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The Poetics of Dating in WhatsApp Memes: Imagery of the Market

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Dating involves feelings and words relating to sex which is considered a subject of social condemnation (taboo). Despite the shame associated with such a subject, human beings still devise ways to refer to them in a manner that is socially and ethically acceptable. Creativity is an essential aspect of language that has enabled human beings to use language in novelty. This paper analyses memes to determine how the market imagery has been used to demarcate dating, highlight the properties of the language in use, and portray markers of gender. This research was guided by the theory of meaning in use propounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953). This paper showed that the market imagery had been used symbolically, enabling WhatsApp users to use indirect expressions to talk about dating and other obscene things. WhatsApp users have resorted to humour to release the tension associated with dating frustrations. Lastly, the names of foods, chauvinistic verbs and basic terms have been used as markers of gender. The data that has been utilised in this research has been collected from WhatsApp statuses. This paper has shown how memes manipulate language to reflect social-cultural realities in the 21st century, specifically in the context of dating in Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

Dating is an essential cultural preamble that men and women undergo in the trail towards finding someone considered suitable to be a spouse. During dating, language serves as the primary vehicle of communication. In the present day, no activity or subject cannot find its expression in terms of language (Murphy, 1996). The issue of dating has found its expression in memes. Richard Darwin coined the concept of a meme in 1976 as a gene-centred approach to cultural evolution (Diaz, 2013). According to Diaz, memes resemble viruses; they affect the brain and move from one person to another as a means to fight and strive for survival. The term meme has evolved. Currently, it refers to funny concepts in pictures, video, text, and animation form propagated through the internet. This introduction puts the subject of study in the proper context. The subsequent section discusses the theoretical framework.

THEORY

This paper was guided by the principles of meaning in use as propounded by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953). According to this theory, meaning is derived from how an expression is used. Meaning depends on the entire context of use. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is derived from its use in the context of other practices. This combination of non-linguistic and linguistic techniques serves as a link between language and the world. A word is assigned meaning by its relationship with different words and their use (Maattanen, 2005). An expression is used according to a set of practical activities. These practical activities help in understanding an expression. This theory was helpful as it enabled the researcher to assign meanings to the collected WhatsApp memes.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilised qualitative data collected from WhatsApp status. WhatsApp memes are in the form of animations, text, emoticons, videos, and photos. The memes collected were in phrases and sentences presented in text and picture form. The researcher interacted with many WhatsApp memes but utilised purposive sampling to identify the data required to answer the research questions. The researcher collected fifteen memes that used the imagery of the market to talk about dating. WhatsApp was selected because it is among the most efficient communication tools in the 21st century. It allows users to make memes, share, post, and repost. WhatsApp also serves as a propagation vehicle, allowing reduplication over the internet. The data was organised according to the research objectives and later analysed thematically. The research findings were presented in the form of discussions. Content analysis was used to study the phrases and sentences. This method allowed the researchers to extract meaningful information, assign meaning, and draw significant conclusions from the WhatsApp memes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Understanding the Context of the Market

Eben (2018) defines a market as a place where people interact physically or virtually to exchange goods and services for capital; if no money is exchanged, no price is paid, and a market cannot be defined. However, this paper will employ the ancient definition of a market as a physical place where people meet with the expectation of finding buyers and sellers. According to this paper, a dating scene is where people bump into each other to initiate an intimate relationship. We begin by examining the following expression:

- *kuoga na kurudi soko* [showering and going back to the market]

The simplicity of the expression ‘showering and going back to the market’ carries denotative and connotative meanings. According to Leech (1981), connotative meaning is the communicative value of an expression whose meaning overlaps the conceptual meaning to reference factors such as age or specific society conceived by an individual. The word *soko* or market has been used to demarcate a dating scene. From the definition given above, a symbol is a place that has meaning and stands for something more than itself. Perrine (1974) defines a symbol as something that means more than what it is. It is an object, a person, a situation, an action, or some other item that has a literal meaning in the story but also suggests or represents different meanings. The language contains rules of transference of meaning. In expounding how meaning has been transferred, this paper utilises the following formulae:

The figurative sense of G may replace the literal meaning of L if G is related to L in such-and-such a way (Leech, 1969:148)

In the market, before buyers decide to purchase some goods, they have the chance to compare brands to determine the price and quality. So, in the same way, dating gives parties involved an opportunity to understand someone’s personality by examining the character traits to determine if one is suitable to be a spouse or not. If not applicable, the phrase [showering and going back...] now comes in whereby the parties involved in dating have recognised that finding an appropriate partner for matrimony can be challenging in the same way, in a market, we have genuine goods and counterfeit. The phrase, [showering and going back to the market...] means moving on after accepting the outcomes of the previous relationship that did not work. According to Leech (1969), symbolism in collective use is assigned an underlying connotation by custom and familiarity. The buyers and the sellers in a marketplace can be equated to parties involved in dating that are male and female. The figurative sense of the phrase ‘showering and going back to the market’ has replaced the literal meaning of a dating scene; therefore, it is called a symbol.

Dating involves words relating to sex, sex organs, natural body functions, and feelings. Although sex is a natural human behaviour in humans, sex-related

matters have always been taboo and subject to social condemnation. Allan & Burrige (2006) define a taboo as the prescription or prohibition of conduct for a particular community of one or more persons at a specific time in specifiable contexts. Despite the censorship and shame associated with sexual concepts, or precisely for these reasons, people need to refer to them in one way or another (Fernández, 2018). This section investigates how sexual concepts have been referred to by the use of the imagery of the market. The beauty of the filthiness of a language is either in the collective ear of the society or that of an individual. Let us examine the following data:

2. (a). *Amerudi soko lakini ako side ya avocado, anafinywa akirudishwa* [You go back to the market, and you are on the side of avocados, you get pressed and left]

(b). *Amerudi soko lakini ako side ya miwa, anakulwa akitemwa* [You go back to the market, but you are on the section of sugarcane, you get chewed and spitted]

The translations are not the best because they preserve the source language’s meaning. A word, phrase, or expression has a denotative meaning and a connotative meaning, reflecting attitudes, values, judgments, and emotions (Fromkin et al., 2003). The connotative meaning of data (2) is as follows: it is a new relationship, and once the parties involved engage in sex, the relationship ends immediately. It also emphasises that women bear the bluntness of failed relationships and suffer more from abandonment than men. The food symbolism points to females as the oppressed victims of male dominance that is occasioned by the act of sex. Through the actions of chewing, spitting, and pressing, we trace the subtle imagery of women as they navigate their dating relationships. Male penetration is romanticised through connotative language that swaps vulgarity with a market discourse where foods are bought.

Since we have discussed the context of the market and what goes on there, we will now examine other elements in the sentence to interpret denotations and connotations of taboo expressions. The literal meaning in data 2(a) is that the only way to know whether an avocado is ripe enough before purchasing for immediate consumption is to use the

sense of touch. The avocado has been used symbolically about the female. The notion of reference overlaps with conceptual or denotative meaning (Leech, 1981). In the same way, a ripe avocado is sweet and can be used alongside other foods, the woman who is considered suitable for a relationship can spice up joy in a man's life. The act of sense of touch, which has been used referentially to mean the act of sex, is intended to determine whether the female (avocado) in the dating scene (market) is worth matrimony. Society plays a vital role in generating and transmitting the meaning of a meme. At this point, the reader might be frightened because of the choice of words given in the connotative meaning. As aforementioned, dating involves matters of sex which is among a set of taboo words in many cultures. The phrase used to give the connotative meaning sounds horrible, causes embarrassment, and frightens. The presence of taboo words in a society inspires the creation of euphemism.

Campbell and Mixco (2007) define euphemism as a word (or phrase) or an indirect expression that replaces another considered obscene, offensive, unacceptable in a social setting, or that otherwise causes discomfort. Euphemism is also referred to as taboo avoidance. The data in (2) in L₁ and L₂ utilises euphemism instead of the explicitly connotative meaning that speaks about sex. The usage of taboo words explicitly is offensive to others. Therefore, using euphemisms has served as a tool to reduce the impact and transparency of negative terms. A Greek historian Plutarch in the first century C.E. wrote that the early Athenians used kind and auspicious terminologies to conceal the ugliness of things (Fromkin et al., 2003). This is an indication that the usage of euphemism is not novel.

In data 2(b), the literal meaning is that sugarcane has juice, and the only way to extract the sweet juice is to remove the outer covering, chew the inner part, and spit the residues. Sugarcane has been used symbolically to refer to the female body. In the same way, the sugarcane has an outer covering, and the woman's body is covered by clothing. The word '*kulwa*', translated as 'chew', connotes the sexual act. The act of spitting has been used symbolically to mean the end of a relationship. Once the juice is exploited, the sugarcane residue is no longer important. This means if the woman no longer

spices joy in a man's life as expected or the union no longer works, then the relationship ends. It is believed in the African context that the male decides the fate of the relationship because he marries whom he wants.

The following set of data utilises an onion and a watermelon to symbolise what constitutes a dating scene:

3 (a) *Amerudi soko lakini ako side ya watermelon, anashinda akichange mind* [He/she has gone back to the market, but he/she is on the side of watermelon, he/she keeps changing his mind]

(b) *Amerudi soko lakini ako side ya kitunguu, alijipata akilia* [He/she has gone back to the market, but he/she is in the side of onions, he/she found himself/ herself crying]

In data 3(a), watermelon has been utilised to symbolise the readiness of someone to date or enter into a new relationship. In the Kenyan political arena, a famous politician named Kalonzo Musyoka has been nicknamed a watermelon because he lacks a firm stand on his political decisions. Watermelon is naturally green in the outer part while red on the inside. In 2010, the team supporting the new constitution was represented by green colour while those opposing it were represented by red colour. According to Mwaniki (2018), Kalonzo Musyoka was supporting the new constitution openly and opposing it secretly, therefore, the nickname watermelon. Data in 3 (a) shows how someone who intends to start a new relationship keeps on changing his mind due to the good or bad memories associated with the previous relationship. Connotations vary according to culture, history, and personal experience (Leech, 1981). It can also mean that even though the current relationship does not seem to work, the parties involved resort to setting aside their differences and continuing dating. This exemplifies the uncertainty of deciding the same way watermelon is green on the outside and red on the inside.

In data 3 (b), onion has been used to symbolise a dating scene. An onion is a delicacy if handled correctly when cooking, just like the dating process. Anyone who has ever cooked has an encounter with an onion bulb. Dicing and slicing onion bulbs

release a chemical called lachrymatory factor that irritates the tear gland (Klein, 2017). The irritant results either in a running nose or tears in the same way dating have ups and down; the parties involved end up crying due to emotional weakness associated with joy or pain. These tears are known as reflex tears, and they form when someone's eyes are exposed to irritants such as smoke and onion fumes. The irritants in the onion bulbs are equated to the ups and downs in a dating scene. A relationship's ups and downs cause pain and discomfort, manifesting in prime tears. The irritants in the onion bulbs serve as a defensive mechanism designed to protect it against insects and pests in the same way crying eases both physical and emotional pain. According to Leech (1981, any characteristic of the referent may contribute to the connotative meaning of the expression which denotes it. For the love of delectable onions, sometimes you just have to cry in the same way a relationship is sweet; there is no simple way to avoid it; from time to time, you just have to shed tears.

(a) *Hii ndio bale mpya na ni mali safi* [This is the new bale of outstanding products]

A market offers an opportunity for buyers to interact with lots of products. Due to stiff competition, a seller must stand out and convince potential buyers to become his customers. This process involves language manipulation. Henceforth, statements like [this is the new bale]. A bale is a huge package or bundle prepared for storage, shipping, or sale. In a bale, there are second-hand goods commonly referred to *mutumba* which are still in good condition and more so new goods. The term *mali safi* has been used to show the unique properties of the goods in the bale. A new bale has been used in reference to persons ready to try new relationships. It can be someone who has never been in a relationship, somebody in a relationship, or someone whose previous relationship did not work. Using the term *bale mpya* is a strategy to convince a potential partner that you bring freshness never experienced before. The market demarcated as a dating scene offers them an opportunity to explore something new. When a buyer purchases a good, he or she says the item purchased is outstanding based on the brand, quality, etc. *Mali safi* has been equated to someone with outstanding qualities such as beautiful, rich, humorous, and so on. The term is

male-oriented and is used to describe a beautiful woman or lady. A lady referred to as 'Mali safi' calls for no debate, she is an S.I. unit of beauty. This kind of beauty does not require patience or scrutiny to discover.

(b) *Sisi ndio tuko* [It is us who are available]

People set standards on whom to date to find a satisfying relationship. However, the standards set are high. Therefore, the basic level of quality expected or required is not met. Some standards are too ambitious and scare off potential partners. For example, most young ladies and men prefer to date rich people. In society, most rich people are old, characterised by their financial independence and professionalism. More so, they are family men and women. This means they are not available for long relationships. The young, poor, and ambitious generation are, however, readily available. Therefore, the phrase *sisi ndio tuko* comes in. This statement is a justification by the young generation that they need to be given a chance to date or be in a relationship no matter their financial struggles. Therefore, it conflicts with the meme in 4(a) that says, *hii ndio bale mpya*, which does not reflect the newness as expected from its perceived "new arrivals". It is a recycled product that is packaged as new. In dating, *bale mpya* signifies a single person ready to mingle.

The Role of Humour in the Collected Memes

Memes serve the purpose of entertainment, informing, and advertising and are characterised by humour. Memes surpass the functions mentioned above; they can also serve other purposes. The memes have allowed the expression of covetous taboo impulses associated with sex by upsetting the pattern and introducing market imagery. This can be ascribed to the description by Raskin (1985) that sex is typically suppressed and repressed, and humour serves as an outlet for its release in a manner that would be more appropriate and ethically acceptable than the more explicit, direct, and natural way. The joke expressed through language allows the WhatsApp status viewers to find relief and positive effect of laughing at jokes considered offensive if plain language is utilised.

Markers of Gender

Brugeilles and Cromer (2009) define gender as relations to culture and the social division into masculinity and femininity. The data utilised in this paper is originally from Swahili. According to Beck (2003), even though Kiswahili has no gender variable pronouns such as her/him or she/he, it has the possibility to specify referential gender explicitly by use of basic terms for ‘woman’, ‘man’, titles, terms of address and kinship terms such as ‘dada’ for sister, *kaka* for brother. Other basic terms like *mwana* for child and *mtu* for a person do not conceal the gender. It can either be male or female. Now, let us examine how data collected from WhatsApp status mark gender:

Use of Chauvinistic Verbs

Chauvinism is the maintenance of fixed beliefs and attitudes of male superiority, associated with overt or covert depreciation of women (Woods, 1976). According to Brown & Miller (2013), a verb is a word class whose prototypical or central members are dynamic and denote events. Therefore, chauvinistic verbs are action words that are male-oriented or dominated. The morpheme {w} in *anafinywa* and *anakulwa* in data (2) suggests that the action is being perpetrated by one person to the other. The verbs *anafinywa* (being pressed) and *anakulwa* (being chewed), which have been used referentially to mean the act of having sex, are chauvinistic verbs in the Kenyan context. They are chauvinistic in that the male does the act while the female is just a participant. Additionally, the sugarcane in 2 (a) that has been used symbolically is just a participant in the process of chewing, the one who chews enjoys.

Further on, the sugarcane foregrounds the male organ penetrating the feminine world to assert power. Femininity is thus termed as a hollow and empty space that needs occupancy since it is a “wild frontier” controlled through the act of sex. Therefore, the verbs and their morpheme structures are makers of macho masculinity. In the African context, when married couples are divorced, the husband divorces the wife, yet we know that this process involves two parties. Women are negatively portrayed as sluts with multiple partners, while men are absorbed by cheating.

Use of Names of Foods to Mark Gender

The name of foods such as avocado and sugarcane in the market has been used as markers of the female gender. The use of onion in 3 (b) marks both male and female genders. This is because humans have feelings manifested by crying, smiling, and so on. From our analysis, an onion irritates the tear gland; therefore, you end up crying. Mostly, women are prone to crying as opposed to men. Therefore, an onion can be used to mark the female gender based on perceptions of dominant gender ideologies. The onion marks females as the weaker sex compared to men.

Use of Basic Terms

Basic terms can be used to mark gender overtly or covertly. Covert gender is the gender that is not concealed while overt is concealed. It can either refer to male or female. Let us examine the following set of data:

4 (a) *Umeenda kuoga urudi soko jamaa wa black Mercedes C200 anachukua na sabuni kwa macho* [You have gone to shower so that you go back to the market but the guy with a black Mercedes picks you up with soap is still in his eyes]

(b) *Umerudi soko, kumbe umerudi kama kanjo; tunakuona tunakuhepa* [You have gone back to the market, but as a city council officer, when spotted, people run]

(c) *Amerudi soko lakini ako side ya viatu* [he has gone back to the market, but he positioned where shoes are being sold]

In data 4 (a), the word *jamaa* for a guy is a basic term that has been used to mark gender. According to Bakita (2015), *jamaa* is someone who is not known by name. According to this definition, we conclude that gender is not concealed. The word *jamaa* is a general term denoting human being. According to Beck (2003), there is a tendency for reference to a female person to be overtly marked, while general terms denoting human beings are preferentially interpreted as male. Therefore, the word *jamaa* is male-biased.

To add to this, there is a mention of a car brand, the black Mercedes C200, which can also be used to say

something about gender. According to Balkmar (2012), cars both reflect and reinstate culturally shared and widespread ideas about gender. Cars are gendered through their designs. A car with a bright colour is feminine. The Mercedes mentioned in data 4(a) is black, a dark colour associated with masculinity. More so Mercedes C200 is streamlined and square in form, a shape associated with men. Sparke (1995) notes that car designs are gender-coded. He adds that historically, bright colours and round forms are regularly associated with femininity, while square streamlined forms and darker colours are culturally associated with masculinity.

In data 4 (b), the word *kanjo* for city council officer refers to workers employed by the city council to enforce city by-laws. Some specific jobs imply the gender of the person such as waitress. The basic term *kanjo* for city council officer is a gender-neutral job; it can either be male or female. In the market context, they have to collect taxes. The *kanjos* are brutal when exercising their duty; they beat up hawkers and collect bribes and money from businesspeople. Even though this occupation is gender-neutral, the roots of male supremacy are embedded in the use of force. Therefore, the basic term *kanjo* is male-biased.

In data 4 (c), the word *kiatu* has been used to refer to someone who is ugly. When selecting a shoe in the market, you consider factors such as size, colour, shape, and brand. These factors define the beauty of a shoe. When choosing someone to date, factors such as personality, beauty, and ability to provide are considered. The beauty of a man is determined by financial capability, as data in 4 (a) portrays, while the beauty of a woman is from the physical appearance. Therefore, the word shoe is female-biased.

CONCLUSION

From all the data and explanations rendered in this paper, the transference of meaning has been established, identified inside the text, and supported by the entire context. It was established that memes carry subtle meanings that foreground the dating scene in Kenya. The market imagery visualises the dating scene in a humorous way that filters out explicitness, thus making memes suitable for the

general audience. The meaning-making process of the memes has been explained through the contextual usage of the market images like foods, clothing, buyers and sellers, and market stewards, all of which are active players in the market. It is from the above subjects and commodities that the paper argues that memes use the market discourse as a polite way of portraying the poetics of dating. The paper recommends more research on the plethora of memes to bring to the surface the variety of meanings they pass across.

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