

METAPHORS OF DEATH IN KUSAAL

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Abstract

Metaphors are the spice of life. This is true especially in a realm where associations rather than parallels are drawn from our everyday experiences. The case of users of Kusaal is not any different as several instances abound where the language users say one thing and imply another; often, with a much deeper intended meaning. In this paper, we draw on Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to explore the span of metaphors of death in Kusaal. The results show that the similarities that are highlighted reflect the place of Kusaal language users in the wider worldview in which they share in similar experiences and conceptualise everyday matters along similar familiar planes.

Keywords: Kusaal, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Metaphors, Death, Mabia

Yɛɛsvɔ (Kusaal)

A-zaŋi-tisnam ane vom malisim pian'abibis. Ne' sid ane amɛɛ, ka li kas-kas ɛne ye daar wɔɔ ti pɔten'era ket ka ti banjɔ ye zin'i-wɔɔ, ninɛaalib nwenne ka lɛɛ pɔ wɛligid ne taaba. Li me kae kɔn' Kusaas pian'ad pɔuginne; bɔzugo, saɲa bedigu, Kusaa tɔn'e yel si'el ka li gbin be li kɔn' ne on sid bɔɔd ye o yel si'el la. Gbaɲ kaɲa nii, ti ye ti nɔkne Lakoff ne Johnson pɔten'er dine pian'ad a-zaŋi-tis yela dunia nwa ni n mak ne Kusaal pɔten'er pian'adnam. Ti ye ti dɔliɛne ba pɔten'er kane ka ba buon ye "Conceptual Metaphor Theory" (ka li giɲa an CMT) la veensi gos ka pa'al a-zaŋi-tis pian'a-bane naamid Kusaal kum sɔnsɔg nammin ne ba ben n an si'em. Veensvɔ la pa'al ye, Kusaal me mɔr nwaasim ne pian'ad bedigu wɔɔ dunia nwa ni nidib wɔsa. Li me pa'an ye ba daar wɔɔ pɔten'era pian'ad nwen wɔɔ zin'is bedigu n an si'em la.

Pian'akpana: Kusaal, 'Conceptual Metaphor Theory', A-zaŋi-tis, Kum, Mmabiig

1.0 Introduction¹

Our daily communicative events are replete with saying one thing in terms of another. In our quest to show off our communicative competence, we often draw on many linguistic forms from different domains to make our conversations rich in content while at the same time stating what it is that we mean to say, or not say. It is thus the case that embedded in many of the things we say are larger units of meaning that can often be shown to be drawn from two broad domains - the abstract and the concrete. Metaphors therefore entail mappings from these two opposing domains and they are a recurring phenomenon of languages, cross-linguistically.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The precise goal of this paper is to identify some of the metaphoric usages that abound in the language of Kusaal users. Precisely, it will adapt the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and will, using this model, attempt an analysis of some metaphors of death found in everyday communication among Kusaal speaking people. Evidence from ordinary conventional linguistic expressions will be used to examine the mapping of metaphorical relations between conceptual domains from the viewpoint of the language users.

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1.2 Brief language profile

Kusaal is the language of the Kusaas who are found in the north-eastern corner of Ghana and is classified as a **Mabia** language of the larger Niger-Congo family. The **Mabia** language name refers to the group of languages which were hitherto called **Gur** languages. The emergence of the label is traced to Bodomo (1993; 2020) and has been embraced and adopted by mostly native speaker linguists from the north of Ghana such as Musah (2010; 2018), Abubakar (2018; 2020), Musah, Issah and Atintono (2020), Taluah (2020) amongst others. The rallying point for these linguists is the fact that Mabia expressly bonds them in language, thought and relation as is evidenced in the similarity of the individual lexemes **ma** ‘mother’ and **bia** ‘child’ which aptly translate as ‘my mother’s child’ and by extension ‘my brother, my sister’ in the large majority of the languages in the cluster. Consider the following examples:

Table 1: **Mabia** ‘My mother’s child’

	‘mother’	‘child’	‘my mother’s child’
Buli	Ma	biik	mabiik
Dagara	Ma	bie	mabie
Dagbani	Ma	biya	mabiya
Gureɛ	Ma	bia	mabia
Hanga	Ma	biya	mabiya
Kusaal	Ma	biiga, biig, bii	mabiig
Mampruli	Ma	bii	mabii
Moore	Ma	biiga, bii	mabiiga
Nabt	Ma	bia	mabia
Nankani	Ma	bia	mabia
Talni	Ma	bia	mabia
Waale	ma	bie, bibile	mabie

(Adapted from Musah 2018: 31)

From the data above, the present view of native speaker linguists from northern Ghana and beyond is a definite breakaway from the **Gur** nomenclature which does not exactly represent the apparent and real linguistic systems that are peculiar to these languages.

Kusaal has two main dialects: **Agole** and **Toende** and is spoken by some 450,000 people spread across six districts of the Upper East Region; Bawku Municipal, Bawku West, Binduri, Pusiga-Polimakom Garu and Tempene (Simons and Fennig 2019). Some pockets of **Toende** speaking Kusaas can also be found in the adjoining area in neighbouring Burkina Faso. Bawku is the major commercial town and administrative center of the area. The linguistic expressions of the people are very much tied to their cognitive conceptual processes. However, these facts are not exactly peculiar to only the Kusaas but may be found to be replicated among other languages in the immediate cluster and beyond. Irrespective of the foregoing, some of the forms and usages that we find depict the typical nature and shared worldview of the language users in their own right.

Data for this paper is primarily sourced from the Agole dialect of the language via a variety of means, including native speaker intuition of the authors. This was used in complement with secondary data culled from written texts on the language including student essays, the translated version of the Kusaal Bible and amateur Kusaal story books.

1.3 The conceptual metaphor theory

Lee (2005: 6) states that “a metaphor is essentially a device that involves conceptualizing one domain of experience in terms of another. Thus, for any given metaphor, we can identify a source domain and a target domain.” Proceeding from the above is one of the major underpinnings of the cognitive approach to explaining metaphorical usage in language: the source and target domains. The source domain relates to the literal meaning of expressions (or more specifically the concrete entities) which are mapped onto the more abstract target domains. The target domain is the domain

the sentence is actually about (Croft and Cruse 2004). The place of metaphors as an important topic within cognitive linguistic circles was realised with the birth of this approach/framework to highlighting the role of thought processes in language use. It is thus the case that, within Cognitive Linguistics “the term metaphor is understood to refer to a pattern of conceptual associations, rather than to an individual metaphorical usage or a linguistic expression” (Grady 2007: 188). Grady states, further, that the cognitive linguistic emphasis “on this conceptual dimension suggests a view in which metaphor is not inherently a phenomenon. In fact, cognitive linguists do conceive of metaphors as patterns of thought which can be expressed in nonverbal ways, such as pictures and gestures” (pp. 189).

Cognitive approaches to explaining metaphoric usage are diverse but the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) has been highly influential. A major underpinning factor of their thesis is the “mapping” relation whereby entities from two domains, the target and the source, are mapped onto each other. They contend that metaphors are:

...pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 103)

Evans and Green (2006: 286) in expounding further on the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (*ibid*) note that:

The basic premise of the [CMT] is that metaphor is not simply a stylistic feature of language, but that thought itself is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. According to this view, conceptual structure is organised according to cross-domain mappings or correspondences between conceptual domains. Some of these mappings are due to pre-conceptual embodied experiences while others build on these experiences to form more complex conceptual structures.

In addition to the foregoing, Lakoff 2006 views the CMT as a contemporary approach to explaining metaphors which, in their own right, are a result of thought rather than of language. He summarises the thrust of the theory and the nerve core of the concept of metaphors thus:

In short, the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another. The general theory of metaphor is given by characterizing such cross-domain mappings. And in the process, everyday abstract concepts like time, states, change, causation and purpose also turn out to be metaphorical. The result is that metaphor (that is, cross-domain mapping) is absolutely central to ordinary natural language semantics (Lakoff 2006: 185-6).

Explicit in the above is an emphasis on the cognitive processes that are ongoing when metaphoric usages come up in language. This approach to describing metaphors thus completely underscores the importance of the everyday (conventional) metaphor to the discredit of rhetorical or figurative metaphors that abound in non-literal works of art. As a result, the conceptual metaphor system refers to the understanding of one idea, or conceptual domain in terms of another, for example, understanding quantity in terms of directionality (for instance, ‘prices are rising’). A conceptual domain could thus be any coherent organization of human experience in any sphere of life.

1.4 Organization of the paper

Beyond this section, the rest of the paper is organised as follows: §2 highlights some of the conventional metaphoric usages that come up on a daily basis in the communicative events of speakers of Kusaal with particular reference to metaphors of death. These metaphoric usages are captured under subsections such as DEATH IS ANIMATE; DEATH IS A JOURNEY; DEATH IS DEPARTURE; DEATH IS RETURNING; DEATH IS ARRIVING AT A DESTINATION; DEATH IS RESTING; and DEATH IS SLEEP. In §3, we capture the conclusion and summary of findings.

2.0 Metaphors of death in Kusaal

The cognitive linguistic tradition discredits the “so-called substitution theory of metaphor, according to which a metaphorical expression replaces some literal expression that has the same meaning” (Croft & Cruse 2004: 194). In light of the foregoing, the metaphors that are identified in this paper differ significantly from the ones in the example (1) below which make some attempts at pointing out similarities between two things through the use of (figurative) metaphorical expressions².

- (1)a. **O** **biig** **la** **anɛ** **kurkur** **paa**
 3SG.SBJ child DET COP pig INT
 ‘His child is a pig (literal).’
- b. **Kvɔk** **la** **zug** **milig-nɛ**
 seat DET head dirty-FOC
 ‘The head of the chair is dirty (the top of the chair is dirty)’

Example (1a) above is a typical example of metaphoric usage in Kusaal. According to the substitution theory, we can draw two meanings that can show some similarities between the figurative and the literal meanings inherent in the example. First off, there is a ‘transference’ of meaning from the sheer size of a pig to the ‘man’s child’ who is, in one sense, fat. The second substitution effect that is inherent in the expression is that the man’s child likes food and eating – a wholesome quality of any healthy pig while yet a third transference paradigm would be to say that that the child is dirty because pigs are generally known to be dirty. Example (1b) is also used along similar lines of substitution, where the spatial location ‘top’ of the seat relates very much to its ‘head’. The above is limited in its scope because it highlights metaphors only in language use. The cognitive approach however looks into the thought processes that go into metaphoric usages. The following metaphors on the concept of death are thus representative.

The concept of death is a universal entity that touches all cultures and all people. In Kusaal and as much in most languages, death is a feared, respected and abhorred stage that must necessarily come to pass and that is often not overtly mentioned in speech (it is virtually a verbal taboo in many languages). The conceptualization process entails speaking of death in terms of less gory categories. We find that the following metaphors of death are used in Kusaal and that these may actually not be peculiar to the language alone but are awash across cultures.

2.1 Death is animate

In Kusaal metaphorical conceptualization process, death, though inanimate, is often seen as an animate entity that has the power to perform certain acts that are the reserve of animate entities. This conceptualization process, though not peculiar to the Kusaa, could, for lack of better explanation, be recognised as a by-product of the customs and belief systems of the people and the nature and conduct of death when it plies its trade. The following expressions exemplify the

² Kusaalis a tone language with three level tones: high, mid and low (see Musah 2010 for instance). In line with Kusaal orthographic conventions, however, we do not mark tone in this paper because the tonal nuances of the language have no bearing on the analysis of metaphors of death which are quite commonplace and easily recognisable.

DEATH IS ANIMATE metaphor. From the examples, and with particular reference to (2a), while two readings of the statement may appear tenable, only one reading is actually possible: that death, indeed, has arrived at our home and by extension that it has taken one of our own. In (2b), the perceived meaning is one of death having laid its icy hands on the child; that the child has actually died. While (2c) and (2d) do not expressly state that death has taken away one of their own, it could imply the apparent and real presence of a deadly state including outbreaks of epidemics such as Cholera, Ebola, SARS and the new Coronavirus which ravage the lands and take anyone who stands in their way.

- (2)a. **Kum paae ti yin-na**
 death reach.PERF 3PL.POSS house.LOC-VEN
 ‘Death has arrived at /reached our house.’
- b. **Kum da nɔk o biig la**
 death PST take 3SG.POSS child DET
 ‘Death took his/her child.’
- c. **Kum kena**
 death come.PERF.VEN
 ‘Death has come.’
- d. **Kum ya’a zi’e fɔ yampunne; zɔɔg ka’asigge**
 Death COND stand 2SG.POSS backyard; escape NEG.there
 ‘When death stands behind your house, there is no escape.’

The conceptualization processes of the language users also ascribes an agentive nominal status to death. This is evidenced in its role as the agent of the verbs and indeed, the entire constructions in the examples in (2a – d) above. Usually, it is animate elements and especially humans that collocate with these verbs but death which comes and goes as and when it likes, is conceptualised intuitively as possessing these fine abilities. As a result of death occurring as the agent in these expressions, it could be considered that DEATH IS AN AGENT metaphor that has been conceptualised. In addition, most of the verbs from the above including **paae** ‘reach’, **nɔk** ‘take’, **kena** ‘come’ and **zi’e** ‘stand’ indicate locomotion and express the sense that death has arrived at a certain location it set out to go to; that it has taken something or someone; that it has moved from one domain to another and finally that it is standing somewhere. These usages show the perceptions of the people about death and highlight that at the conceptual level, the power that death wields is comparable to, or may even surpass that of animate entities which would normally collocate with such verbs. There is, thus, a certain systematicity to the metaphorical expressions involving death such that considering the insurmountable nature of death, only ‘strong’ or ‘powerful’ verbs can be used with it.

The cross-domain mappings that are inherent in these expressions include ascribing the concrete attributes of the source domain (the agents or the animate entities) to the more abstract target domain (death) which is less ‘graspable’ in terms of features. In addition, it could also be said of death in Kusaal and indeed, cross-culturally, that it has hands (3a) with which to knock on doors (3b), and deriving from the foregoing, that, it is an enemy, even if a transitory one (3c) which has power to overcome human beings through its ability to shoot them (3d):

- (3)a. **Ka o nyɔvɔr bɛ A.kum nu’us-in**
 CONJ 3SG.SBJ life EXST Mr.Death hands-LOC
 ‘And his life was in death’s hands’
 (TKB: Job 33: 22)
- b. **Kum nwe’edi ti zanɔɔr-in**
 death knock.PROG 3PL.POSS door-LOC
 ‘Death is knocking on our door’

- c. **Kum anɛ dataa kanɛ ka o na... san'am**
 death COP enemy that FOC 3SG FUT destroy
 'Death is an enemy that He will...destroy'
 (TKB: 1 Corinthians 15: 26)
- d. **Li anɛ tɔvmbɛ'edi ket ka kum nyɛt paŋi tɔɔnd**
 3SG COP bad.deeds allows for death get power shoot
nidib
 people
 'It is bad deeds that lets death to get power to shoot people'
 (TKB: 1 Corinthians 15: 56)

2.2 Death is a journey

The higher level conventional metaphoric expression DEATH IS A JOURNEY subsumes a number of other metaphors that relate to DEATH IS A DEPARTURE, DEATH IS ARRIVING AT A DESTINATION and death is returning. The embodied conceptual structures of the language users enable them to perceive such metaphorical constructs as being related to some of the issues that pertain when one goes on a physical journey.

2.2.1 Death is a departure

The DEATH IS DEPARTURE metaphor is conceptualised as a parting from the corporal, mortal world into the next world. In the examples that follow in (4), we show that the departure is perceived with regard to the individual who passes onto the underworld but not in terms of the entity of death itself. In addition, this type of departures are one-way journeys that once taken, are not retractable such as is exemplified in (4a) which indicates that the soul of the deceased has departed a particular location for another unknown one while the example in (4b) makes clearer the import of the fact of departing. In fact, the two examples are part of a dirge that is sung during funeral services for departed souls:

- (4)a. **O gaariya**
 3SG.SBJ leave.PST
 'He has gone.'
- b. **O lɛn kae kpɛla**
 3SG.SBJ again NEG here
 'He is no more here'

The above thus puts into greater perspective the metaphor of death in relation to departure away from the temporal world into the higher realm. As there are, to our knowledge, no known instances when people have died and come back to life, this physical fact (the more tangible aspects of a departure scenario) is mapped onto the abstract death phenomenon. Death is thus conceived as an act of leaving, of moving from one end to another and often of no return to life. These forms are however not as varied as the ones in example (2) above, where it is apparent from the choice of vocabulary that express this concept that they depict movement, transition, change of location, amongst such other considerations.

2.2.2 Death is returning

Another metaphorical usage that is quite limited in its usage is DEATH IS RETURNING. The cognitive conceptualization process details how Kusaas view the nature of death in this regard and the dead person is thus seen as returning to the creator or to wherever it was before it came into the world. The source domain explicates a more concrete domain of returning, of going back to an initial position, or of re-joining the ancestors who always get reincarnated:

- (5)a. **Biig la læbi-ya**
 child DET return-PST
 ‘The child has returned.’
- b. **Agbam læb o ba’anam ni**
 Agbam. return.PERF 3SG.POSS father.PL side
 ‘Agbam has returned to the side of his fathers.’

Example (5a) above is often said of stillborn babies who are presumed as detesting or abhorring the conditions here on earth and who would thus prefer to go back to the world they came from. The return is often conceptualised as going back to the creator or the ancestors and so it is possible to also say the same of an elderly person who passes on that they have returned to their creator or to the ancestors/forebears who preceded them (5b).

2.2.3 Death is arriving at a destination

The concept of death is also often structured along the metaphorical expression DEATH IS ARRIVING AT A DESTINATION. It is the case that in Kusaal, death is conceptualised as arriving at a destination; as reaching a goal. Our embodied experience informs the cognitive processes that go into the conceptualization of going on a journey and arriving at the end point. The following everyday usages buttress this point.

- (6)a. **O paae Wina’am ni.**
 3SG.SBJ reach.PST God side
 ‘S/he has reached God’s house’.
- b. **Dau la paae o bæn**
 man DET reach 3SG.POSS end
 ‘The man has reached (come to) his end’.
- c. **Ti mør yadda ye o paa tensuŋ**
 3PL.SBJ have belief that 3SG.SBJ arrive good.town
 ‘We believe that he has gone to paradise.’

In example (6a) which is set in a religious activity, death is conceptualised as coming before **Wina’am**, the almighty God. This entails coming to the end of the daily (Christian) life. From birth, life is also seen as a gradual march towards death and it is this goal we hope to achieve one day and so (6b) is perceived as coming to the end of one’s life. In addition, the example in (6c) expresses the hope that the departure of the deceased has eventually culminated in him/her arriving at a better place. We concur, however, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer that (6b) “The man has reached his end” does not necessarily portray death as an arrival but could be conceived as life being a process that has an end; in other words, that the next logical step after life is death.

2.3 Death is resting

In some languages death is perceived as a form of rest that a person takes after he/she has gone through all the hustling and bustling that life is fraught with. It is conceptualised that death is a perfect form of rest devoid of any more disturbances and thus the conceptualization of the DEATH IS RESTING metaphor. Consider the following linguistic expressions:

- (7)a. **M ba’aba yøn vøusiya**
 1SG.POSS father now rest.PERF
 ‘My father is now at rest’.

- b. **O lɛn pɔ mɔr yɛlla**
 3SG.SUBJ more NEG have troubles
 ‘S/he doesn’t have troubles anymore (his/her troubles have come to an end).’

The first example relates very much to the conceptualization process ongoing in the English language where the statement ‘rest in peace’ is commonly used to assuage the mourners that the dead person is actually not dead but is simply taking a rest. The second example (7b), expresses a metaphoric cross domain mapping to some extent and suggests that the dead have finally escaped from the physical realm which is inundated with many impediments and have come to receive some fitting form of rest in an ethereal one.³

2.4 Death is sleep

Closely related to the DEATH IS RESTING metaphor above is another conventional usage which sees death as a form of sleep. Sleep endures over a longer period and so this experience is mapped onto the concept of death which is conceived as a phase that will pass after some time. This metaphorical usage is also prevalent in Christian scripture where there is the promise of the resurrection. The DEATH IS SLEEP metaphor is also palpable among the Kusaas who hold a very strong spiritual belief in the existence of a supreme being who grants rest and sleep to the dead. The following is representative:

- (8) **Win na maal tɛŋ ka o digin**
 God FUT make ground CONJ 3SG.OBJ lie
 ‘May God give him/her rest (lit: God will create a place for him/her to lie down).’

Win, truncated from the fuller **Wina’am** ‘God’ form, is trusted, in most customs, with both our corporal and ethereal needs. This consolatory statement is usually offered to a grieving family after they have lost one of their own or when two or more people have reason to reminisce over a dead acquaintance. Similar parallels can be found across many languages and cultures and is perhaps not wholly indigenous to the Kusaas people. Among the Kusaas who practise Christianity, for instance, there are many linguistic expressions that exemplify this conventional metaphor as due to its similarity to the resurrection and life after death. This final fact highlights the many convergences in traditions and religions across languages and cultures and underlies the overarching conceptual processes that bind us together as we endeavour to go on with our daily activities.

3.0 Conclusion

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) of Lakoff and Johnson opens up a new dimension to understanding language from the standpoint of the thought processes (the cognitive conceptual processes) that structure the way we talk about things and concepts in our languages. To this end they note that our daily communicative activities are replete with saying one thing in terms of another; in terms of conventional metaphorical systems rather than in the classical or rhetorical metaphoric systems that abound in creative arts. It is also the case that two domains are drawn upon to make explicit the concepts being spoken about and they relate to the source and target domains which correspond to concrete and abstract concepts respectively. The mapping relations of these

³ As an anonymous reviewer pointed out (in line with the views of Dancygier and Sweetser 2014), the idea expressed in (7b) could be considered as not necessarily metaphoric but metonymic. The point being that, not having troubles is not the same as being dead but is part of the understanding of what it means to be dead. However, we contend that while both inherently deal with replacing one word with another in rhetoric, metaphors tend to have more abstract mappings than metonymies. The fact that this abstraction takes a reduced form in the example might cause it to be recategorised into another less abstract domain such as metonymy. From the example however and also for the purposes of this paper, we conjure a mental picture of a metaphoric mapping and further that the analysis is not entirely falsified by not considering the example as a *bonafide* case of metonymy.

two generate conventional metaphorical concepts that are used in our everyday language situations because they are etched in our minds as embodied conceptual structures. In the core section of the paper, we identified some of the conventional usages that Kusaal speakers draw upon when they talk about the concept of death and the following were examined: DEATH IS ANIMATE; DEATH IS A JOURNEY; DEATH IS DEPARTURE; DEATH IS RETURNING; DEATH IS ARRIVING AT A DESTINATION; DEATH IS RESTING; and DEATH IS SLEEP. As these expressions are conceptually structured, some of them can be found to be cross-linguistically valid or to be used along similar lines across other languages.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

1	1 st person	LOC	Locative
2	2 nd person	NEG	Negative
3	3 rd person	OBJ	Object
CMT	Conceptual Metaphor Theory	PERF	Perfective
COND	Conditional	PL	Plural
CONJ	Conjunction	POSS	Possessive
COP	Copula	PROG	Progressive
DET	Determiner	PST	Past
EXST	Existential	SG	Singular
Foc	Focus	SBJ	Subject
FUT	Future	TKB	Translated Kusaal Bible
INT	Intensifier	VEN	Ventive