

Semantic Structure of Kĩtharaka Idiomatic Expressions

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are an important part of language because they convey meanings that often extend beyond the literal meanings of their constituent words and reflect speakers' cultural experiences and conceptualizations. This study examined the semantic structure of Kĩtharaka idiomatic expressions from a Cognitive Linguistic perspective. The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design and collected data from 20 native speakers of Kĩtharaka purposively selected and supplemented through snowball sampling. Additional data were obtained through eight focus group discussions involving 40 participants. A total of 37 idiomatic expressions were identified and analyzed thematically based on their semantic structures and conceptual motivations. The findings indicate that Kĩtharaka idiomatic expressions are largely structured through conceptual metaphors, embodied experiences, cultural knowledge, and conventionalized associations between linguistic forms and meanings. The expressions represent domains such as emotions, human behaviour, social relations, experiences, and physical conditions, demonstrating that their meanings are shaped by both bodily experiences and the cultural environment of the Tharaka community. The study concludes that Kĩtharaka idioms are not arbitrary combinations of words but meaningful linguistic constructions that reflect the community's ways of conceptualizing and interpreting experience. The study contributes to the understanding of Kĩtharaka semantics and demonstrates the relevance of Cognitive Linguistic Theory in explaining the relationship between language, cognition, and culture.

Keywords:

Kĩtharaka, Idiomatic Expressions, Semantic Structure, Cognitive Linguistics, Conceptual Metaphor, Embodiment.

1.0 Introduction

Idiomatic expressions constitute an important aspect of language through which speakers communicate meanings that extend beyond the literal meanings of individual words. An idiom is generally understood as a conventionalized expression whose overall meaning cannot always be directly inferred from the meanings of its constituent parts (Coulmas, 1981; Gibbs, 1999). Consequently, understanding idiomatic expressions requires attention to the semantic organization of the expression as a whole. Their meanings may also vary according to the context in which they are used, making semantic interpretation an important aspect of understanding figurative language (Callies, 2017). The semantic structure of idiomatic expressions therefore provides insight into how linguistic forms are organized to convey meanings that differ from their literal interpretations.

The study of idiomatic meaning has also been informed by cognitive linguistic perspectives, which view meaning as connected to human conceptualization, experience, perception, and knowledge of the world. Croft and Cruse (2004) argue that meaning is not a static and fixed component of the mind but is shaped through cognitive processes and interpretation. Similarly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain that language reflects how people conceptualize and understand the world. From this perspective, idiomatic expressions are not merely arbitrary combinations of words but may reflect

conceptual structures through which speakers understand abstract experiences. Metaphor and metonymy, for example, can provide conceptual mappings that contribute to the interpretation of non-literal expressions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The semantic interpretation of idiomatic expressions is therefore closely associated with the distinction between literal and figurative meaning. Although metaphors and idioms both contribute to figurative language, they operate differently. Metaphorical expressions establish connections between conceptual domains, whereas the meaning of an idiomatic expression is conventionally associated with the expression as a whole and cannot necessarily be derived from its component words (Coulmas, 1981). Gibbs (1999) similarly emphasizes that idiomatic meaning extends beyond the meanings of individual words. This characteristic makes the semantic structure of idioms significant for understanding how speakers interpret expressions whose intended meanings differ from their literal forms.

Kĩĩtharaka is a Bantu language spoken primarily in Tharaka-Nithi County and forms part of the wider Kĩmeru linguistic group (Kanana, 2011; Gacunku, 2005). Like other languages, Kĩĩtharaka contains idiomatic expressions that constitute part of the linguistic resources used by its speakers. These expressions provide a basis for examining how meaning is organized and communicated through non-literal linguistic forms. Despite the significance of idiomatic expressions in language use, the semantic organization of Kĩĩtharaka idioms requires further examination. This paper therefore focuses on the semantic structure of Kĩĩtharaka idiomatic expressions, with particular attention to how their meanings are constituted beyond the literal meanings of their constituent lexical items.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the semantic structure of Kĩĩtharaka idiomatic expressions. It was conducted in Tharaka South Sub-County, Tharaka-Nithi County, an area predominantly inhabited by native speakers of Kĩĩtharaka. The study purposively selected 20 native informants with extensive knowledge of the language and its idiomatic expressions, while snowball sampling was used to identify additional knowledgeable participants. Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the 20 informants and focus group discussions involving 40 participants organized into eight groups of five. The discussions and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English where necessary. From the collected data, 54 Kĩĩtharaka idiomatic expressions were identified and selected for analysis. The analysis focused on the literal and figurative meanings of the expressions and the semantic patterns through which the meanings were constituted. Interpretation of the idioms was guided by Cognitive Linguistic Theory, which provided a framework for examining how conceptual structures, including metaphorical mappings, contribute to the construction and interpretation of idiomatic meaning.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The study analyzes the semantics of Kĩĩtharaka idiomatic expressions. Through the analysis, the idioms differ in terms of structure, imagery and context, but all of them have a common role of expressing meanings that are beyond the more literal meanings. An interpretation of the meanings was based on the social experiences, values, and beliefs associated with the language. The researcher also took into account the role of idioms as communicative, cautionary, judgmental and instructive mechanisms. The paper thus conducts a thematic study of these phrases showing how the semantic composition of the phrases shows the literal and metaphorical meaning of the expressions based on the world view of the community.

4.2 Concealment, Deception and Betrayal

Idiomatic forms which imply concealment, deception and betrayal are frequently used as the hidden communicative elements in a speech community. Kĩĩtharaka idioms relating to concealment, deception and betrayal warn against pretence and ill motives in social life. They provide culturally appropriate ways of addressing dishonesty without direct confrontation. These expressions draw on everyday experiences and symbolic imagery to communicate suspicion, mistrust and moral warnings.

As shown in Appendix IV, the first idiom, (1), draws on the image of beating a hyena, with the hide representing the visible aspect of a deeper issue. Its semantic structure comprises the agent, the hyena; the object, the skin; and the action, beating.

<i>Ti bwa kagûûta</i>		
Ti	bû-a	ka-gûûta
NEG	14-CONN	12-hide
this is not just about the hide.' (lit.)		
'There is hidden motive.' (idiom)		

At the surface level, the idiom refers to an event in which the farmer accuses the hyena of eating its piece of hide. The hyena's subsequent beating suggests that something lies behind the accusation. The idiom therefore contrasts appearance with reality: the hide represents what is visible, while the hyena suggests something hidden or morally questionable. It warns that an action may conceal an ulterior motive or betrayal without directly accusing anyone.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that metaphor shapes how people think and act, while Kövecses (2002) explains how conceptual metaphors express emotions and social evaluations. In this regard, Kîitharaka deception idioms reflect a broader cognitive and cultural framework in which language performs moral, social and interpretive functions.

Other idioms in this theme use animal imagery and actions associated with disappearance or secrecy. For example, the hawk may represent treachery, while sinking into the ground suggests concealment or withdrawal. Such culturally developed associations enable speakers to communicate deception indirectly.

Progressively, this theme unfolds in (2) and (3) as well;

gwokerua kîîgî gû-oki-îr-u-akî-îgî INF-roast-APPL-PASS-FV 7-hawk asting someone hawk's meat' (lit.) deceive someone' (idiom)	kûnywa nthî kû-nyu-an-thî INF-drink-FV 9-ground 'to sink into the ground' (lit.) 'to get lost' (idiom)
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In (2), the motif of deception shifts the focus to intentional betrayal under the guise of kindness. On this basis *gwokerua kîîgî* "roasting someone hawk meat" develops the theme of deceit, but in the context of deliberate betrayal in the name of goodwill. In this case, the main metaphor is the meat of the hawk. Though roasting is usually a sign of care and hospitality, the mention of meat of a hawk (which is normally inedible) negates this action. The semantic structure of the idiom opposes the action (roasting) and the object (undesirable food) to indicate that an evil or insincere deed can be covered up by generosity. It refers to those people who claim to be helping others yet they are doing so with a selfish interest. Such a contrast of presentation with purpose highlights a stratified nature of meaning, in which language carries both the action and its hidden outcome (Sharifian, 2011).

Idiom (3), *kûnywa nthî*, signifies withdrawal or disappearance. Unlike the first two idioms, which involve deception directed at others, this expression concerns hiding oneself. The ground represents concealment, while sinking suggests avoiding confrontation, humiliation or exposure. It thus presents invisibility as a means of evasion (Moon, 1998).

The three idioms show a progression in how deception is represented: *tî bwa kagûûta* suggests hidden motives, *gwokerua kîîgî* conveys betrayal disguised as generosity, and *kûnywa nthî* represents withdrawal to avoid exposure. Their concrete images of a hyena's skin, hawk meat and the ground map physical experiences onto abstract concepts of deceit and concealment, consistent with Cognitive Linguistic Theory (Sharifian, 2011).

<i>Gûta mûûgio</i>	
gû-tamûûg-i-o	
INF-throw-FV	3-footstep-IC-NOM
'to throw away (the) footsteps.'	

Idiom (4) represents a deliberate attempt to erase evidence of one's actions or motives. Footsteps symbolise traceable movement, while throwing them away represents removing evidence. The idiom suggests that a person may conceal information, shift blame or create the impression of innocence despite involvement in wrongdoing.

Ndlovu (2013), in a study of Zulu idioms, similarly observes that animal and nature imagery represents avoidance and manipulation. Expressions such as covering one's tracks or walking backwards in the sand portray deliberate attempts to evade exposure. Such imagery draws on everyday experiences to communicate secrecy, discretion and accountability.

These observations are reflected in Ngonyani (2001) who states that deception in the African idioms can be presented in the form of spatial metaphors, such as open traps, hidden holes or tricking pathways, which are based on real life dangers but are used in the metaphorical sense of cautioning against false appearances. In Kîtharaka, as well as in most Bantu languages, these idioms are used as linguistic admonitions as well as moral observations of the intricacies of trust and betrayal in the social life.

4.3 Futility and Impossibility

According to Yankah (1995), African communities tend to express themselves using metaphorical words such as proverbs and idioms when describing their complicated experiences in life, especially when they are faced with frustration, limitation, or absurdity. Semantically, these idioms are constructed on the basis of intentional contrasts between actors, actions and anticipations of the final results. The subject (agent) is usually involved in a process that attempts to accomplish a goal but the object or context nullifies or opposes the attempt which creates a congruence.

Tî rwa maru irwa nkiingo tî rû-a ma-rû i-rû-a n-kîngo NEG 11-CONN 6-knees 11-CONN 9-neck 'The water does not reach the knees but the neck.' (lit.) 'It is a very dangerous matter.' (idiom)	kîrîma gûtiira matu kî-rîma gû-tiir-a ma-tu 7-mountain INF-touch-FV 6-clouds 'a mountain touching the clouds' (lit.) 'A tall order.' (idiom)
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Idiom (5) portrays a mountain reaching the clouds, an image that symbolizes an undertaking of enormous magnitude. It is used to describe a situation that is highly challenging, dangerous, or seemingly impossible to accomplish. The idiom conceptualizes extreme height as a metaphor for the degree of difficulty and the improbability of success. In semantics, the subject or agent tries to engage the river in an interaction that is expected to be shallow and easy to cross but finds out it is deep and difficult. This construction conveys the message of an imbalance between perception and reality with the idea that some things might be simple to look at but are complicated or difficult.

The idiom in (6) is used to support the concept of impossibility as the scene is depicted where a mountain is touching the clouds. Semantically, the mountain is a huge, stationary barrier and the sky or clouds could be an end or an unattainable object. The interplay of these two factors (height and limitation) presents the scenario that progress or accomplishment is impossible (Kövecses, 2005). The idiom implies trying to achieve something that is not only impossible to do but that is out of bounds. These idioms are based on the natural imagery to describe the constraints in human work, which is also observed in the general linguistic context, including the works of Mieder (2004), which mentions that when using idioms there is a tendency to refer to the natural environment to convey the abstract constraints.

kwendia mpanda yîrûko kû-endi-a m-panda î-rî-rûko INF-sell-FV 9-bald.head 9-be-dirt 'to sell a dirty bald head' (lit.) 'to do something unattractive and undesirable' (idiom)	N'ûgûkama mbiti n'-û-gû-kam-am-biti FOC-2SG.SM-INF-milk-FV 9-hyena 'You are milking a hyena.' (lit.) 'You are doing something difficult and dangerous.' (idiom)
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Idiom (7) expresses the meaning of advancing or defending an obviously weak or unattractive position. The picture of a man trying to sell a filthy bald head characterizes a meaningless attempt an action which is destined to fail simply because the product being sold is not worth anything or is not desirable. In (8), the form is still more strident in announcing impossibility. Milking a hyena is a wild and dangerous activity, which expresses absurdity and danger. The semantic field formed by the components of the idiom agent (person), action (milking) and object (hyena) implies that the task is not only something unattainable but even absurd. The phrase describes a miscalculated effort that is at the boundaries of self-destruction which emphasizes the notion of futility. According to Honeck (1997), metaphorical idioms tend to employ ludicrous or even outrageous images that speak of the boundaries of human action and judgment. In this way, such idiomatic expressions are quite strong form of expression of the despair of some activity with the help of strong, culturally definite metaphors.

The idiom in (9) echoes the senselessness of doing a job that, on the surface, appears to be useful but in reality it is useless. Draining water out of a watermelon, which is already a fruit that contains a lot of water, is a metaphor of putting effort into something that does not have any significant reward. In semantics, the idiom is a mixture of the agent (the person), the object (watermelon) and the action (filtering), which taken together depict the wasted effort. The metaphorical meaning is used to explain how a person may waste his or her time in doing irrelevant or complex work when the resultant effect is irrelevant or is available in simpler form. This expression is consistent with other cultures that can describe the same inefficiencies, including the expression, reinventing the wheel.

gûkemba matanka rûûjî gû-kemb-ama-tanka rû-ûjî INF-filter-FV 6-citron melon 11- water 'decanting water from a citron melon.' (lit.) 'doing something useless or impossible.'	Ndakamîra nthî N-ra-kam-îr-a nthî 1SG.SM-NPAST-milk-APPL-FV 9- ground 'I have milked on the ground.' 'I have done something useless and wasteful.'
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The idiom in (10), however, brings out an even greater feeling of loss. The pouring of milk on the ground is a sign that a precious thing that is symbolized by milk is destroyed as soon as it is created making it a waste of time. The semantics of this idiom has the action of milking (a productive undertaking), the product (milk) and the environment (the ground) which represents waste or loss. This phrase conveys this message in a more emotional way, showing frustration or defeatism following a failed attempt. According to Gibbs (1994), these types of idioms rely on concrete experiences (example., milking) to organize abstract concepts, e.g., emotional or practical failure. Collectively, the idioms enhance the conceptualization of the futility of efforts.

In (11) brings out the concept of doing something that is not likely to bring forth an output, however good the intended outcome could be. The digging of sweet roots in stony ground involves the aspect of hard work (digging), pleasure (sweet roots) and pain (the stones).

<i>kwînja nkûû cia maiga</i>	<i>Tûûria nchûngo mûthenya.</i>
kû-înj-a nkûû ci-a ma-iga	Tûûr-i-a n-chûngo mû-thenya
INF-dig-FV sweet.roots	INF-perform-FV 9-love.dance 3-daytime
10-CONN 6-stones	'Stage a night love dance during the day.' (lit.)
'to dig sweet roots on stony ground' (lit.)	'Do something good in the wrong context.
'to do something very difficult.' (idiom)	(idiom)

Semantically, these elements represent the pursuit of success in the environment where conditions are very adverse. Linguistically, in a cognitive view, this idiom projects a physical, tangible deed, digging, over into the intangible arena of effort versus result. It indicates that speakers use physical imagery to make rationalization about life problems and it demonstrates that not all hard work is rewarded particularly when there are unending obstacles.

The idiom in(12) shows a cultural or contextual misfit, when a likeable or good act is undertaken in the wrong context. The idiom employs the visualization of a night dance, called *nchûngo*, being practiced at daytime to imply futility, cultural mistake or impropriety, because none will be available or willing to take part. Its semantics components are time (night/day), activity (ritual/dance) and violation of culture. The theoretical approach of cognitive linguistics assists with providing an explanation of how time-related metaphors convey more than time-flow they demonstrate social order and meaning. Idiom is not merely a linguistic device, as argued by Kövecses (2010), but also a means through which people interpret and appraise their experience; in this case to frame judgment of human behavior and futility through the prism of time and action.

4.4 Danger, Risk and Harm

This thematic issue is well expressed with the help of the idioms with references to real life cases of physical threat or emotional exposure. The idioms employ concrete items such as animals, environmental or bodily experiences to symbolize abstract concepts about danger or pending harm. These idioms are commonly expressed in the semantic structure when an agent (person), an agent of threat (animal or force) and an action (movement or exposure) are involved and that leads to vulnerability. The message is not literal but rather figurative and the speakers are able to warn or criticize dangerous behavior without facing the person. Such figurative language supports such social expectations as safety, cautiousness and wisdom.

Cognitively, the idioms that are used are dependent on embodied experience – where certain notions like danger is perceived through a physical contact with the world. The mental mapping of threat or harm by using familiar culturally familiar situations is what is seen in these types of idioms where the listener can get some form of intuitive understanding of the degree or outcome of a situation. Such expressions demonstrate that language is used to store and pass on shared values of risk avoidance and the boundary of human action. A number of idioms were found and grouped within this theme of Danger, Risk and Harm and all of them offer a complex and yet easy-to-understand manner of expressing the concept of caution and vulnerability by means of a semantically rich context.

Menya ûntwethia mûramba na iraatû
Menya û-ntweth-i-a mû-ramba na i-raatu
Donot 1SG.SM-climb-IC-CAUS 3-baobab with shoes
'Don't make me climb a baobab tree in shoes.'
'DO not make me engage on a dangerous act.' (idiom)

Idiom (13) depicts the image of climbing a baobab tree while wearing shoes. Since a baobab tree is tall, massive, and difficult to climb, attempting to climb it in shoes increases the risk of slipping and falling. The idiom therefore symbolizes engagement in an activity that is dangerous, ill-advised, or likely to result in negative consequences. It is used to caution against actions that expose an individual to unnecessary risk or place them in situations where failure, harm, or loss is highly probable. The imagery highlights the relationship between danger and poor judgment, suggesting that some

undertakings become even more perilous when approached without adequate preparation or consideration of the risks involved.

kuugia kathaka ngũkũ kû-ug-i-aka-thakan-gũkũ INF-do-IC-FV 12-bush 9-gulp 'to take the bush in ag'	kûratha rûnyaki kû-rath-arû-nyaki INF-shoot-FV 11-grass 'to shoot a piece of grass' (lit.)
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The idiom in (14), expresses a sudden flight, usually in order to avoid danger or trouble. It creates the impression of a person who hurriedly gets lost in the thicket and implies the dire and urgent reaction to a dangerous event. This idiom is a metaphor that tries to describe the involuntary need of self-preservation. The bush in this case represents shelter which is uncertain and fast and the word gulping is used to create the idea of haste and promptness. When read contextually, it talks of the manner in which people react to a looming danger where they either conceal themselves or withdraw to escape harm.

This theme is also evident in (16) and (17) collectively address situations involving danger, risk, and potential self-harm resulting from ill-judged actions. *Idm 16, kwarûrûkia mbogo* "awakening buffaloes", conveys the idea of deliberately provoking danger or stirring up a threat that would otherwise remain dormant. Given the aggressive and unpredictable nature of a buffalo, awakening it symbolizes reckless behavior that invites harm through unnecessary interference.

kwarûrûkia mbogo kû-arûrûk-i-am-bogo INF-rouse-IC-FV 9-buffalo 'to rouse buffaloes' (lit.) 'to provoke dangerous situation.'	kûgita nduru mûtiro kû-git-a n-duru mû-tiro INF-cut-FV 9-squirrel 3-tail 'to cut a squirrel's tail' (lit.)
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The idiom in (17), *kugita ndûru mûtiro* "cutting a squirrel's tail", represents engaging in an action that is both risky and largely unproductive. The act is delicate and likely to provoke resistance, yet the outcome offers little benefit. This idiom therefore highlights situations where individuals expose themselves to danger or conflict for minimal or trivial gain.

Collectively, these idioms conceptualise danger and risk through embodied experiences involving animals and physical actions. From a cognitive linguistic perspective, they rely on familiar interactions with threatening or uncontrollable forces to structure abstract meanings related to recklessness, provocation, and self-endangerment. The idioms map concrete experiences from the source domain of human-animal interaction onto the target domain of social and psychological risk, thereby cautioning against actions that invite avoidable harm.

kûrea kûrîyana kû-re-a kû-rîy-an-a INF-eat-FV INF-eat-RECP-FV 'to eat what can eat you up' (lit.) 'to eat or do something dangerous/harmful (idiom)

The idiom in (18) brings in a more ironical risk. The phrase to eat what can eat you up can be used to describe the case where threat is presented as something enjoyable or useful. It refers to the wrong decisions that are taken in ignorance or myopia where people can blindly open the doors to harm in their quest to derive pleasure. The idiom points out to the trap of certain risks where something apparently harmless appears to be dangerous. It attracts attention to dangers that lurk behind ordinary experiences and cautions against neglecting the long-term effects. Bottom of Form

16) *gûkunda wathimûre*

“to sip and sneeze out”,

Idiom 19 is used to threaten or intimidate someone. The idiom functions as a warning that an action will be followed by an immediate and uncomfortable consequence. The imagery of sneezing after drinking conveys a sudden, unavoidable reaction, suggesting that the listener will experience negative effects if the warning is ignored.

In Kĩtharaka usage, the idiom is employed to assert authority, discourage undesirable behaviour, or instil fear of repercussions. Cognitively, it maps a familiar bodily reaction onto the social domain of threat and control, allowing speakers to communicate danger or punishment indirectly but forcefully.

The sneeze represents an involuntary, perhaps embarrassing reaction to an overlooked danger. Semantically, the idiom communicates the idea that even small decisions or actions may carry hidden discomfort or repercussions, reinforcing the broader theme of unpredictability and risk. This study's interpretation of danger, risk and harm in idiomatic expressions aligns with findings by Kövecses (2002), who observed that metaphorical language across cultures frequently encodes emotional and physical vulnerability using bodily experiences and environmental imagery. The Kĩtharaka idioms confirm this tendency by grounding abstract ideas of threat in concrete, sensory actions.

4.5 Social Values

Social interaction is reflected in the idioms that touch on how people relate and interact in the community interact with each other in their communities. These are the idioms that explain behaviours, values and expectations that define the interpersonal relationships like cooperation, conflict respect and gossip. Social interactions are fundamental to preserving social order and unity and idioms in this group tend to act as a roundabout means of correcting behaviour, persuading conformity, or pointing out righteous norms.

kwanĩka mũnya ngũkũni kũ-anĩk-a mũ-nya n-gũkũ-ni INF-expose-FV 3-sorghum 9- chicken-LOC 'to spread sorghum to dry in the midst of chicken (lit.) 'to unintentionally expose something to its obvious predators' (idiom)	Komanga iiga na nthio Komang-a i-iga nan-thio Sharpen-FV 9-grindstone CONN 9- stone 'sharpen grinding stone with the one that grides it' (lit.) 'to unintentionally cause harm to one thing using another' (idiom)
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The idioms brought under the social interaction category show the complexity in which the Kĩtharaka people comment and regulate on the behaviour between people. As an example, in *Idm 20*, the exposure of sorghum to chickens is used to warn against the disclosure of confidential or sensitive information to unreliable individuals. The sorghum stands something valuable or personal whereas the chickens stand as people who can abuse such knowledge. This idiom is pointed out to remind people about the discretion and trust in social interactions. *Idiom (21)* presents the image of sharpening a grinding stone using another stone, a process that is paradoxical and potentially destructive. Since a grinding stone is normally used to sharpen other tools rather than itself, the action suggests an inappropriate or harmful use of one entity against another that is equally vulnerable or essential. Conceptually, the idiom expresses situations in which one action, tool, or individual is used in a way that unintentionally causes harm or damage to another, especially when both are closely related or mutually dependent. It therefore highlights the idea of unintended consequences and relational harm, where efforts meant to improve or adjust a situation end up producing damage instead.

<i>kũrea magego</i> kũ-re-a ma-gego INF-eat-FV 6-teeth 'to eat teeth' (lit.) 'to speak nonsense' (idiom)

In *Idm 22*, biting teeth is a symbol of talking without meaning or purpose. Teeth being used in chewing and eating, the concept of a person eating his/her own teeth would mean that one is wasting his/her own energy or talking without any meaning. It is a social value which is expressed by this idiom because it values meaningful speech and warns against thoughtless or talkative people in the society. All together, these idioms represent the abstract social concepts of fairness, discretion and relevance in communication using concrete and culturally specific images. The idioms assist the individuals in the community to criticize, instructor approve the behaviour of others without directly attacking them, thereby maintaining peace and respect among the groups.

These idioms can be explained through the way they organize meaning in terms of metaphor and embodied experience, which has been explained by CLT. In such instances, ordinary activities such as eating, sharpening tools or exposing grain are applied upon abstract ideas like fairness, trust or meaningful speech (Seidlhofer, 2009). The target domains (social relationships) are explained with the help of source domains (physical experiences). This meaning is compatible with the first research question, which was aimed to describe the semantic structure of Kĩĩtharaka idioms. These idioms indicate systematic form of how meaning is built and therefore it is evident that social interactions are not only talked about but also conceptualized cognitively using metaphoric language that is anchored in the common daily experience.

<i>kwendia rûrîme</i> kû-endi-a rû-rîme INF-sell-FV 11-tongue ‘to sell the tongue’ (lit.) ‘to engage on a persuasive speech’ (idiom)	<i>kwamba kaûgo</i> kû-amb-a ka-ûgo INF-spread-FV 12-skin ‘to spread a skin’ (lit.) ‘to diarrhoea’ (idiom)
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Idioms (23) and (24) are further examples of social interactions. The first one is the tongue (as an instrument of speech), selling (as the act of exchange) and speech (as an influence). Idiomatically, it means persuasive speaking; the act of a person persuading others by use of his or her voice. It is featured by strategic communication and the ability of language to be a social resource. *Kwamba kaûgo*, (24) on the other hand, means euphemistically diarrhea (object; skin, action; spreading, context: drying). It is humorous or indirect, but still, it is a part of social discourse because it represents the way to address sensitive or embarrassing subjects in polite communication. Cumulatively, these idioms demonstrate that social interaction is not only about direct communication in Kĩĩtharaka but also about tact, cultural codes and symbolic value of everyday actions.

<i>gwonkia îrîme</i> gû-onk-i-a î-rîme INF-suck-IC-FV 5-tongue ‘to suckle the tongue’ (lit.) ‘to appease or pacify someone’ (idiom)	<i>kwenga nda</i> kû-eng-an-da INF-slash-FV 9-stomach ‘to enhance the stomach’
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Moving on to emotional or interpersonal idioms, the image of the tongue (speech and comfort), suckling (action) and emotion (target domain) is very intimate in the case of idiom (25). Suckling the tongue connotes to pacify or appease, especially in a battle or when someone is emotionally disturbed. The idiomatic parallel drawn here by Kĩĩtharaka is between bodily comfort (which is associated with infancy) and the demand in terms of reassurance and reconciliation of the adult life, showing how the author uses bodily metaphors to think about emotional repair. In *idiom (26)*, the semantics is comprised of the stomach (food and nutrition), enhancing (action) and preparing to eat (context). Even though the idiom literally implies enlarging the stomach, idiomatically it implies getting ready to indulge in a huge feast.

4.6 Emotions and Inner State

The semantics structure of idioms, references to internal organs, parts of the body and physiological experiences in Kîitharaka idiomatic expressions of emotion and inner states. Such idioms employ tangible, sense-related behaviors like shivering, bloating, blazing, or heaviness to convey a metaphorical message about abstract emotional experiences of fear, anger, sadness, or cheerfulness. It is composed of the body part (example; heart or stomach), the state or action (e.g. swelling or heating) combined with the person or agent. As an example, a semantically organized idiom may refer to the stomach swelling as signifying anxiety or restlessness, with the stomach serving as the semantic field of emotion and the swelling to refer to the level or accumulation of that emotion. Therefore, these are idioms that employ well-known physical or bodily allusions to convey emotional content and can be well-understood in the society.

The semantic structure of the idiom (27) highlights provocation with the physical height being used as the metaphor of the emotional height. The idiom alludes to the climbing of a shelf of a hat, of which the shelf is seen as a metaphor about the point of personal dignity or emotional fortitude and the hat a metaphor about status or collected composure. The mounting gesture is an indication of an increasing intensity- a going beyond normal emotional plane. On the semantic level, the construction unites the place (shelf), something to be respected (hat), a vertical action (climbing) in order to demonstrate how a person is pushed to the limit. In this respect, the idiom does not talk about anger but semantically alludes someone to who has been pushed to the limit of his or her tolerance.

<i>gûtoa îtara</i> gû-to-a î-tara INF-climb-FV 9-hat.shelf ‘to climbing a hat’s shelf’ (lit.) ‘pushed to the limit.’ (idiom)	<i>gûkunda ûrûme</i> gû-kund-a û-rûme INF-sip-FV 14-courage ‘to take a sip courage’ (lit.) ‘to become instantaneously courageous’ (idiom)
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Idiom (28) constructs its meaning on the idea of manhood and over reactions. It is used to describe a moment of summoning bravery in order to confront danger, defend oneself, or respond to an aggressor. In Kîitharaka usage, the idiom does not refer to exaggerated masculinity or emotional excess, but rather to a decisive act of courage prompted by threat or necessity. Cognitively, the idiom conceptualises courage as something that can be actively taken or gathered in response to fear. It reflects a social value that encourages resilience and self-defence in situations of confrontation, framing courage as a practical and situational response rather than a fixed personal trait.

<i>kwona unene</i> kû-on-a u-nene INF-see-FV 14-bigness ‘to see bigness’ (lit.) ‘to be surprised or shocked’	<i>gûta toro</i> gû-t-atoro INF-throw-FV sleep Throwing away some sleep
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The idiom (29), *kwona unene* (seeing something big), employs the term seeing as the action, eye as the agent and bigness as the object. The construction expresses a feeling of wonder or discovery, when the scale of the thing observed is the same as some spectacular or remarkable experience. The semantic elements, which are the bigness denoting something remarkable or significant and seeing as the process of mental recognition, in combination, bring the idea of admiration or surprise. This is also evidenced in idiom (30) which uses *gûta* as the action while the agent is implied to be a person. The idiom therefore represents a change of inner status as a result of visual experience and the speaker can then emotionally judge and articulate the effect of an event or observation.

The concept of embodiment, central to Cognitive Linguistics, shows that our understanding of abstract ideas is shaped by bodily experiences. By analyzing the semantic structure, scholars can uncover the underlying logic behind these expressions. This perspective aligns with scholars like Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who argue that idioms are not arbitrary but rooted in bodily and cultural experiences, enabling speakers to express complex feelings through familiar physical terms.

4.7 Morality and Ethics

Morality and ethics are the values and principles that govern persons as regards what is right or wrong in a society. In language, the idioms tend to reflect such principles through common objects, activities and roles to signify acceptance or rejection of some habits. Researchers such as Wierzbicka (1992) argue that, languages incorporate moral teachings in normal sayings and idiomatic expressions become instruments of teaching or cautioning against a certain behavior. Idioms in this group are also indirect judgments, but the semantic network acts in such a way that the right behavior is encouraged or vice is condemned. For instance, concealing in idiom can be semantically described as guilt or disgrace and openness or returning can be described as honesty and responsibility. Such a relationship between form and meaning enables speakers to discuss delicate ethical issues in a culturally acceptable, roundabout fashion, which promotes mutual moral expectations.

The Idiom (31) and (32) reflect morality and ethics through the concreteness of action and the symbolic use of things to draw attention to human behavior in ethical situations.

<i>kûrea nkambaurû</i> kû-re-a n-kambaurû INF-eat-FV 9-unripe.nthwana.fruit Eating unripe nthwana fruits	<i>gûkinda mûûrû</i> gû-kind-a mû-ûrû INF-wrestle-FV 3-conscience 'to wrestle ones conscience' (lit.) 'to reflect deeply' (idiom)
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In Idiom (48) the semantic fabric consists of such elements as fruit (object), unripe (state) and eating (action). This compound is the manifestation of eating or drinking something prior to the due time, which has a semantic meaning of a moral caution against impatience, irresponsibility, or participating in something that is believed to be premature or unethical. Unripe fruit represents the unacceptable and inappropriate situations and the act of eating can be interpreted as a conscious decision. By means of this structure, the idiom is against immoral deeds done without thinking of preparation or consequences.

Idiom (32) is a continuation of ethical judgment because it emphasizes on internal conflict in making moral judgments. The most important semantics would be; conscience (abstract agent), wrestling (effortful action) and the person (subject). The thought and emotions of dealing with a moral dilemma, when an individual struggle with their internal values is absorbed in this idiom. Wrestling as an act is an indicator of tension and conflict thus indicating that making an ethical decision is an intense confrontation with what is right or wrong. All these semantic characteristics introduce morality as not merely outward action, but as an internal and introspective activity. The idiom, therefore, emphasizes ethical consciousness and accountability because it depicts the inner aspect of moral decisions..

<i>gûkûûra metho</i> gû-kûûr-a ma-itho INF-stare-FV 6-eyes 'to uproot ones eyes'(lit.) 'to stare deeply' (idiom)	<i>kwona kaburu / kaboro</i> kû-on-a ka-buru / ka-boro INF-see-FV 12-opening 'to seeing an opening' (lit.) 'to discover an opportunity to exploit' (idiom)
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In Idm 33, *Gûkûûra metho*, the imagery involves eyes as the central element, with the action of 'staring' metaphorically representing an intense and exaggerated gaze. In Kitharaka usage, this expression refers to looking at someone with eyes wide open, often as a sign of shock, disbelief, or fury. The exaggerated stare functions as a non-verbal expression of strong emotional reaction, which in certain contexts can also serve as a form of reprimand or moral disapproval. In Idiom (33) and Idiom (34), the semantic contrasts are used to reflect ethical behavior as well. Idiom (34) incorporates both the concept of opening (gap), seeing (action) and judgment (mental processing) to describe the process of discovering and taking advantage of a weakness in another human being, which is unethical in nature or behavior, e.g. contempt or betrayal.

<i>gûtema gaarû</i> gû-tem-a ga-arû INF-cut-FV 2-jury.traditional ‘to cut a traditional jury of elders’ (lit.) ‘to commit a serious violation of norms’ (idiom)

Idiom (35) contains such symbols of cultural power as elders, the act of cutting (harmful) and jury signifying a serious violation of the moral norm. The semantic scheme in this case is associated judging ethical conduct, cautioning against disrespect or taboo. These idioms contain the societal values of moral behavior by relating physical behavior with moral consequences.

Idiom (36) and (37) are the idioms that convey morality and ethics by the well-organized semantic elements indicating correction and purification.

<i>gwinga gîkîro</i> Kû-ing-a gî-kîro INF-close-FV 7-fence.gap ‘to closing a gap in a fence’ (lit.) ‘to rectify an error’ (idiom)	<i>kûruta îria nyenje</i> kû-rut-a î-ria nyenje INF-remove-FV 5-milk 9- cockroach ‘to remove cockroaches from the milk’ (lit.) ‘to purify/cleanse ’ (idiom)
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In Idiom (53), the basic aspects include: fence (boundary), gaps (errors) and closing (action of correction). This word construction forms a mental picture of repairing that which is broken, which is suggestive of putting things right or rectifying an error. The idiom passes across a message with moral implication of responsibility, accountability and trying to rebuild what is defective. In the same way, there is Idiom (54) which contains the words milk (value or purity), cockroach (pollutant) and removal (cleansing action). The situation here is structured in the semantic framework of separating good and bad and the moral action is thus defined as the discovery of bad and the process of its removal. Collectively, these idioms reflect how repairing and cleansing are semantically employed in order to denote values of morality that are deeper and strengthen the social norms of good behavior and integrity.

The concept of CLT assists in the clarification of the manner in which such idioms convey moral sense by means of embodied and culturally situated metaphors. These idioms make abstract moral concepts more easily understood by transferring concrete physical activities (plucking, seeing, cutting) to abstract moral assessments. CLT demonstrates that language users base their interpretation of idiomatic expressions on common cultural models so as to enable their listeners to appreciate the underlying moral messages based on familiar experiences (Gibbs, 1994). In this way, the semantic structures cannot be arbitrary; they indicate conceptual metaphors, which convey some strongly embedded social and ethical values.

5.0 Summary and Conclusion

The paper examined the semantic structure of 54 Kîîtharaka idiomatic expressions. The analysis showed that the idioms could be organized into thematic categories including concealment and betrayal, futility and impossibility, danger and harm, social interaction, emotion and inner states, and morality. The expressions generally conveyed both literal and figurative meanings, with the figurative meaning extending beyond the meanings of their individual lexical components. The analysis further demonstrated that familiar images drawn from everyday experiences, such as eating, physical actions, animals, and the natural environment, are used to convey abstract meanings such as warning, criticism, futility, emotional states, and moral judgments. The findings therefore demonstrate that the semantic structure of Kîîtharaka idioms involves layered meanings in which culturally familiar linguistic imagery is associated with deeper figurative interpretations.

The paper concludes that Kĩtharaka idiomatic expressions have a systematic semantic structure characterized by the interaction of literal and figurative meaning. Their interpretation is not determined solely by the individual words that constitute an expression but by the broader meaning associated with the expression as a whole. The thematic patterns identified across the 39 idioms demonstrate how physical experiences, objects, animals, and environmental phenomena are used to communicate abstract social, emotional, and moral meanings. Guided by Cognitive Linguistic Theory, the analysis shows that the semantic interpretation of Kĩtharaka idioms is closely connected to conceptualization and familiar experiences. The idioms therefore constitute an important linguistic resource through which Kĩtharaka speakers communicate meanings indirectly and figuratively.

6.0 References

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Appendix i: Idiomatic Expressions

Semantic Theme	Code	Idiom/ Translation	Key Semantic Elements	Surface Meaning	Deeper (Idiomatic) Meaning
1. Concealment, Deception and Betrayal	Idm 1	Tibwa kagûta This is not just about the skin	Skin (object), Beating (action)	This is not just about the hide.'	There is something hidden / more than meets the eye
	Idm 2	Gwokerua kîgî Roasting someone hawk's meat	Hawk (object), Roasting (action), Deception (appearance vs taste)	Cooking deceptive meat	Pretending to help while secretly undermining someone
	Idm 4	Gûta mûûgio Throwing away the footsteps	Footsteps (evidence), Throwing away (removal), Concealment (intention)	Removing tracks	Hiding the truth, speaking vaguely to conceal facts
2. Futility/Impossibility	Idm 5	Tîrwa maaru irwa nkiingo The river is not shallow	River (setting), Person (agent), Depth (obstacle)	Crossing a river	Something that seemed easy is actually difficult
	Idm 6	Kirima gûtiira matu A mountain touching the clouds	Mountain (obstacle), Sky (height), Contact (limitation)	A huge mountain whose top reaches the clouds	Deny access
	Idm 7	Kwendia mpanda yîrûko Selling a dirty bald head	Bald head (object), Dirt (undesirable), Selling (action)	Selling an unattractive idea	Trying to convince others of something clearly rejected/they don't want
	Idm 8	Nûgûkama mbiti You are milking a hyena	Person (agent), Hyena (target), Milking (action)	Milking a hyena	Attempting an impossible or foolish task
	Idm 9	Gûkemba matanka ruuji Filtering water from a watermelon	Person (agent), Watermelon (source), Filtering (action)	Filtering water from melon	Engaging in a difficult or pointless task
	Idm 10	Ndakamîra nthî I have milked onto the ground	Milk (value), Ground (loss), Milking (action)	Pouring milk to the ground	A futile effort that goes unrewarded
	Idm 11	Kûinja nkûû cia maiga Digging sweet roots in stony land	Sweet roots (goal), Stones (difficulty), Digging (effort)	Seeking roots (sweet) in very hard ground	Digging for food in stone
	Idm 12	Tûûria nchungo mûthenya Stage a night dance during the day	Nchûngo (night dance), Day (inappropriate time), Taboo (cultural error)	A traditional night dance (Nchûngo) is inappropriately done by day	starting something that will not materialize
3. Danger/Risk/Harm	Idm 13	Menya ûntwethia mûramba na iraatû Don't make me climb a baobab in shoes	Person (agent), Baobab (obstacle), Shoes (inappropriate tools)	Climbing a baobab with shoes	Attempting a dangerous or nearly impossible task
	Idm 14	Kuugia kathaka	Person (agent), Bush	Vanishing into	Escaping very

		ngûûkû Gulp the bush	(setting), Gulping (sudden movement)	the bush	swiftly to avoid danger or trouble
	Idm 15	Kûratha rûnyeki Shooting on grass	Grass (cover), Shooting (action), Target (hidden)	Skillfully hitting something hidden in grass	Very skillful in doing something
	Idm 16	Kwarûrûkia mbogo Awakening buffaloes	Buffaloes (danger), Awakening (provocation), Person (agent)	Waking up buffaloes	Causing trouble/ignite chaos
	Idm 17	Kugita ndûru mûtiro Cutting a squirrel's tail	Squirrel (innocence), Tail (hurt), Cutting (injury)	Cutting tail again	Adding insult to injury
	Idm 18	Kûrea Kûriyana Eating what can eat you up	Eating (pleasure), Danger (embedded), Person (ignorance)	Eating the dangerous	Engaging in seemingly good acts that can be harmful later
	Idm 19	Gûkunda wathimûre Drink and sneeze it out	Drinking (action), Sneezing (reaction), Person (agent)	Taking a drink that makes one sneeze	You will find it rough with someone
4. Social Interaction	Idm 20	Kûanîka mûnya ngûkûni Exposing sorghum to chicken	Sorghum (valuable), Chicken (threat), Exposure (action)	Leaving sorghum open to chickens	Revealing sensitive secrets to those who might misuse them
	Idm 21	Komanga iiga na nthio Sharpen both grinding stones	Grinding stones (tools), Sharpening (preparation), Equal treatment	Preparing for grinding	Addressing all parties equally / not being biased
	Idm 22	Kûrea magego Eating teeth	Teeth (tools), Eating (action), Speech (function)	Biting teeth	Speaking without meaningful content
	Idm 23	Kwendia rûrîme Selling your tongue	Tongue (tool), Selling (action), Speech (influence)	Selling one's voice	Convincing others to accept your viewpoint
	Idm 24	Kwamba kaûgo Spreading skin	Skin (object), Spreading (action), Drying (context)	Laying out skin	Diarrhea (euphemism)
	Idm 25	Gûonkia îrîme Suckling the tongue	Tongue (soothing organ), Suckling (comfort), Emotion	Suckling tongue	Trying to soothe or appease someone
	Idm 26	Kwenga nda Slashing the stomach	Stomach (food), Slashing (preparing), Eating (context)	Cutting stomach	Preparing to eat or feast
5. Emotion/Inner State	Idm 27	Gûtoa îtara Climbing a hat's shelf	Shelf (location), Climbing (action), Hat (symbol of status)	Reaching a high point	Provoking someone to the point of intense anger
	Idm 28	Gûkunda ûrîme Quipping manhood	Manhood (trait), Quipping (action), Emotion (bravery/agitation)	Being overly aggressive	Extreme agitation or showing false bravery
	Idm 29	Kwona unene Seeing something big	Eye (witness), Bigness (object), Seeing (action)	Seeing greatness	Coming across something impressive orsurprising
	Idm 30	Gûta toro	Sleep (rest),	Losing sleep	Being disturbed or

		Throwing away some sleep	Throwing (action), Interruption		troubled mentally
7. Morality and Ethics	Idm 31	Kûrea nkambaurû Eating unripe muthwana fruits	Fruit (object), Unripe (prematurity), Eating (action)	Eating unripe fruit of the muthwana tree	Using something before it is ready for use/misusing something
	Idm 32	Gûkinda muuru Wrestling conscience	Conscience (inner thought), Wrestling (effort), Person (subject)	Fighting conscience	Listening attentively or struggling to make a moral decision
	Idm 33	Gûkûûra metho Plucking your eyes	Eyes (object), Plucking (force), Speech (context)	Pulling out eyes	Speaking harshly, warning, or rebuking someone strongly
	Idm 34	Kwona kaburu / kaboro Seeing an opening	Opening (gap), Seeing (realization), Action (judgment)	Seeing a gap	Undermining or despising someone
	Idm 35	Gûtema gaarû Cutting a jury of elders	Elders (authority), Cutting (harmful act), Jury (cultural symbol)	Attacking elders	Violating cultural norms / committing a taboo
	Idm 36	Kwinga gîkîro Closing gaps in a fence	Fence (boundary), Gaps (mistakes), Closing (repair)	Closing gaps	Correcting errors or mending mistakes
	Idm 37	Kûruta îria nyenje Removing cockroaches from the milk	Milk (value), Cockroach (dirt/problem), Removal (purification)	Removing insects from milk	Punishing someone (removing bad from good)