ùtumumu* – (love is blindness).

In Metaphor (1) above, love is conceptualized as *ùtumumu* (blindness). This makes love the target domain (TD) and *ùtumumu* (blindness) the source domain (SD) in line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). One key conceptual mapping between the SD and the TD is that lack of physical sight corresponds to emotional blindness. This conceptual mapping highlights how the lack of physical sight in blindness corresponds to impaired emotional judgment and reduced rational control in romantic involvement. This metaphor, thus, portrays love as a force that obscures perception and reason which can lead individuals to act without full awareness of potential consequences. Metaphor (1) in Table 1.1 was obtained from Wanja Asali's mugithi song *Wendo ndùrì mùndũ mùùgi* (love doesn't have a wise person). Wanja Asali is a famous Mugithi artist whose songs revolve around the theme of love. In her song, Wanja Asali compares love to blindness.

This illustrates how excessive love can obscure one's ability to "see" clearly and to ignore warning signs that would normally provoke concern. In this way, a person's reasoning becomes clouded by intense passion rendering them blind to potential pitfalls. Blind literally refers to the inability to see and is metaphorically used to refer to the failure to act right and make sound judgment. Thus, when it is said that LOVE IS BLIND, it suggests that the lover becomes so

overwhelmed by emotion that they lose focus and clear judgment.

In the metaphors below, love is conceptualized as something that cannot easily be understood or explained.

(2) *Wendo nì njamba* – (Love is a warrior (bravery)),

(3) *Wendo nì ndùrì guoya* – (Love is fearless).

Metaphors (2) and (3) above conceptualize love as a powerful and courageous force. In these metaphors, love functions as the target domain (TD), while *njamba* (warrior/bravery) and *ndùrì guoya* (fearlessness) serve as the source domains (SDs). The conceptual mappings show that a warrior corresponds to the lover who confronts emotional challenges, bravery corresponds to the willingness to endure risk and sacrifice, and fearlessness corresponds to confidence and resolve in expressing affection. These mappings emphasize love as an active force that demands strength, resilience, and bold commitment.

On the other hand, the metaphors *Wendo nì njamba* (love is a warrior) and *Wendo nì ndùrì guoya* (love is fearless) frame love as daring and resolute rather than passive. Here, love (TD) is understood through the SDs of bravery and fearlessness which highlight emotional risk-taking and steadfastness in the face of uncertainty. As Kövecses (2010) observes, such metaphors reflect culturally shared models in which love is conceptualized as a courageous endeavor that requires endurance and confidence. This aligns with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) view that conceptual metaphors structure abstract experiences like love in terms of more concrete and embodied domains.

Love is presented as an emotional experience that can lead individuals to act irrationally, often

opposing wise judgment. Thus:

(4) *Wendo nita ūrimū* – (Love is foolishness).

Metaphor (4) above was collected from Samidoh's humorous song *Wendo na ūrimū*. In the song, the musician suggests that love and foolishness are born of the same mother, as love can make an individual vulnerable to betrayal and disappointment. One may love wholeheartedly, only to be taken for granted with no reciprocation. From the perspective of CMT, this expression instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS FOOLISHNESS, in which elements from the SD of foolishness are mapped onto the TD of love. Within this mapping, a fool corresponds to a lover who acts without logic, ignoring consequences, trusting too much, and enduring pain blindly.

Samidoh therefore portrays love as inseparable from foolishness, hence, highlighting its power to overwhelm reason and render individuals emotionally vulnerable. This portrayal aligns with CMT, which explains how abstract emotions are understood through familiar experiential domains. As Litovkina (2024) observes, such mappings underscore how love can drive behaviors that defy rationality. This reflects its dual nature as both compelling and potentially hazardous.

In metaphor (5) below, love is portrayed as a condition that can negatively affect an individual. It disrupts normal emotional and physical functioning. Therefore:

(5) *Wendo nì m̀rim̀* – (Love is a disease).

Metaphor (5) conceptualizes love as a disruptive condition that alters normal functioning. From the perspective of CMT, this expression instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS DISEASE, in which elements from the SD of disease are mapped onto the TD of love. Within this mapping, a sick person corresponds to a lover experiencing uncontrollable emotional and physical changes, while symptoms such as restlessness and pain correspond to the destabilizing effects of love.

As Kövecses (2010) explains, metaphors of emotion often draw from embodied experiences. In this case, sickness often serves as a powerful source domain for expressing loss of control. Similarly, Littlemore and Tagg (2018) note that disease metaphors capture the involuntary and overwhelming nature of emotions. Therefore,

Wendo nì m̀rim̀ communicates the consuming intensity of love and its capacity to overwhelm an individual. It also emphasizes that love, like sickness, can destabilize well-being by producing anxiety and emotional pain.

Metaphor (6) below challenges the idea that love is necessary for survival. It implies that love is not as essential as air, since one can live without it. Therefore:

(6) *Korwo wendo nì riera ingiakwire tene* – (If love is air, I'd be long dead).

Metaphor (6) is utilized by Joseph Gatutura, popularly known as Machete the King, in the Mugithi song *Korwo Wendo Ni Riera*. From the viewpoint of CMT, this expression instantiates the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS NON-ESSENTIAL. In this mapping, elements from the SD of air, which is essential for life, are projected onto the TD of love that are framed as non-essential and inconsistent. Within this mapping, air corresponds to a guaranteed and life-sustaining force. Love, on the other hand, corresponds to a powerful yet unreliable emotional experience that cannot be depended upon for stability or continuity.

Here, the singer resists the idealized notion of love as a life-giving force, instead portraying it as selective and inconsistent. Cameron and Maslen (2019) argue that metaphors of emotion often function as discursive tools through which speakers negotiate power and vulnerability in relationships. In this sense, *Korwo wendo nì riera ingiakwire tene* communicates disillusionment, hence, framing love as secondary to survival and challenging its romanticized indispensability.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU) is a reliable tool for identifying metaphors in selected mugithi songs for study. This resonates with Steen's et al. (2010) claim that MIPVU provides analytical procedures that researchers follow for metaphor identification. The study also concludes that mugithi songs systematically employ conceptual metaphors to portray love as a force, hence, revealing structured cognitive patterns through which abstract

emotions are understood in terms of more concrete experiences. Additionally, the metaphors in selected Mugithi songs reveal the dual nature of love. They show its capacity to inspire courage, passion, and attachment, while also producing vulnerability, irrationality, and emotional instability. This demonstrates how Gikùyù cultural expressions encode both the power and the risks inherent in romantic experience.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that researchers studying metaphorical language in music continue to employ the Metaphor Identification Procedure *Vrije Universiteit* (MIPVU). This tool provides a systematic and reliable framework for identifying and analyzing conceptual metaphors. It is resourceful in ensuring that interpretations are

both consistent and replicable across different contexts and musical genres. Its use can enhance the rigor of metaphor studies and allow for more precise cross-cultural comparisons.

Additionally, it is recommended that Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) be used to guide the analysis of metaphorical expressions in music. By mapping abstract concepts such as love onto concrete and embodied experiences, CMT facilitates a deeper understanding of the cognitive and cultural processes underlying metaphorical language. Furthermore, documenting and analyzing these metaphors can contribute to the preservation of Gikùyù linguistic and cultural heritage. They also provide valuable reference material for future studies and for the development of a comprehensive Gikùyù dictionary of metaphors

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