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Conceptualizing Famine and Periodic Food Shortage Ideologies through Image Schemas: The Case of Dholuo in Kenya

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Abstract: Ravaging drought and biting hunger/famine are not new phenomena in Kenya. Every year, different parts of the country experience episodic or seasonal food shortage caused by inadequate rainfall. The Luo community in Nyanza notably braves raging hunger by nicknaming famines based on the circumstances and impact of a dry season on the people. The nicknames used to describe the famines are chiefly drawn from recurrent patterns arising from bodily experiences such as containers, paths, links and forces. Against this backdrop, the present study set out to investigate the nicknames of famines in Dholuo to reveal how famine ideologies are conceptualized using image schemas. A descriptive study was conducted in Homa-Bay County. Sixteen key informants were interviewed on famine nicknames and the ethno-semantic implications of the descriptions. From the interview, twelve nicknames of the famines considered to be the most biting were purposively sampled for analysis using the Image Schemas Theory (IST). The study found that famine hits hardest between April and July when many crops in Nyanza are being weeded in anticipation of harvesting in August. Secondly, the study found that the Luo community braves hunger/famine through nicknames that utilize FORCE, CONTAINER, OBJECT and PATH schematic patterns. Further, famine naming among the Luo represents socio-economic ideologies that are important for understanding local and national subsistence crises. The findings of this study indicate that Cognitive Linguistics dispenses powerful tools for conceptualizing abstract concepts such as famine/hunger. Famine nicknames in Dholuo are versatile tools that enrich communication with ethno-semantic layers of interpretation. The study concludes that schematic patterns used to conceptualize famine are products of cognition and should therefore be investigated through the lenses of a cognitive linguist.

Keywords: Famine nicknames, image schemas, Cognitive Linguistics, Dholuo, conceptualization

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INTRODUCTION

Besides unemployment and poverty, severe famine is one of the greatest challenges facing Kenya and the African continent at large. Every year, about 2.6 million Kenyans suffer from moderate to severe famine in different counties (Mutea *et al.*, 2022). Although all countries are expected to attain Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, Kenya notably lags behind the targets because it grapples with Zero Hunger goal. The goal of reducing food shortage remains a tall order for most parts of the country due to limited social, economic and physical access to food. Food insecurity in Kenya is due to lack of access to food or consumption of insufficient amounts. According to Tabe-Ojong *et al.* (2022), cases of famine and undernourishment continue to rise steadily in Sub-Saharan nations thus making Kenya one of the most food insecure. Hunger and lack of access to food create a crisis that is worsened by impacts of climate change, economic and social shocks, natural disasters and acute poverty in many parts of the country. Considering the alarming number of food insecure families in Kenya and the rest of the world, it appears that attaining the Zero Hunger goal will remain elusive for Kenya. Consequently, many Kenyans opt to brave the famine seasons by infusing creativity in nicknaming them.

The Luo community is a Nilotic group residing in the Lake Victoria basin in Western Kenya. Predominantly, they practice agriculture and grow crops such as maize, millet, beans, finger millet, potatoes, pumpkins and a variety of vegetables among others. Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006) observe that worsening agricultural yields have compelled many Luo people to seek other forms of subsistence such as reliance on remittance from employed relatives, fishing, sale of farm produce and paid labor among others. In spite of the efforts to create a food secure community, episodic or seasonal shortages are experienced almost annually. The Luo community uses the term *kech* to describe both episodic and seasonal food shortage. Sadliwala (2021) defines famine as a protracted period of food scarcity which may result in hunger, starvation and mortality. Famines are rare among the Luo people but when they occur, the memory of their ravaging impacts lingers longer. The community names famines and episodic food shortage seasons as a way of commemorating their economic struggles and constructing local history.

The period between April and July is characterized by food shortage because farmers are weeding crops as they anticipate harvest in August. Many people are often famished during this period due to food shortage arising from poor harvests and low rainfall in previous seasons. Acute food shortage during

this period is also traceable to the injudicious sale of cereals to unscrupulous traders who hoard and resell when prices shoot. Duminy (2022) postulates that the establishment of a sufficient food base in many households in Luo Nyanza is inhibited by the secret and cheap sale of farm produce soon after harvest. This argument is buoyed by Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006) who point out that some farmers (especially women) rush to secretly turn their cereals into money thereby depleting their food stores. Paradoxically, the traders who sneak their produce into the market are the first to decry biting hunger once food deficit persists in the market and households. The vicious cycle of food shortage repeats itself almost annually due to rainfall shortage, low harvest and the imprudent act of selling cereals to unscrupulous dealers. As the market dynamics of food price hike exacerbate hunger, many households turn to a desperate act of conceptualizing famine through nicknames.

Nicknames play a significant role in the linguistic landscape of a community. Among the Luo of Nyanza, famine nicknames achieve social and cultural significance because they convey special meanings about how the community navigates challenging times. Akong'a (2019) observes that famines are described using nicknames with humorous undertones to commemorate social struggles. The circumstances around a dry season and the impact of food shortage on a community play a pivotal role in determining the nickname used to describe the famine in Nyanza. Although innumerable periodic food shortage periods have been nicknamed since colonial times, some seasons stand out due to emotional connection and devastating impacts (Duminy, 2022). The creative naming of famines utilizes schematic patterns arising from recurrent bodily experiences such as paths, forces, links and containers. These image schemas require an interpreter to immerse themselves into the sociocultural contexts of the nicknames to unveil their meanings.

The present study is housed in Cognitive Linguistics, an interdisciplinary approach that investigates the nexus between language and human cognition in the production of utterances. Evans and Green (2018) observe that Cognitive Linguistics was founded in 1970s and early 1980s after formal branches of linguistics proved inefficacious in interpreting linguistic phenomena produced through a combination of sociocultural contexts and cognition. The meaning of some linguistic phenomena requires an understanding of the backstage cognition and cultural resources used in an utterance. According to Ogal *et al.* (2024), the interpretation of abstract linguistic phenomena eludes formal branches of linguistics because such utterances are culture-dependent and motivated by embodied cognition. For instance, products of cognition such as metaphor, idioms, analogy, counterfactual reasoning and metonymy among others are produced using perceptual experiences, mental processes and specific encounters in

contexts of use. This is the idea buttressed by Evans (2012) who reiterates that the human brain possesses cognitive models for processing perceptual data into images that are used to comprehend abstract phenomena within the broad framework of Cognitive Linguistics. Meaning, in Cognitive Linguistics, is the core of a linguistic investigation (Evans & Green, 2018). Therefore, it is important to explore the cultural resources, perceptual experiences and contexts that contribute to the meaning of nicknames of famines in Dholuo.

Nicknames and Cognition

The role of cognition in the creation of nicknames is a topic that has attracted large quantities of scholarly ink among linguists. For instance, Dobric (2010) observes that names of various phenomena rely on metaphorical connections as the basis for human conceptualization. The study further advances that names utilize mental concepts developed using resources retrieved from the immediate environment of the speaker. This suggests that the human brain contains semantic concepts that are expressed by grammatical or lexical features in the construction of names. Jinge and Xiaolong (2023) argue that the conceptualization of any abstract phenomena using nicknames relies on mental representations constructed within the culture or contexts of use. In another study, Brédart (2017) investigates the neuroscience of naming and reiterate that some nicknames are difficult to comprehend if one is alien to the speaker's thoughts, reasoning, experiences and feelings. In other words, nicknames of things or people provide conceptual pathways for understanding a phenomenon within a particular community.

The nexus between nicknames and cognition is also reinforced by the concept of framing. Nicknames are constructed using mental structures that shape people's understanding of the world around them. Dąbrowska (2023) defines frames as mental models consisting of beliefs, experiences, knowledge and actions that people use to name phenomena in their environment. The study adds that one's motivation to use a nickname depends on the mental frames that they have developed. This point mirrors the argument of Kövecses (2017) who asserts that nicknames are products of cognition because they involve "conceptually specific information" used for local understanding (p. 325). In other words, the meaning of a nickname is obtained by investigating the underlying mental models and frames used to construct it. According to Dąbrowska (2023), conceptualization of abstract phenomena is possible since human brains retrieve mental models that they use to name things around them.

Studies also demonstrate that nicknames are grounded in deep cognitive processes that mirror how a community uses language to construct identity. For instance, various concepts drawn from the cultural contexts are combined to create new meanings using nicknames. Nikolenko (2023) investigates nicknames as

markers of social identity and observes that nicknames have a cognitive base in the mental models that are blended and verbalized in particular communicative situations. Communities initiate and reinforce identity using conceptual domains triggered by nicknames. Shulska *et al.* (2018) maintain that a nickname “has a conceptual structure, since the motivational text of the nickname is compressed to a concept” (p. 4). The above quotation hints that a nickname is perceptual in nature because it leans heavily on mental representations retrieved from the memory and matched with cultural information for new meanings. It is based on this backdrop that the present study investigates the nicknames of famine in Dholuo using the lenses of Cognitive Linguistics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by the Image Schemas Theory (IST) which was developed by Johnson (1987). By definition, image schemas refer to a collection of experiences individuals gather from their environment to help them comprehend abstract phenomena around them. Gibbs (2008) notes that as people interact with their environment, they gather and store analog structures from perception, manipulation of objects, bodily movements and experience of force. The argument by Gibbs (2008) is reinforced by Ogal *et al.* (2024) who reiterate that image schemas consist of auditory, visual, tactile and kinesthetic experiences that a linguistic community employs to comprehend abstract concepts. Studies on mental representations indicate that image schemas lay the foundations for cognition using physical and sensory experiences as the building blocks (Johnson, 1987; Mandler & Cánovas, 2014; Ntabo *et al.*, 2021). The IST holds that the human brain gathers analog structures in the form of paths, containers, forces and links. These bodily experiences are used to comprehend abstract concepts in particular contexts. The implication is that sensory experiences play a pivotal role in the comprehension of abstract phenomena within a given linguistic community.

As products of cognition, nicknames lean heavily on schematic patterns provided by the IST for comprehension. Dąbrowska (2023) undertakes a study on nicknames of animals using the IST and points out that nicknames rely on embodied experiences conceptualized in paths, links, containers and forces. These embodied experiences reflect behavior, role, significance and our perception of people or things around us. According to Wood *et al.* (2018), the physical or sensory experiences one gathers around them are used to create nicknames that describe people. The sensory experiences are recurrent structures suggesting containment, power or force, dynamism, part-whole relationships and objects among others. When people or things are given nicknames, image schemas play the role of mapping abstract thoughts onto tangible concepts derived from the physical world. Dąbrowska (2023) observes that a nickname is not just a label but a product

of cognition that reveals how we perceive the character and experience of things using schematic patterns. Therefore, nicknames provide a cognitive lens for understanding how people form mental representations of the things around them using recurring schematic patterns.

Image schemas have been categorized differently by various scholars. Mandler and Cánovas (2014) contend that due to the large number of image schemas, it is not theoretically possible to rank all of them. This has resulted in varied categories of spatial mappings arising from embodied experiences for ease of applicability in conceptualization of abstract concepts. For example, Peña (2000) identifies PART-WHOLE, PATH and CONTAINER as the basic image schemas from which subsidiary gestalts are activated. Clausner and Croft (1999) argue that SPACE, UNITY, MULTIPLICITY, SCALE, EXISTENCE and FORCE are the major schematic patterns for conceptualizing abstract phenomena. According to Johnson (1987), our interaction with the world yields highly structured image schemas in the form of CONTAINER, ITERATION, PROCESS, COLLECTION, ENABLEMENT, ATTRACTION, MASS-COUNT and LINK among others. Evans and Green (2006) identify schematic categories such as FORCE, SPACE, UNITY, EXISTENCE and LOCOMOTION among others. Santibáñez (2002), in turn, identifies CONTAINER, PATH, FORCE and OBJECT as the major schematic patterns from which orderly activations are achieved.

This study adopted the classification developed by Santibáñez (2002) due to certain reasons. First, Santibáñez (2002) points out that there are main image schemas which allow for subsidiary schemas to be activated. This suggests that there are many categories of image schemas and they are divided into sub-categories. Secondly, the study employed Santibáñez’s (2002) classification based on his view that there is an interplay between image schemas hence a phenomenon may belong to more than one image schema. Using more than one image schema to account for an abstract linguistic phenomenon yields novel interpretations of the concept.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design because it sought to provide an account of the nicknames of famine in the Luo community without manipulating the data. According to Siedlecki (2020), a descriptive research design is appropriate for the analysis of a readily available research phenomenon. Thus, research data for a descriptive study is gathered through interviews, surveys, questionnaires and case studies among others (Doyle *et al.*, 2020). The study randomly sampled Homa-Bay County as a study location where Dholuo is the native language. Data was collected from 16 key informants purposively sampled across eight sub-counties. Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006) define key informants as community members who serve

as primary sources of information on issues such as culture, politics, history, economic system and religion among others. Periodic food shortage is a societal phenomenon that has existed since independence. To provide the lived experiences and ethnographic account of famine nicknaming, the study sampled 16 informants within the age bracket of 60 years and above. The key informants were intensively interviewed on the origins of the famine nicknames, historical contexts and experiences associated with the names.

A total of 35 famine and food shortage nicknames were collected from the informants. Out of these, 12 were purposively sampled for analysis. The study noted that most famines that were experienced around 1960 backwards were named after famous chieftaincies (for example, *ke Otuoma*- during Otuoma’s chieftaincy). Therefore, 23 out of the 35 collected nicknames were not considered for analysis in this study because they simply commemorate chieftaincies by using leaders’ real names. The twelve (12) items sampled for analysis were translated into English and their years of occurrence indicated in a table. They were then subjected to the Image Schemas theory in which FORCE, CONTAINER, PATH, and OBJECTS schemas and their

subsidiaries were used to describe them. The section that follows discusses the findings of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found that famine and periodic food shortage seasons are conceptualized using embodied experiences drawn from the immediate environment in the Luo community. This finding aligns with the argument of El-Masry (2023) who mentions that famine and “hunger are conceptualized as invaders who attack people fiercely” (p. 147). This quotation hints that tangible resources around us are used to conceptualize abstract things such as hunger and famine for a fuller comprehension. Tangible experiences derived from the physical world are used as source domains for comprehending the ravaging impacts of famine and periodic food shortage in Dholuo. The study also found that whereas many famines are named after famous chiefs in the Luo community, periodic food shortage periods derive their nicknames from embodied experiences collected from the physical and sensory experiences of the community. The table below shows twelve nicknames sampled for analysis in this study.

Table 1: Nicknames of Famines and Periodic Food Shortage Seasons in Dholuo

No	Famine/ Hunger Name	Translation	Year
1	<i>Mang’wana</i>	Cornered	
2	<i>Ocampo Six</i>	<i>Ocampo Six</i>	2011
3	<i>Kibrit olwar e pi</i>	Wet Matchbox	
4	<i>Ke piende</i>	Hunger of animal hides	1960
5	<i>Gorogoro</i>	2 Kg measurement tin	1980
6	<i>Log dichiel</i>	Wash your hands once	1982
7	<i>Maro odonjo ei dero</i>	Mother-in-law has entered the granary	1991
8	<i>Ngware lawa</i>	Bicycle taxi is chasing me	1997
9	<i>Kaset maseto ji ebwo otanda</i>	Cassette that searches people under the bed	2003
10	<i>Ting’ badi malo</i>	Surrender	2000
11	<i>Gachagua oloyo e kendo</i>	Gachagua has urinated in the hearth	2023
12	<i>Ruto Ochung’ e dhot</i>	Ruto is standing at the door	2024

Table 1 above indicates that the ravaging impact of famine and hunger is conceptualized using resources drawn from the sensory and physical experiences of the community at the time of the famine occurrence. These names of famine and hunger reflect visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile experiences that can be broadly categorized under the FORCE, OBJECT, PATH and CONTAINER image schemas. The study identified 4 nicknames conceptualized by the FORCE, 3 are conceptualized by CONTAINER, 2 have employed the IBJECT image schema while 3 are conceptualized by the PATH image schema. A detailed analysis of each nickname in terms of the image schema and its subsidiaries is presented in the sub-sections that follow.

Famine/Hunger nicknames Conceptualized by the FORCE Image Schema

Force is a major image schema used to comprehend metaphorical description of abstract

phenomena. Mandler and Cánovas (2014) posit that entities are described to have experienced a force when their interaction is characterized by dynamics such as resistance, exertion, blockage, removal of blockage and overcoming force. Santibáñez (2002) observes that FORCE image schema activates gestalts such as COMPULSION, COUNTERFORCE, BLOCKAGE, ATTRACTION, REMOVAL OF RESTRAINT, and ENABLEMENT for the conceptualization of a phenomenon. This study identified 4 nicknames conceptualized by the FORCE image schema. Each of the 4 nicknames is discussed below.

Mang’wana- ‘Cornered’

The word *mang’wana* in the instantiation above is derived from Dholuo verb *ng’wano* which means to lay hold of someone or use force to take a grip of somebody or something. This force eventually shuts a person in a situation where they cannot escape thus the

person is cornered. El-Masry (2023) points out that hunger is conceptualized as a combat because it seizes people who struggle to free themselves from its firm grip. The nickname *mang'wana*, therefore, denotes the use of FORCE image schema which activates the COUNTERFORCE subsidiary image schema. From the interview with key informants, it emerged that hunger, just like a police officer, does not announce when it will arrest an individual. It just pounces. This argument mirrors the opinion of Nkrumah (2020) who reiterates that food shortage creeps and seizes chronically hungry individuals so tightly that they can not break loose. The attempt to free oneself from hunger results in COUNTERFORCE subsidiary image schema because the victim and hunger are involved in a head-on combat. Asgari (2013) defines COUNTERFORCE as "a force schema that involves the active meeting of physically or metaphorically opposing forces" (p. 186). Although victims of hunger struggle to free themselves, they have no alternative but to yield because the harvesting season is a few months away. Therefore, *mang'wana* implies that victims of hunger and food shortage are seized, shut in and compelled to survive on scanty food supplies.

***Gachagua olayo e kendo* – ‘Gachagua has urinated in the hearth’**

The nickname (2) above uses political satire to conceptualize food shortage. Rigathi Gachagua is the former Deputy President of Kenya. It is a common practice among the Luo community to use political occurrences to coin names of hunger as a way of satirizing the government. Harrington and Manji (2013) observe that Kenyans brave tough economic times such as hunger and government betrayal using satirical descriptions of their hardships. The nickname *Gachagua olayo e kendo* places the blame on the Kenyan government (of which Gachagua was the Deputy President) and implies that in many households, there is no cooking going on since the hearths are wet. The process of urinating in the hearth is an uncouth practice that uses FORCE as an image schema to put out the fire. Although urinating is a natural act that follows the body's relaxed reaction to the pelvic muscles, urinating in the hearth is a punitive activity forcefully done by a sadistic individual. This nickname uses FORCE and BLOCKAGE as its subsidiary image schema to conceptualize hunger and food shortage. Johnson (1987) defines BLOCKAGE as the experience when an entity encounters a force which bars it from reaching its destination. In this study, the act of urinating is a force which blocks fire from burning in the hearth hence no food is cooked. Flames of fire emanating from the hearth signals cooking. However, when the heart is wet, it means that there is no cooking for a long period. Therefore, the nickname *Gachagua olayo e kendo* means that hunger has impoverished households thus they struggle to find something to cook.

***Ting' badi malo* - ‘surrender’**

The instantiation *ting' badi malo* (surrender) creates the image of two individuals involved in a combat thus making FORCE a viable image schema for its interpretation. El-Masry (2023) metaphorically conceptualizes famine or food shortage as a war or struggle in which victims sometimes have no options but to yield to the pangs of hunger. The implication is that hunger seizes victims but because they have grown too weak to resist, they concede defeat. In this process, the WITHDRAWAL OF RESTRAINT as a subsidiary image schema of FORCE comes in handy to help in interpreting the nickname (3) above. Sirait and Lingga (2022) mention that the WITHDRAWAL OF RESTRAINT gestalt is a subsidiary of FORCE activated when a barrier is physically or metaphorically withdrawn from the path of a force. In this study, hunger is a force which experiences no resistance from the victims of food shortage. When the resistance is withdrawn, the victims of hunger surrender to their fate and accept starvation as their new norm.

***Kibrit olwar e pi* - ‘wet matchbox’**

The nickname *kibrit olwar e pi* is loosely translated as ‘matchbox has fallen in water’. For a matchbox to drop in water and get wet, force is involved. It is the matchbox that produces fire used to cook in many households in rural areas. The conceptualization of food shortage period as a matchbox that drops in water suggests the use of FORCE image schema and BLOCKAGE as the subsidiary schema. A matchbox experiences a force as it drops in water. This process activates the BLOCKAGE gestalt because the intention of getting wet is to deactivate the matchsticks. In the Luo rural set up, smoke and fire emanating from the hearth are signals of food being cooked. The expression *kibrit olwar e pi* implies that hunger has depleted all food resources in the household and there is nothing left to cook. Food shortage is therefore equated with a force that blocks the cooking of food thus leaving many families famished. Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006) observe that food scarcity is a force that blocks people's efforts to achieve nutritional goals. Therefore, the expression *kibrit olwar e pi* means that food resources have been exhausted and there is hardly anything to cook.

Hunger/Food Shortage as a CONTAINER

The CONTAINER image schema is also used to coin phrases that describe hunger or food shortage. Hedblom (2020) defines the CONTAINER image schema as the experience gathered from interaction with a vessel which has an inside and an outside. This definition hints that vessels have boundaries and contents that get in or out. The notion of containment is developed when people interact with entities that hold things. Santibáñez (2002) points out that the CONTAINER image schema activates subsidiary gestalts such as IN-OUT, FULL-EMPTY and EXCESS. This study identified 3 nicknames of hunger/food shortage

conceptualized by the CONTAINER image schema as discussed below.

***Maro odonjo ei dero* - 'Mother-in-law has entered the granary'**

The expression (5) is a common saying among the Luo. In traditional setups, every household had a granary where grains would be stored after harvesting. *Dero* (granary) is a cylindrical vessel with a conical grass-thatched roof. It is made using flexible sticks that are woven together and smeared with cow dung (Ogembo & Anudo, 2024). As a container of farm produce, a granary signifies food security in every Luo homestead. Ogembo and Anudo (2024) observe that a granary "has a boundary, an interior and exterior" which prevent grains from spillage (p. 27). It is for the above reason that the present study classifies the expression *Maro odonjo ei dero* under the CONTAINER image schema. A mother-in-law is a highly respected member of the Luo community and she must be careful to conduct herself in a manner that does not show disrespect or embarrassment while at the in-laws' place. Cultural beliefs forbid a mother-in-law from accessing rooms such as the bedroom, granary, kitchen and any room considered private. It is therefore unconceivable that the mother-in-law can enter *dero* (granary) where food is stored.

Considering the context of hunger in which the expression *maro odonjo ei dero* is used, a new interpretation pops out from the FULL-EMPTY gestalt. According to Cashman (2021), starvation compels people to break cultural expectations, moral principles and rules of decency. When a mother-in-law leaves her home and enter the granary of her in-laws, it means food supply at her own home is depleted. Her own food store which was once full is now devoid of food and she is compelled to break the rules of decency and morality by hopping into an in-law's granary. At this point the FULL-EMPTY image schema applies because the container which had abundance and satisfaction is now devoid of food and only signifies starvation. The mother-in-law enters the in-law's granary expecting abundance but is greeted by the rude shock of emptiness. The expression *maro odonjo ei dero*, therefore, means that hunger is so severe that all storehouses that were once full have run dry thus people break the moral barriers to seek food from other households.

***Ruto ochung' e dhot* – 'Ruto is standing at the door'**

The expression *Ruto ochung' e dhot* is a satirical description of the biting hunger in the community. It was coined in 2024 as a mockery to President Ruto's failure to deliver a food secure economy despite the much-hyped political campaigns that promised to lower the cost of living. The idea of standing at the door uses the CONTAINER image schema to conceptualize hunger. In this instantiation, food shortage is metaphorically represented as a house with walls and doors at which someone can stand. According to Raiyasmii and Sari

(2020), sensations such as hunger and deprivation are conceptualized as vessels with walls, entrances and exits. The expression *Ruto ochung' e dhot* activates the IN-OUT gestalt because standing at the door suggests the action of preventing one from either coming in or moving out. From the interview, it emerged that when Ruto stands at the door, he prevents members of the household from coming out to look for food. The implication is that famished bodies are confined to a room and their freedom to get out and search for food is curtailed by an obstacle at the door. The meaning of the expression *Ruto ochung' e dhot* is that households are famished and contained by hunger. They have no alternative of getting food because their only way out of containment is blocked by an obstacle. Hunger, therefore, is a container which traps people thus making it difficult to come out of.

Ocampo Six

The expression *Ocampo Six* refreshes the gory memories of the 2007 Post-Election Violence and the six perpetrators named by the former International Criminal Court (ICC) Chief Prosecutor Louis Morenho Ocampo. The six persons were accused of instigating inter-ethnic clashes that resulted in economic, political and humanitarian crises (Roberts, 2009). The protests were fueled by allegations of electoral manipulation and rigging of presidential votes. According to Roberts (2009), the ethnic clashes caused economic hardship characterized by biting hunger and famished bodies in the years that followed 2007. The six accused perpetrators who were to face trial at the Hague were named on 15th December 2010. The expression *Ocampo Six* was therefore used as a nickname for the hunger that was experienced in 2011. By leading investigation, filing a petition and appearing in court against the six accused persons, the ICC Prosecutor employs the CONTAINER image schema to confine the suspects until their cases are heard. Used in the context of hunger and food shortage, the expression suggests that hunger seizes people and holds them hostage until the harvest is ready. As the suspects await their verdict, their freedom is curtailed to such an extent that they cannot travel outside the county. This limitation aligns with the containment when hunger becomes a vessel which prevents one from coming out. In other words, food shortage hooks people and shuts them in thus preventing them from coming out. For this reason, the nickname *Ocampo Six* activates the IN-OUT gestalt evidenced by the fact that once a famished body is confined to a room, it remains there until the food shortage season passes.

Hunger/Food Shortage as an OBJECT

The OBJECT image schema is another mental concept used to conceptualize sensations such as hunger and food shortage. It arises from interactions with human bodies or tangible entities such as stones, trees, walls and chairs among others (Santibáñez, 2002). There are three chief arguments that help one to classify a mental concept as the OBJECT image schema. First, an

expression may suggest that people manipulate or modify properties of certain objects. Second, tangible entities can be perceived as wholes or divided into parts so that we can judge their functionality (Mandler & Cánovas, 2014). Thirdly, objects may be destroyed or shredded into pieces for various reasons (Santibáñez, 2002). According to Mandler and Cánovas (2014), the OBJECT image schema activates subsidiary gestalts such as PART-WHOLE, MASS COUNT and CENTER-PERIPHERY. This study identified two hunger nicknames conceptualized by the OBJECT image schema. Each of the expressions is discussed in the section that follows.

***Ke piende*- ‘Hunger of animal hides’**

Ke piende (hunger of animal skins) is considered to be one of the most severe hunger seasons in the history of the Luo community. Evidence from the key informants indicates that in 1960, there was a devastating famine that was caused by ravaging drought throughout the country. According to Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006), famines are seldom experienced but when they occur, they leave an indelible memory. The drought experienced during *Ke piende* ravaged the Luo community, destroyed all crops and left both animals and humans famished. Because there was hardly any green matter to subsist on, households resolved to slaughter their sickly and starving animals. However, the drought protracted and became grievous such that animals hardly survived. For this reason, people were forced to eat animal skins because there was no meat. A whole animal elicits the OBJECT image schema. However, when the skin is eaten instead, the subsidiary PART-WHOLE is activated. Usually, animal body parts such as skins are never eaten. The severity of the famine compelled people to subsist on them. The expression *ke piende*, therefore, means that food shortage/famine was so severe that households resolved to subsist on inedible parts of animals.

***Gorogoro* – ‘2 Kg measurement tin’**

A two-kilogram tin is called *gorogoro* or *kube* in Dholuo. It is the basic unit of measuring the quantity of grains after harvesting. Under normal circumstances, every household harvests at least one sack of (about 90kg) or more. The 90kg as a whole creates the mental image of OBJECT since it is perceived as a tangible entity. According to Birman (2024), hunger depletes food reserves in many households hence leaving everyone living from hand to mouth as the only option. Survival in such times requires one to look for the bare minimum food supplies often quantified in a *gorogoro* (2 kg). When a family survives on a tin of maize instead of a sustainable sack of maize, the PART-WHOLE subsidiary image schema is activated. Santibáñez (2002) argues that PART-WHOLE is a conceptual model used for the comprehension of configuration of parts of whole entities. As a metonymic reference to food, the word *gorogoro* suggests that the search for sustainable food supplies is futile. Therefore, households alleviate their

hunger by surviving on small portions which are inadequate for the family. In most families, *gorogoro* of flour is consumed in a single meal. Using the PART-WHOLE image schema, the nickname *gorogoro* would mean that hunger has impoverished households to such an extent that they afford only one meal.

Hunger/Food Shortage as a PATH

The final image schema used to conceptualize hunger or periodic food shortage in this study is PATH. Johnson (1987) postulates that the PATH image schema is used to conceptualize experiences and abstract phenomena that have starting points, paths and destinations. Otieno (2019) reiterates that a mental concept qualifies to be categorized under the PATH image schema if it meets four conditions: first, it should have the starting point; second, there should be a destination to be arrived at; third, the path should have intermediate points along it; and, fourth, there is a particular trajectory or direction of an entity. The PATH image schema yields subsidiary gestalts such as PROCESS, FRONT-BACK, VERTICALITY, CIRCULAR and RIGHT-LEFT (Mandler & Cánovas, 2014). This study identified three hunger nicknames conceptualized by the PROCESS and FORWARD gestalts. Each of the two items is discussed below.

***Log dichiel*- ‘Wash your hands once’**

Handwashing is a requisite exercise for eating. Each meal is metonymically referred to as *logo* (hand washing). Ideally, every household serves three meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) every day. A feeding cycle is, therefore, complete if one washes their hands three times. This implies that they have served three meals in a day. When somebody takes only one meal, they participate in one part of the entire process. For instance, breakfast is the starting point in the PATH to serving all meals. Evidence from key informants reveals that *log dichiel* was a devastating hunger because families had nothing to put on the table. For those who were lucky to get something for their families, the supply hardly sustained one meal. For this reason, the subsidiary image schema PROCESS is a viable concept for conceptualizing hunger in Dholuo. During hunger and periodic food shortage, the most important meal of the day is dinner. Ogoye-Ndegwa and Aagaard-Hansen (2006) point out that when hunger strikes, households survive on rationed foodstuffs and often take only one meal per day. The PROCESS of supplying the body with all necessary food nutrients is therefore incomplete because two meals have been skipped. Thus, hunger skips the intermediary points along the PATH of feeding the household hence the PROCESS is incomplete. The nickname *log dichiel* suggests that famished bodies have exhausted all food reserves and can afford only a little portion for one meal.

***Ngware lawa* – ‘Bicycle taxi is chasing me’**

Bike-taxi is called *boda boda* or *ngware* in Dholuo. Commercial cyclists started operating in the

Nyanza region around 1997 (Mutiso, 2010). Bike-taxis were introduced as unique and informal means of transport that navigated both the urban and rural destinations. Since their introduction, the bike-taxis with multi-colored carriers spread fast and became a common means of transport in the early 2000s before motorcycles phased them out. Cycling a bicycle elicits the PATH image schema because one rides from one point to another towards a destination. When used as a nickname for food shortage, the expression *Ngware lawa* activates the FORWARD subsidiary gestalt. El-Masry (2023) mentions that hunger is an adversary that follows victims with the intention of capturing them. For one to save their life, they must be on a forward projectile to escape from the pursuer. Howe (2018) explores famine ideologies and observes that famine and hunger are conceptualized as a pursuer which people have to escape by running away. Based on this conceptualization, hunger takes the FORWARD orientation as it chases the malnourished individual along the PATH image schema.

Kaset maseto ji ebwo otanda- Cassette that searches for people under the bed

The word *seto* (to search for something) in Dholuo creates the picture of ransacking a place. Particularly, people hiding in places such as under the bed are ransacked and removed from the hiding place so that they can face punishment. When anything is suspected to be hiding under the bed, it is dragged from dark corners using a long stick. The process of dragging the object utilizes the PATH image schema since the object follows the direction of the stick. Maxwell *et al.* (2016) describe various coping strategies during famine and reiterate that avoiding famine-prone areas is one method people use to escape famine and hunger. However, the study argues that hunger/famine ransacks people thus extending its reach beyond borders. The expression *Kaset maseto ji ebwo otanda* (cassette that searches for people under the bed) suggests that in relation to hunger, there are two positions the victim can occupy: the danger zone and the safety zone. Whereas hunger victims flee hunger-prone areas and hide, hunger is a powerful force that drags them to the areas where food is scanty. Thus, the process utilizes the BACK gestalt of the PATH image schema. Hunger is, therefore, a phenomenon that drags people to a danger zone where food supply is scanty.

CONCLUSION

This study endeavored to examine the image schemas used to describe food shortage and hunger/famine ideologies in Dholuo within Cognitive Linguistics framework. The study has established that image schemas dispense powerful tools for conceptualizing famine ideologies using nicknames with rich ethno-semantic implications. It has also emerged from the study that the human mind stores embodied experiences and schematic patterns that help in the conceptualization of abstract phenomena such as famine and hunger. The four image schemas: CONTAINER,

PATH, OBJECT and FORCE, together with their subsidiary gestalts, are useful devices which help to adequately comprehend famine/hunger as an abstract entity. Famine naming among the Luo people highlights the socio-economic ideologies which are effective for understanding regional and national food crises. The famine nicknames provide insights into cognition and cultural linguistic resources thus providing ethno-semantic layers of interpretation. The study concludes that schematic patterns used to conceptualize famine are products of cognition and should therefore be investigated through the lenses of a cognitive linguist.

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