

# ***Mafumbo*: Considering the Functions of Metaphorical Speech in Swahili Contexts**

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## **1. Introduction**

In a number of different forms of Swahili discourses and contexts, veiled speech loaded with metaphors through which “one thing is described in terms of another” (Cuddon 1999: 507) is appreciated and even wanted (Abdulaziz 1979, Allen 1981, Beck 2001) However, looking at the functions that metaphors have been considered to fulfill, one finds that they are extremely diverse, with different kinds of emphasis, and may even appear to be contradictory. Metaphorical speech has, for instance, recurrently been described as a politeness strategy: indirect speech is a way of safeguarding the other’s face. But for a number of Swahili poets, metaphors belong to classical poetic forms of discourse, like the *shairi* genre, where the notion of poetics is linked with ‘veiled speech’ (*mafumbo*), so that the aspect of safeguarding social balance is certainly not the most prominent function. And lastly, the notion of metaphor as an essentially poetic device has recurrently been criticized by cognitive linguists for whom metaphorical language is not an ornamental and disguising figure of speech, but a conceptual mechanism generally at work in language.

In this paper, I will first of all consider the three main approaches regarding the *raison d’être* and function of Swahili metaphorical speech: the politeness hypothesis, the stylistic hypothesis and the cognitive hypothesis. Secondly, taking particularly the cognitive and the poetic functions into consideration, I will address the question if and how one can reconcile the sometimes apparently contradictory functions: is the metaphor a (revealing) conceptual mechanism or a (disguising) poetic device? Considering particularly the poetic function of the metaphor in the area of classical Swahili poetry that I have mostly worked on, I will lastly deal with three different poetic domains which all draw on the poetic metaphor’s essential characteristic: ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> It is the multilayered nature of the poetic metaphor that the communicative use as a form of politeness draws on.

## **2. Three approaches to the metaphor**

### *2.1. The politeness hypothesis: the metaphor as a face-protecting strategy*

The use of Swahili metaphorical speech has frequently been described as an essential and prescribed part of face-threatening acts like criticisms and complaints, as the speaker can always recur to the literal meaning of the message, denying any critical illocutionary force (see for instance Velten 1903 (Allen 1981), Sheikh 1994, Beck 2001, Yahya-Othman 1994). At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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\* I thank the participants of the panel at the ACAL conference, where an earlier version of this paper was presented, for their interesting comments. The paper grew out of a footnote on metaphors in my PhD thesis on a 19<sup>th</sup> century Swahili narrative poem, where metaphors were of less importance but still gave rise to a number of questions. Thus, it largely draws on the fieldwork in Northern Kenya that I did for my PhD and particularly on the insights I got from three Swahili poets from Mombasa, Ahmed Nassir Juma Bhalo, Ahmad Sheikh Nabahany and his wife Khadija. I am most grateful to them. I also thank Naomi Shitemi, Geoffrey Kitula King’ei and Paola Ivanov for discussing aspects of the paper with me. All translations into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. I thank Ruth Schubert for proofreading and correcting the English text.

<sup>1</sup> The rather infelicitous term ‘classical’ is meant to refer to pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Swahili poetry or even poetry composed later that stresses the link to a canon of poetic form and diction. For a more extended critical discussion, see Vierke (forthcoming). It goes without saying that metaphors also figure in modern free verse poems, which will, however, not be in focus in this article.

century, Mtoro bin Mwingi Bakari in his description of Swahili customs describes this form of “double speech” as follows: “The reason why Swahili use double meanings is that if someone does something improper, people speak with double meaning so that he may not understand. If he knows the meaning, he can interpret it, and if he does not, he cannot” (Allen 1981: 194).

For an example, we can refer to Rose Marie Beck, who has analyzed the use of *kanga*<sup>2</sup>, a wrap with a printed message, as a means of communication, where the intention to pass on an often problematical message is key.<sup>3</sup> She gives the example of a divorced girl whose behavior was considered immoral and promiscuous (see Beck 2001a: 102ff.). Thus, she received a *kanga* from her grandmother with a printed message “*Mtungji umevundika*” which literally means “the pot is broken”, referring to her lost virginity – according to Beck a harsh form of criticism conveyed through the face-protecting metaphor.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory (1987), the use of the *kanga* described by Beck can be considered as an off-record or indirect politeness strategy, since it removes the speaker from the possibility of imposing, while still voicing the concern: “For the case of the *kanga*, the problem that needs solving and that may be seen as the background to the communicative genre is to compensate for communicative barriers (or communication gaps, Bearth 2000). Specifically the *kanga* is able to voice domains of daily life that are subject to speech prohibitions: mainly conflicts, envy, jealousy, discontent, quarrels, but also sexuality and to a certain degree adhortations and advice” (Beck 2001b: 158).

## 2.2. The stylistic hypothesis: the metaphor as a decorative device

The stylistic hypothesis regards metaphor primarily as an extraordinary use of language and a figure of speech used for aesthetic reasons. Accordingly, as echoed by the Encyclopædia Britannica, metaphors are mainly found in poetry, poetic language and registers prone to a heightened form of language: “Metaphor is the fundamental language of poetry, although it is common on all levels and in all kinds of language” (see E.B., under the entry ‘metaphor’). That view is commonly thought to go back to Aristotle, who underlines in ‘Rhetoric’ that it is the metaphor above all that “gives perspicuity, pleasure and a foreign air” and helps to ornament speech (‘Rhetoric’, Book III, chap. 2, 1404b, see also ‘Poetics’, chap. 22, 1458aff.). While the aspect of perspicuity has faded out of focus, it is the ornamenting function which the metaphor has mostly been associated with in the course of its history.<sup>5</sup>

Working on classical Swahili poetry from the 19<sup>th</sup> and also 20<sup>th</sup> century, I have come across a similar view, according to which the metaphor is an essential part of poetic language. Though poetic language is by no means restricted to poetry or to any particular poetic genre, and even everyday language can be poetic, particularly one of the poetic genres, the lyrical *shairi* genre, has been associated with poetic ‘heavy language’, *lugha nzito* (Abdalla 1990: 40ff.).<sup>6</sup> Even in emic terms, there is a clear differentiation between two levels of poetic style, *lugha nyepesi* ‘an easy, straightforward language’ and *lugha nzito* ‘heavy language’ (Abdalla 1990: 40ff.). Particularly the classical *shairi* poet is supposed to use the latter in his poetry, which is meant to be markedly different from everyday language (Abdulaziz 1979). Apart from using uncommon borrowings, and lexical and grammatical archaisms, and applying rules of scansion that lead to highly elliptic language (see Vierke 2011), one of the major ways ‘to render the language heavy’ is to use *mafumbo*, an obscure language, in which

<sup>2</sup> A *kanga* or *leso* is piece of printed cotton cloth worn as a wrapper by women in Eastern Africa. Typically, *kanga* contain a printed, mostly proverbial, message. For the various uses of *kanga* as a means of communication, see Yahya-Othman 1997, Beck 2001a, b.

<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that the *kanga* can also be used and interpreted differently, depending also on the situation as well as the intention of sender and recipient (see also below).

<sup>4</sup> For other poetic contexts where the broken pot is used as a metaphor referring to the loss of virginity and, by extension, immoral sexual behavior, see Vierke 2007.

<sup>5</sup> For a concise account of the concept’s history in German literary and philosophical scholarship and its gradual reduction to a mere figure of speech, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, leaving aspects of depiction and cognition out of consideration, see Birus 2007.

<sup>6</sup> On the various Swahili poetic genres, see Shariff 1988; on the classical *shairi* see Abdulaziz 1979.

metaphors play an important role.<sup>7</sup> *Kufumba maneno*, i.e. ‘to twist or to tie up words’ means to render the poem enigmatic: “*Shairi hutumiwa kwa kutumiwa kwa kufumba, kuichezea lugha kwa ujuzi na uhodari (...)*” (“The *shairi* genre is used by twisting the language, playing with the language with knowledge and skill (...)”) (Nabahany 1987: I). According to Swahili poets, like Ahmed Nabahany, it is particularly the heightened form of language and the effort to decode (*kufumbua* ‘to untie’) the poem’s riddles, the *mafumbo*, that the audience takes particular pleasure in.<sup>8</sup>

The following example, an enigmatic poem by the Mombasan poet Muyaka bin Haji from the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been interpreted in different ways. According to Abdulaziz (1979: 92), the narrator refers to an incident where he wanted to meet a lady and found two other men standing in front of her door.<sup>9</sup> She had inadvertently given all three men appointments at the same time. Muyaka satirizes her and in the last line he asks how a canoe (the lady) can hope to ferry such an unfriendly three as grass, goat and leopard across the river together (Abdulaziz 1979: 92, stz. 1, translation by Abdulaziz):

*Mbwene mwinda na t’aza / kuemewa ni tomezi*  
*Mno vikanishangaza, / hapatwa na makuuzi*  
*Hafikiri nikiwaza, / Mola ndiye muwawazi*  
*T’ui na mani na mbuzi / huvushaje dau moja?*

I saw (with great surprise) an expert hunter with her retriever being baffled by small prey!  
 And I was completely puzzled, and became utterly dumbfounded  
 I thought and pondered, ‘God is surely the only One Who can comprehend (human behavior)!  
 How on earth could a leopard, a goat and grass be ferried across together in one canoe?’

Apart from having a decorative function, the metaphorical language used in this poem can be considered to do face-work, masking a complaint, coming functionally close to the *kanga* method of communication described above. This aspect is also acknowledged from an emic point of view according to which poetry, rather than being a hermetic art for art’s sake, is meant to answer social needs and goals in Swahili society, as echoed in Nabahany’s description of poetic aims (see also Abdalla 1990): “*Mshairi hutunga shairi kwa lengo la kumfundisha mtu kitu fulani, kumfumba mtu (kama vile mshairi mwengine) au kwa kumwambia mtu jambo ambalo hawezi kumwambia usoni mwake moja kwa moja*” (A poet composes a poem to teach something to someone, to make up a riddle for somebody (i.e. another poet) or to tell someone something that he cannot tell him/her directly to his or her face”) (Nabahany 1990: 5).

### 2.3. *The cognitive hypothesis: the metaphor as a conceptual mechanism*

While the stylistic hypothesis has been put to the foreground in the history of Western research in the last couple of centuries, the notion of a metaphor being a mere embroidering literary device has been called into doubt by cognitive linguists like, to mention only the pioneers, Lakoff and Johnson (1980). From their point of view, metaphorical language is not simply “a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish – a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language” nor is it “characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought and action”, but a conceptual mechanism “pervasive in everyday life” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 3). Thus, metaphors are a part of

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers, who underlined that *fumbo* (pl. *mafumbo*) does not only refer to metaphorical speech in the strict sense but can mean ‘proverb’, ‘riddle’, ‘enigma’, ‘obscurity’, ‘irony’, ‘sarcasm’ and ‘word-game’.

<sup>8</sup> On Lamu in Northern Kenya, according to some accounts in old manuscripts, there even used to be poetic competitions, *gungu* ceremonies, where aspiring poets competed against each other in solving poetic riddles, *mafumbo*, that the *shaha*, the master poet made up (see Harries 1962: 172ff.; see also Abdulaziz 1979: 51ff.; both rely on manuscripts from the Taylor Papers kept at SOAS in London): the *shaha* ‘ties up an animal’, *anafunga nyama*, i.e. he composes an enigmatic poem and the poets have to ‘untie it’, to solve the riddle. The one who unties it, is the winner and is formally recognized as *shaha*.

<sup>9</sup> Though Muyaka is certainly the most prolific *shairi* poet, enigmatic poetry is not restricted to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. See for instance the contemporary poetry by Ahmad Nassir Juma Bhalo (Harries 1966), Abdilatif Abdalla (1973) and Said Ahmed Mohamed (e.g. Mohamed 2002).

human thought processes, because they are a tool used to make sense of everyday realities and to structure “kinds of experiences that are less concrete or less clearly delineated in their own terms” (Lakoff and Johnson: 118). Helping to cope with the complexities of experience, they are a means to grasp “a relatively abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete or at least more highly structured subject matter” (Lakoff 1993: 244). As not only Lakoff and Johnson themselves but also many others following their approach have shown, metaphorical language that maps concrete source domains to abstract target domains, is pervasive not only in poetry, but in all forms of discourse and registers, such as science (Jäkel 1997), politics (Lakoff 1996), religion (Biebuyck et al. 1998) and education (Cameron 2003).

We can even add another Swahili example to the area of science, referring to *Taalamu ya Ushauri* (“The Study of Poetry”), a theoretical book meant for secondary school and university students, by two Kenyan scholars, Kitula King’ei and Amata Kemoli (2001). A subsection of the second chapter bears the title “*Ushairi ni chombo cha utamaduni wa jamii*” (“Poetry is a vessel of the society’s culture”), where poetry is compared to a vessel (*chombo*), underlining its functional and storing aspect. In the following sentence, the discipline of poetry is metaphorically depicted as an area, i.e. in terms of a well-defined space within the wider space of language and culture: “*Sababu ya kwanza kabisa ni kuwa ushairi ni sehemu mojawapo ya lugha na utamaduni wa jamii.*” (“The most basic reason is that poetry is one area of language and the society’s culture”) (Kin’gei and Kemoli 2001: 4).

This unidirectional transfer from concrete to abstract has helped linguists to account conceptually for change in lexical meaning and grammar. From the conceptual perspective of grammaticalization, the speaker makes “use of existing forms for expression of new concepts” (Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer 1991: 27). This ‘recycling strategy’ that extends the usage of the existing concept “serves the introduction of new lexemes; at the same time, however, it forms the primary means for creating grammatical expression” (Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer 1991: 27).

Similarly to its English counterpart, the verb ‘to compose’ in Swahili, *kutunga*, for instance, comes from a more concrete meaning ‘to drive cows together’, ‘to put beads on a string’ (see also Krapf 1882: 386, Sacleux 1939: 913); by metaphorical extension, the mental process of composition is depicted as a concrete process: like beads that are aligned on a string, words are carefully arranged in poetry (see also Hichens 1939: 53).

By referring to a metaphorical process, we can also account for the development of grammatical constructions in Swahili.<sup>10</sup> For instance, the commonly observed use of locative constructions to express a progressive (see Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer 1991: 36) is also attested in Swahili, where speakers equally translate time into space: *mimi nimo katika kusoma* ‘I am reading’, literally ‘I am in reading’ i.e. ‘I am in the process of reading’. A verbal noun in class 15 (*kusoma* ‘reading’) takes the slot of the location (compare *nimo posta* ‘I am in the post office’).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, we are tempted to agree with Anatol Stefanowitsch (2005: 164) who weighs the cognitive motivation of the metaphor against stylistic motivations: “This pervasiveness (and systemacity) of metaphor could not be accounted for if metaphor were simply a stylistic phenomenon.” Stefanowitsch argues that the understanding of the metaphor as an ornament going back to Aristotle is not far-reaching enough, as the idea of poetic decoration alone cannot account for the systematic usage of metaphor (and the systematic difference between metaphors and more literal near-synonyms): the metaphor is essentially cognitively motivated.

However, while I totally agree with Stefanowitsch that the metaphor has a cognitive foundation – even Aristotle agrees with this – I think that his notion of stylistics or poetics, according to which the metaphor is a poetic ornament needs to be reconsidered. And I am going to turn to a consideration of the poetic function in the following.

<sup>10</sup> As in other Bantu languages, some TAM morphemes in Swahili can be traced back to concrete lexical items (see for instance Mische 1979, 1992, Marten 1998, Heine 2003: 580).

<sup>11</sup> Examples can even be found in 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry, like the *Utendi wa Haudaji* (stz. 412, Vierke 2011: 559): *Haudaji, uwenezo, / nd’izo, nizifuetezo; / ni katika kwend’a nazo / kwa amri ya Jalia.* “The palanquins that you have seen are the ones that I have been following. I am in the process of accompanying them under God’s grace.” I thank the anonymous reviewer for throwing a critical eye on the examples.

### 3. Reconsidering the poetic function: What is the *poetic* in poetic metaphor?

Certainly, cognitive linguistics has done a great job in underlining and systematizing the metaphorical structure of human cognition. It needs to be added that Aristotle himself saw metaphor as a human cognitive capacity. According to him, unlike other decorative means that the poet can learn to make use of, the finding of metaphors is an innate talent for seeing analogies between different domains of experience: “This alone cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts: because to use metaphor well is to discern similarities” (‘Poetics’, chap. 22, 1459a). Thus, while both cognitive semantics and Aristotle seem to underline the conceptual foundation of the metaphor, Aristotle’s statement (considering the “capacity for metaphor as the greatest asset” (‘Poetics’, chap. 22, 1459a)) also implies a qualitative differentiation between capable and less capable poets and between well-used and less well-used metaphors. Cognitive semantics, however, rather ignores what I would call the poetic question. While all metaphors may have a cognitive foundation, they differ qualitatively. In other words, there are some metaphors which are more poetic than others; not all metaphors have counterparts in everyday speech.

In Muyaka bin Haji’s *shairi* poem, *Dunia mti mkavu* ‘The world is a dry brittle tree’ (Abdulaziz 1979: 63, translation by Abdulaziz), the poet translates an abstract concept, the world, into concrete, palpable matter, an old, rotten tree, an image representing the futile and treacherous nature of life. The interpretation of the tree as a *vanitas* motif is enhanced by the last line which changes the literal topic, reminding the audience that even a momentous feeling of making progress is deceptive.

*Dunia mti mkavu, / kiumbe siulemele,  
Ukaufanyia nguvu / kuudhabiti kwa ndole;  
Mtiwe ni mtakavu, / mara ulikwangushile.  
Usione kwenda mbele, / kurudi nyuma si kazi.*

The world is a dry brittle tree; do not lean on it, you mortal creature.  
Nor should you hold on to it tightly with too firm a grip.  
It is made of rotten wood, and will soon drop you to the ground:  
Do not be too tempted by present good fortune, misfortune may come any time.  
(Lit. You may be finding yourselves moving forward now, but going back is the most easy thing to happen).

The image of the tree is based on universal human cognition and on analogical conclusions, and yet this image is not found in everyday language and evokes an impression of depth, implying numerous shades of meaning that go far beyond casual talk. Constructing analogies might be human, but not every human being has the same capacity of seeing and evoking similarities. It is precisely this difference that lies at the basis of the poetic, and which gets lost if one merely considers the cognitive foundations of metaphor.

The following stanza from a longer epic poem, the *Utendi wa Haudaji*, provides another example (see Vierke 2011: 490). It is part of a longer eulogy of God. Human beings (*ziombe* ‘creatures’) evoked in the first line are compared to cattle (*ng’ombe*) in the second line. Against the backdrop of the last two lines referring to slaughter (evoking knives “which can do more than just shaving”), cattle become an image of the mortal and unconscious human being who does not realize and want to realize that s/he is destined to die. The elliptical stanza has a gloomy effect: the process of slaughtering is not explicitly mentioned, but merely exists in the audience’s imagination, which seeks to fill the semantic gap resulting from the juxtaposition of the images.

<i>Nd’iye muongowa ziombe, wakeo kama ng’ombe, na akhira kuna nyembe, hupita na kunyolea.</i>	[God] is the guide of [all human] beings, who are like cattle. In the netherworld there are knives, which can do more than just shaving. (stz. 45)
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It is the process of mapping the cows onto human beings and knives onto the scenery that stirs the audience’s imagination. It hints at an essential connection, a shared essence that reveals itself only through careful consideration. Like an optical illusion, a third image shines through the aligned images,

in this case, the idea of ephemerality and doom and the pressing need for the unconscious human being to repent. It is the momentous experience of depth which qualifies the master poet, being a sign of his *busara* 'wisdom'.

In its intention of unraveling realities, poetry is even similar to science. However, science puts emphasis on terms which have a precisely defined, unequivocal denotation. Poetry, on the other hand, depicts an "inexhaustible complexity", as Schadewaldt (1963: 411) writes with respect to Greek poetry. By using metaphorical images, poetry connotes: "The means of poetry is not the term, but the parable, picture. The intention: not denotation but connotation. The precision, which poetry demands as well: not exactitude (*akribeia*), but adequately layered salience (*sapheneia*)."<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, poetic metaphors differ qualitatively from other metaphors: the metaphor in non-poetic speech tends to denote. As Stefanowitsch underlines, an expression like 'in the heart of', as for instance, 'in the heart of the city' is void of ambiguity: on the contrary, the speaker uses it to refer to the middle or the centre of vast and complex geographical shapes "that are difficult to conceptualize or describe" (p. 174). Furthermore, as he observes, there is a systematic difference to its quasi-synonymous literal counterpart 'in the centre of' which tends to refer to "comparatively simple, clearly recognizable shapes with easily determinable centres" (p. 174). Thus, according to Stefanowitsch's argumentation, given the systematic and "stylistically neutral" usage of the metaphorical expression, it must be cognitively motivated rather than motivated by a concern for decorative, emotionally charged language, which he associates with poetic language. The speaker uses it as an idiomatic expression with a clearly defined reference. The table leg, to give another example, is an equally unpoetic and semantically opaque expression in English whose literal meaning hardly comes to the fore and whose reference is unambiguous.<sup>13</sup> Similarly in Swahili, for instance, an expression, like *kutungu shairi* 'to compose a poem' simply refers to the abstract notion of poetic composition and no longer evokes its etymology, i.e. the idea of aligning words on a string.

Thus, an important difference between the poetic and non-poetic use of metaphors is the degree of conventionalization (see also Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 139). Unlike conventionalized metaphors, 'creative metaphors' first of all surprise: as they have never or seldom been used before, they contain a collocation that is not expected. Likening a human being to cattle and the world to a dry tree are comparisons that conflict with the audience's expectations, the latter being based on their previous experience of comparisons (see also Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer 1991: 60). Poetic metaphors, which "sit at one far end of the spectrum of linguistic metaphors", as Parker (1998: 437) writes, "challenge some part of our pre-existing conceptual schemes, precisely because they are not grounded in our stockpile of conceptual metaphors." It is the "deviant predication" (Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer 1991: 60) or collocation which lies at the base of the metaphor's powerful enigmatic nature: while conventionalized metaphors are commonly used to highlight a known, shared property between the two entities compared (e.g. poetry is compared to a vessel to highlight its functional aspect), the audience needs some reflection to discover the shared properties of a dry tree and the world, two entities that are not commonly compared and whose comparison might even seem impossible at first glance.<sup>14</sup> The metaphor in the poetic context escapes easy understanding and can certainly not be considered in the Lakoffian sense, as a handy organizing or structuring tool facilitating the speaker to get a firm grasp of abstract or less clearly delineated experiences. The relations between the entities compared in the examples given above are multi-layered and complex, creating an impression of depth. The metaphor in these poetic contexts is concealing and revealing at the same time (see Schadewaldt 1963).

Accordingly, the Swahili master poet is not only expected to use language "heavy of thought" (Abdalla 1990: 40), but he is also expected to find an appropriate form and new metaphorical images

<sup>12</sup> We can even link the aspect of "pleasure", mentioned above in the context of the ornamental function of metaphor, with this experience of decoding the poem or of revelation, which is a pleasure of a much more intellectual kind.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly in Swahili *mguu wa meza* 'table leg' has no poetic connotations.

<sup>14</sup> In his 'Poetics' (chap. 22, 1458a) Aristotle defines the riddle as attaching "impossibilities to a description of real things." A good example is the poem by Muyaka mentioned above, which ends with the riddle of how the impossible combination of a leopard, a goat and grass may be ferried over the river.

for his thoughts: “He must be able to (...) twist and construe the words to his advantage, and to introduce original metaphors and idioms into his works” (Abdulaziz 1979: 88). In fact, in the context of Swahili poetry, the metaphor is not added after the message has already been decided upon, to give it a poetic flavor, like cream being added on top of the ice-cream. This does not reflect the process of composition, as the master poet Ahmed Nassir Juma Bhalo underlined in a discussion that we had. According to him, imagery and message cannot be told apart, since the images come to mind first. Sometimes without grasping the depth of these images himself, he cannot but use these very images to convey his thoughts adequately. Given the close relation between image and thought, a poetic metaphor cannot be substituted or paraphrased either, since the poetic element is lost if one tries to express it in other terms.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in short, it is its enigmatic nature, a sense of ambivalence, which makes the poetic metaphor different from other conventionalized metaphors and which demands interpretation but typically escapes easy understanding.<sup>16</sup> This enigmatic nature is conditioned both by the originality that is prescribed from an emic perspective (poetic metaphors need to be innovative) and by their use in unexpected contexts and collocations.

#### 4. The power of ambiguity: examples of metaphors in different poetic domains

In the following I am going to explore the notion of ambiguity by considering examples coming from different poetic genres. Allowing for several interpretations, metaphorical form fits the content in genres which at first glance might seem to have very little in common, like religious, erotic and political poetry.

##### 4.1. Religious and philosophical poetry

As already shown by the examples given above, metaphorical expression fits religious and philosophical poetry. The ultimately incomprehensible nature of life and death can only be explored in images that cannot be reduced to easy terms but evoke the “inexhaustible complexity” mentioned by Schadewaldt. Indeed, Swahili religious poetry is full of metaphors. A prominent example is the *Inkishafi* that has recurrently been acknowledged for its allegorical nature grounded in multi-layered imagery (see Taylor 1915, Hichens 1939): on the one hand, it depicts in vivid colors the downfall of the city state of Pate in Northern Kenya, which gradually lost its hegemonic status in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; but, on the other hand, it is at the same time a more general parable on the brevity and vanity of human life, having a quasi mystical quality that the title *Inkishafi* ‘the revelation’ also hints at (see Allen 1946).

The following stanza is taken from a passage that depicts the deserted houses, painting a tableau of Pate in vivid terms, referring to the bats and birds that have invaded the house and the gloomy absence of any noise (Hichens 1939: 81; stz. 49):

*Nyumba zao mbake ziwele t'ame;*  
*makinda ya p'opo iyu wengeme.*  
*Husikii hisi wala ukeme;*  
*Zitanda matandu walitandiye.*

Their mansions bright, with empty echoes ring.  
High in the halls the fluttering night-bats cling.  
Though hear'st no outcry; no sweet murmuring.  
The spiders, o'er the couches, spin their skein.

The poem transgresses the historical reality of Pate and the ruined houses can be considered to stand for the inevitability of death in a more general sense. House and inhabitant are in a metonymic

<sup>15</sup> One might also refer here to Jakobson, who underlines the close relation between form and message in his understanding of what he calls “the poetic function of language”, i.e. “the set (*Einstellung*) towards the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake (...)” (Jakobson 1981: 25).

<sup>16</sup> Jakobson considers poetic speech to be permeated by relations of similarity, where elements that would not be likened to each other in everyday discourse appear in direct contiguity. The result of this unexpected juxtaposition is ambiguity, which “is an intrinsic, inalienable character of any self-focused message, briefly a corollary feature of poetry” (Jakobson 1981: 42).

relation which is ultimately one of similarity or identity: the decay of the houses is echoed by the decay of the human bodies whose decomposition is very plastically described in the poem: “But the death of a village or a civilization is a metaphor drawn from the literal death of human beings. Al-Inkishafi is ultimately a poem about a perennial theme – the theme of Death as the great equalizer” (Mazrui 1977: 8). Furthermore, the graves are referred to as the ‘houses of sand’ *nyumba za t’anga-t’anga* (Hichens 1939, stz. 60; see also stz. 33, 44, 58, 59): the parallelism of the deserted houses of the living and the ‘houses of the dead’ further highlights the comparison that permeates the poem.

#### 4.2. Erotic poetry

The form also fits the context in a totally different domain: erotic poetry. In the *Utendi wa Mwana Mnga*, a sensual depiction of a woman from head to toe, commonly attributed to the mythical hero and master poet Fumo Liyongo (Miehe et al. 2004), the women’s body parts are likened to fruits and other objects found in nature: her head is smooth like marble (stz. 9), her ears curve like a sea-shell (stz. 10), her chin is like a ripening almond (stz. 34), her fingers are long like the branches of an acacia (stz. 28), her navel is like a casket (stz. 38), and particularly her private parts are depicted in metaphorical terms (her breasts are pomegranates, stz. 32).<sup>17</sup> A sexual adventure is depicted in terms of a ‘boat trip’ (see stz. 41 and 42 below): the woman’s private part is depicted as a boat, *safina*.<sup>18</sup> The male narrator, on the other hand, unfurls the main sail, raising it to the top of the mast, going down to the bilge before firing a canon – a highly metaphorical depiction with increasing tension (see Miehe et al. 2004: 62, 63; translation by Miehe et al.).<sup>19</sup>

*Na yakwe safina / nalipoiyona, / si nyire, si p’ana / iyaliye nyonga.*

And her sailing ship - when I saw it - was neither long nor wide but filled well between the thighs.

*K’akunduwa dume / matanga yakwime / haswa la galime / shira’a k’asonga.*

I unfurled the main sail raising it to the top of the mast; concentrating then on the smaller sail hauling its ropes to catch the wind.

So far the usage of veiled speech has chiefly been considered as a strategy for talking about morally unacceptable topics in public. For instance, Nabahany (1990: 13) explains the use of metaphorical language in the following way: “Fumo Liyongo *alieleza mambo ambayo yakisomwa mbele ya hadhara ya watu hakuna atakayeona haya, lakini ni mambo ambayo, kwa kawaida, hayatasimuliwi hadharani. Aliyafinika*” (“Fumo Liyongo explained matters in such a way that if they were read in public no one would feel ashamed, but generally speaking, these matters are not spoken about in public, thus, he concealed them”). Also Topan and Khamis (2006: 128) underline that the “subdued manner using dense imagery giving some imagination to the reader” in the poem is used in order to “reduce a sense of obscenity that emerges out of it”. Thus, metaphors in erotic contexts would be similar to metaphors used in risky social contexts described before as a politeness strategy. There is a sense of speaking while denying the act of speaking.

While considering this way of speaking as a form of face-protection underlines the capacity to mask speech, and concentrates on strategies of not-speaking while speaking, the sense of speaking needs to be further explored. Veiled speech not only denies its force, but, on the contrary, the message develops its particular force precisely because it is veiled. Erotic poetry in particular gains its erotic force by making allusions and suggestions through comparisons and images that attract the audience’s attention towards the meaning rather than showing it openly. Its veiled, sensual imagery, whose references are neither unequivocal nor totally obscure, stirs the imagination of the recipient and makes the mind wander. Without a veil, erotic poetry would turn into pornography.

<sup>17</sup> The *Utumbuizo wa Mjemje* is another example of a poem where a female body is depicted in terms of fruits and plants (see Vierke 2007).

<sup>18</sup> For an explanation of the metaphorical vocabulary (including drawings) by Muhamadi Kijuma, who supplied Western scholars with explanatory word lists, see Miehe & Vierke 2010: 405ff.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar poem depicting a female body in metaphorical terms, referring also to sexual intercourse, see *Alika kama Harusi* by Muhamadi Kijuma in Miehe & Vierke 2010.



### 4.3. Critical political poetry

Political poetry with a critical or even provocative message also draws its particular force from its ambiguity. After being sentenced to three years' solitary confinement for having distributed a poetic pamphlet *Kenya: Twendapi?* 'Quo vadis Kenya?' in 1969, the Kenyan poet Abdilatif Abdalla, the first political prisoner in Kenya, continued composing metaphorical poetry. In one of his prison poems *Mnazi Vuta N'kuvute* 'Coconut tree: pull and I pull you', for instance, Abdalla (1973: 17) depicts the post-independence conflict over the distribution of resources and power between the two most important political leaders in Kenya, Kenyatta and Odinga, as a conflict between two brothers, the poor Alii and the well-off and arrogant Badi, fighting over a plantation of coconut trees, which represent Kenya. Alii asks his brother to share his wealth and power, but he refuses to do so, as already becomes clear at the beginning of the poem:<sup>20</sup>

Alii:

*Ndugu ulo mnazini, wanitafuta balaa  
Nakwambiya shuka tini, katakata wakataa  
Wafanya ni masikani, mustarehe 'mekaa  
Utashuka au la?*

Badi:

*Ndugu tini ya mnazi, nilo juu nakujibu  
Haya ni upuuzi, unambiyayo swahibu  
Kushuka tini siwezi, pasi kujurwa sababu  
hiyo ni yangu jawabu*

Alii:

Brother in the coconut tree, do you want me to be in trouble?  
I am telling you to come down and you refuse stubbornly,  
You make it your home, you enjoy it and stay  
Will you come down or not?

Badi:

Brother below the coconut tree, I am up here, this is my answer  
to you  
What you are telling me is nonsense, my friend  
I cannot come down from the tree, without any reason  
this is my answer.

One of the reasons for using a highly metaphorical form of poetry was definitely his intention to hide the message from the guards who smuggled his poetry out of the prison, as Abdalla explains himself in an interview: "... I doubt if they [the prison guards] will be able to make out the meaning of the poems. Even if they will, I have 1001 alternative interpretations for each one of them" (The Star, Wednesday, October 6, 2010).<sup>21</sup>

However, apart from disguising his intent to save not only his face but his life, his criticism particularly gains in power through the hidden message in the poem. Precisely because it escapes easy, straightforward interpretation, it makes the listener-reader unravel the analogies, so that its effect is particularly powerful, as it only comes about with a delay in the hearer-reader's imagination. The message is hence like a Trojan horse that derives its power precisely from its innocent or unconcerned appearance, which helps it to penetrate to the very centre of the securely protected enemies' fortress, where it develops a destructive force. It provides the poet with a sense of shrewdness or cunningness, affirming his (at least verbal) superiority that outwits the opponent. From a Swahili perspective, it is the artistically veiled, indirect message, addressing a pressing issue that hits the mark, which is considered to be particularly elegant and powerful. Veiled speech not only avoids tension (being face-protecting for the speaker and the hearer), but can also create tension (being face-threatening to the hearer) at the same time – precisely because of its ambiguity.

The aspect of provocation, or responding to a provocation, is feasible in numerous forms of *kujibizana* 'verbal duels' (Biersteker 1996). *Kanga* communication, where messages are also exchanged to tease and provoke each other (King'ei p.c.), can be considered to be of a similar nature. Furthermore, this aspect is also reflected by the ancient tradition of political verbal duels. There is a large corpus of texts from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the Swahili city states all along the Kenyan coast fought each other not only on the battlefield, but also by exchanging enigmatic, provocative poetic letters (see Biersteker and Shariff 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Most of his prison poems were published later in an anthology *Sauti ya Dhiki* 'Voice of Agony'.

<sup>21</sup> Cited after a blog entry by Chachage 2010.

The poem on the right hand side (below) was written by Zahidi Mngumi, who reigned over the city state of Lamu at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in answer to a letter he had received from Muyaka, who is supposed to have composed the poem on the left hand side (below) on behalf of a coalition between Pate and Mombasa (taken from Biersteker and Shariff 1995: 27, 28, 39, 40, stzs. 1 and 2; translation by Biersteker and Shariff).

The dialogic structure of the poem is evident, since Mngumi not only mentions Muyaka's letter, but also takes up issues introduced in the previous poem by Muyaka. For instance, he refers to the "tied clothes", which refer to duels for which fighters would prepare by tying themselves to the spot, so that they would not be able to flee an attack if overcome by fear. In the second stanza, he also takes up Muyaka's boastful introductory line *Mimi niko Pate Yunga* 'I am in Proud Pate' by answering *Kwamba uko Pate-Yunga, nami niko Kiwandeo* which we could paraphrase as 'o.k. you are on glorious Pate – so what, I am on the island of pride, i.e. on Lamu.'

Muyaka bin Haji (Pate-Mombasa coalition)

*Mimi niko Pate-Yunga, nifuwete Ahamadi  
Qatu si mwenye kuzinga, ulimi wangu sirudi  
P'inga zemu mungapinga, hazitangui ahadi  
Siku ya thuluthi ahadi, tutaonana fundoni*

I am in Proud Pate, in support of Ahmad. Never will I return back, my word will not be withdrawn. Oppose me though you may, opposition does not nullify a promise. On next Tuesday, we will meet in battle

*Watumba musuwe kule, mukakaa kandokando  
Vutikani muye mbele, tuoneshana zitendo  
Mtaona wateule, nguo wafungenye p'indo  
Siku ya kutinda fundo, tutaonana fundoni*

"Brides to be" you should not be there, you sitting on the side. Advance and come forward, so that we meet in action. You will see the finest men, with their clothing tied together. On the day of fighting, we will meet in battle.

Zahidi Mngumi (Lamu)

*Muhibu wamu mngwana, niwene wako waraka  
K'ifahamiya maana, kiteko kikanicheka  
Nguo muyapo fungana, zitawakusa mashaka  
Ni'oteyani zise koka, meswiri kuwa kizani*

My dear gentleman, I have seen your letter. As I understand its meaning, I burst out laughing. When you come to tie the clothes, that will bring you trouble. One who stokes a fire with wood that does not burn, will remain in darkness

*Kwamba uko Pate-Yunga, nami niko Kiwandeo  
Sikae ukiipanga, hutofidi muradio  
Mume huya akasonga, haneni "yeo ni yeo"  
Wayole mbwawa waliyo, watendayo msituni*

If you are in Proud Pate, and I am in Glorious Lamu. You should not sit planning, you will not achieve your goals. A brave man advances, he does not say, "You will see me today". Examine the life of carnivores in the forest [that is how we shall fight].

In his poem, Mngumi makes an effort to show his fearlessness. To underline his determination, he closes his first stanza with a metaphor to underline the point: the preparations by the opponents will have as little effect as a fire fed with wood that does not burn. The metaphorical allusion to the life of carnivores in the last line given here is meant to underline his readiness to fight. Using a rhetorical question, it is again up to his opponent to fill the semantic gap.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

I have tried to consider three common approaches to Swahili metaphorical discourses, the politeness approach, the stylistic approach and the cognitive approach. While I have argued that the metaphor is grounded in human cognition, cognitive linguistics can hardly account for the qualitative difference between unpoetic metaphors and poetic metaphors that, far from being purely ornamental, are powerful figures of thought and imagination. The poetic capacity is grounded in its essential ambiguity: rather than having a conventional denotation, the poetic metaphor creatively coined by the

<sup>22</sup> Other more recent contexts in which highly metaphorical language is used to provoke and to compete are rap music (Vierke 2009), where ad hoc competitions play a decisive role, and *mipasho* music (see Kolbusa 2010) where metaphors are used to provoke and not to mitigate tension.

poet, or used in new contexts, has multiple references, precisely because it is not part of a common store of idioms. The poetic metaphor is essentially multilayered or ambiguous. Thus, it appears in various poetic contexts with complex and multilayered contents that might at first glance seem to be unrelated. The poetic metaphor is an adequate instrument to describe the ‘inexhaustible complexity’ of life and death in religious and philosophical poetry. It appears in erotic poetry, as erotic attraction or tension is created by the power of suggestion (which implies an idea of being open to various imaginations) and assuming without revealing and seeing. Lastly, the poetic metaphor also figures in political criticisms and provocations; it is particularly hard-hitting as the recipient  *nolens volens*  contributes to its effect: it only unfolds its implications after interpretation.

By considering the poetic nature of ambiguity as key, I have countered the predominant reading of poetic metaphors as a form of politeness strategy, which cannot account for the erotic, philosophical or provocative force of the messages. Certainly, the communicative and the poetic aspect are related: both hinge on the role of ambiguity. Swahili poetry often has social implications: even religious and philosophical poetry implies a moral imperative, as poetry is also meant to teach. And social criticism often takes a poetic form (e.g. *kanga* communication, political criticism and the use of proverbs). However, rather than considering poetic discourse as a mere politeness strategy, I would consider the aspect of politeness in the use of metaphors as being derived from its ambiguous nature: the *kanga* message is the social and communicative application of the poetic aspect.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See also Ivanov (2010) for an aesthetic consideration of the female social practice of wearing a veil.

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