A Cultural Reflection of Metaphors and Proverbs in Toposa

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Abstract

This paper examines how metaphors and proverbs reflect the culture and identity of specific ethnic groups. Focusing on the Toposa people, a herding community in South Sudan, it demonstrates that metaphors and proverbs are structured around culturally salient domains such as warfare, marriage, famine and hunger, and name-giving, among others. These figurative expressions are embedded in cognitive frameworks that, once activated, facilitate the comprehension of non-literal language. The analysis is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which provides a framework for understanding how abstract concepts are mapped onto concrete experiences. Warfare metaphors and proverbs reflect the lived experiences of warriors on the battlefield, while marriage-related figurative expressions highlight the roles and expectations of women within marital relationships. Metaphors and proverbs associated with famine and hunger exemplify the harsh realities of the environment, and those connected to name-giving reveal the characteristics or virtues attributed to individuals. Collectively, these figurative expressions encode and transmit societal values and norms: a successful warrior is revered, an obedient wife brings harmony and happiness to the household, a husband is expected to act as protector, and metaphorical names

underscore the esteem granted to bravery in battle while condemning laziness and foolishness.

the metaphors and proverbs of the Toposa not only convey literal and figurative meaning but also serve as cultural markers that reinforce social norms, ethical expectations, and communal identity.

Keywords: culture, identity, source domain, target domain, metaphors, proverbs

Introduction

Linguistic anthropology, a sub-discipline of linguistics, asserts that there is a close relationship between language and culture. Duranti (1997) states that the premise of linguistic anthropology is that language is to be understood as a cultural practice (p. 21). Cultural practices, in turn, manifest people's identity.

One way in which cultural practice is exercised is through the linguistic construction of non-literal language, as manifested in metaphors, metonymy, idioms, and proverbs. In cultural anthropology, metaphors, the figure of speech under consideration in this paper, are regarded as vehicles through which culture is transmitted. In this sense, a strong command of the mother tongue, including the understanding of metaphors and proverbs, serves to preserve the culture and identity of an ethnic group.

Some scholars (Sapir & Crocker, 1977) regard metaphors as a means of controlling the social and natural environment. Philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists alike have also recognized metaphors as a guide to how cultures experience the world (Duranti, 1997, p. 38). This paper seeks to investigate how metaphors provide a window through which cultural practices and cultural identity can be explored and recognized. It focuses on metaphors from Toposa, an Eastern Nilotic language of South Sudan, which is linguistically and culturally closely related to the Turkana of Northern Kenya. The metaphors and proverbs are analyzed

cognitively, as constructions of cross-domain mapping, in line with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The data were elicited from Pastor Lokuuda, a native speaker of Toposa and co-author of this article. Pastor Lokuuda was raised in Kapoeta, Eastern Equatoria of South Sudan, the heartland of the Toposa people. At the age of 15, he fled to Kenya due to civil war to continue his schooling and further training. He returned to Kapoeta in 2005 to serve the community as a pastor and Bible translator. Pastor Lokuuda possesses deep knowledge of the Toposa language and culture and has previously served as a language consultant and informant for the authors.

I have worked in the development of the Toposa language since 1981, living among the Toposa people from 1981 to 1984 in Riwoto, near Kapoeta, and later working with Toposa communities in Juba from 1985 to 1988 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education of South Sudan. I have reading and comprehension proficiency in the language and possess extensive knowledge of the culture.

The metaphors and proverbs were elicited through focus interviews with Pastor Lokuuda, aiming to understand and illuminate some of the values and norms of Toposa society. Data analysis was conducted within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which posits that meaning in cognitive linguistics represents the conceptualization of knowledge, whether simple or complex, and serves as a mirror through which the culture and norms of a language community can be understood. This paper is structured as follows: Section Two presents definitions and the theoretical orientation; Section Three discusses Toposa metaphors and proverbs; and Section Four provides a discussion and conclusion.

Definitions and Theoretical Orientation

In order to begin the discussion, it is necessary to define the concepts of culture and identity. Duranti (1997, p. 23) notes that definitions of culture are often highly politicized. He suggests a broad understanding, stating that culture is best conceptualized as a system of communication, with language serving as the core instrument. This perspective provides the theoretical foundation adopted in this paper.

When culture is viewed as a system of communication, its encompassing idea can be summarized as follows: culture is learned and transmitted from one generation to the next (Duranti, 1997, p. 24); it is a system of cognitive and socially distributed knowledge (ibid., pp. 27–30); it is a system of signs manifested in stories, myths, descriptions, theories, proverbs, metaphors, artistic products, and performances (ibid., p. 33); it is a system of mediation, in which cultural tools mediate between human beings and the environment (ibid., p. 39); it is a system of practice, meaning that humans can exist only as participants in habitual activities that are presupposed and reproduced (ibid., p. 45); and it is a system of practice in which human interaction is always social, collective, and participatory (ibid., p. 48). For more details on the different facets of culture, see Duranti (1997, pp. 24–45).

This paper emphasizes the idea of culture as a system of socially distributed knowledge and as a manifested system of signs. Emphasizing culture as cognitive knowledge allows for the application of a cognitive theory to interpret metaphors and proverbs, while the conceptualization of culture as a system of signs manifested in figurative speech provides examples of metaphors as representations of cultural knowledge.

The next concept requiring clarification is “identity,” which this paper broadens to “cultural identity.” Collier and Thomas (1988) expand the notion of personal identity to include cultural identity. In this paper, cultural identity is defined as self-assertion grounded in a cognitively coherent system of knowledge about the values, beliefs, customs, history, and

codes of one's culture, which serves as a stable and consistent frame of reference for actions (adapted from http://communicationtheory.org/cultural-identity-theory/p. 1).

Metaphors have traditionally been understood as figures of speech that involve the transfer of meaning from a concrete idea to an abstract concept. In this paper, however, metaphors are approached from a cognitive-experimental perspective, where they are viewed as a process: "Metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another. To serve this function, there must be some grounding, some concepts that are not completely understood via metaphor to serve as the source domain" (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p. 135).

This study adopts the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The fundamental premise of CMT is that metaphor is not merely a stylistic feature of language, but a matter of thought. Conceptual structures are organized by cross-domain mappings or correspondences, which are represented in long-term memory. Some of these mappings arise from pre-conceptual embodied experiences, while others build upon these experiences to create more complex conceptual structures (Vyvyan et al., 2007, p. 6).

In Cognitive Linguistics, the term "domain" refers to any conceptualization of knowledge, simple or complex, that contributes to semantic meaning (Taylor, 1989, p. 88). For instance, when one considers the domain "market," various associated concepts, such as items sold (bread, sugar, vegetables), types of markets (vegetable market, supermarket), and related activities, come to mind. A domain serves as a base upon which other domains can be structured. This concept is analogous to Fillmore's (1982, p. 111) notion of "frames" in semantic interpretation.

Two additional concepts essential for cross-domain mapping are the source domain and target domain. In metaphor interpretation, the source domain provides the concrete or

familiar conceptual basis that is mapped onto the target domain, which is typically more abstract. Cognitive linguistics also operates on the principle of encyclopedic knowledge, understood as an individual's knowledge of the world (Vyvyan et al., 2007, p. 8). Encyclopedic knowledge is organized in domains, each encompassing multiple, related concepts. During domain mapping, the encyclopedic knowledge contained in the source domain is accessed and transferred onto the target domain to facilitate understanding of metaphors and proverbs.

Proverbs, in comparison to metaphors, are traditional cultural sayings rooted in shared experiences that serve social functions such as directing behavior, offering advice, providing recommendations, or issuing rebuke based on commonly held truths within a culture. Proverbs frequently employ metaphorical expressions, which underscores the close relationship between the two. The distinction between metaphors and proverbs is often minimal; however, proverbs tend to be less specific and convey more general truths. They are often introduced by quantifiers such as *all*, *everybody*, or *everyone*, or by indefinite expressions, and are typically expressed in the present tense (White, 1987, p. 153). Because metaphors and proverbs are so interwoven, some of the metaphors discussed below are embedded within proverbs. The cognitive processing of proverbs can be viewed as an extension of metaphor processing; thus, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) can also be applied to understand proverbs. In addition, the processing of proverbs emphasizes the role of metaphor in reinforcing cultural norms and values (Jerono, 2016a).

Toposa Metaphors and Proverbs

Among the Toposa, young men are renowned as fierce warriors, and the practice of cattle raiding continues to this day. It is primarily the young men who participate in these raids, a role that is culturally valorized. In principle, both raiding and demonstrating prowess

as a warrior are highly esteemed across the Toposa society. The elders, in particular, hold these young men in high regard, often recalling the times when they themselves were fierce young warriors and the pride of their people.

Warfare Metaphors and Proverbs

The acceptance of cattle raiding as a culturally sanctioned norm is reflected in numerous warfare-related metaphors in Toposa society. Many of these metaphors specifically describe the characteristics and qualities expected of a man. The perceived strength of Toposa men is intimately tied to the cultural practice of fighting, particularly in the context of raiding. Within this cultural framework, men are expected to demonstrate courage, resilience, and readiness to risk their lives for the protection of their cattle. The metaphors thus not only reflect physical bravery but also reinforce societal expectations, valorizing the role of young men as defenders and providers in the community.

(1) Edoŋo nyekilye naatukų.
remained man in cows.
Lit.: The man remained with his cows.
The man has died in defence of the cows.

To understand the above metaphor, the hearer must access the overall domain of cattle raiding. Within this domain, several encyclopedic meanings are activated: cattle raiding is an expected and highly esteemed behavior in Toposa culture; it is primarily practiced by the young men of the tribe; and during raids, men often risk death, an act perceived by society as heroic. In this metaphor, the source domain is the verb *remain*, whose encyclopedic meanings include “to stay put” or “not to move.” When constructed with the object *cows*, the metaphor conveys that a man who “remains with his cows” does not flee from enemies; in fact, he may die in battle defending his herd. Such a man is recognized as courageous according to the cultural expectations of Toposa society. Conversely, a coward is described in stark contrast, highlighting the societal disapproval of fleeing during raids.

(2) Elomitɨ nyapoo nakookɨ keŋɛ.
entered rabbit stomach his
[Lit.: A rabbit has entered his stomach.]
A rabbit entered his stomach. [The man is a coward].

The example above represents a proverb that draws upon a metaphor, in which the source domain *rabbit* is activated. In Toposa culture, the encyclopedic entries associated with rabbits include that they do not fight, they are naturally fearful, and they flee upon encountering an enemy. These encyclopedic entries from the source domain are mapped onto the target domain of a *man*. Thus, a man who is said to have a "rabbit in his stomach" is understood to be filled with fear and, like the rabbit, runs away when facing an enemy. Consequently, such a man is labeled a coward within the cultural framework. Some proverbs also address the possibility of warriors dying in battle. These proverbs are commonly invoked by elders when preparing young men for war, both to instill courage and to underscore the societal value of bravery.

(3) Enyamete ŋatarukʉ ŋikilyokɔ nyapaaranaɨ na.
will-have-eaten vultures men day this
[Lit.: Vultures will have eaten men today.]
Vultures will have eaten men today.

The example above represents a proverb that functions as general advice from the elders to warriors before they enter battle. To fully understand the proverb, several concepts within the domain of warfare must be considered. In warfare, the possibility of death is always present. Therefore, when men assemble in preparation for a cattle raid, the elders instruct them on how to be mentally prepared for dying in battle, even on the same day. The source domain activated in this proverb is the *vulture* and its associated behaviors. A well-known characteristic of vultures is that they feed on the remains of animals killed by others. This characteristic is mapped onto the target domain of men, implying that those who die in battle may become food for the vultures.

Another proverb reflects the same cultural reality of men dying on the battlefield. In this case, the source domain of *sleep* is activated, with *sleep* functioning as a euphemism for death. Through these proverbs, the Toposa elders convey essential cultural knowledge about courage, mortality, and the risks associated with warfare, reinforcing societal norms and expectations for young warriors.

(4) Eperete ŋikilyokᴐ nyakoloŋᴐ na.
will-sleep men day/sun
Lit.: Men will sleep this day.]
The men will sleep this day.

Again, the warfare domain is activated, with the concept of *death* on the battlefield being foregrounded. Within the domain of *warfare*, the concept of the *enemy* plays a central role, as enemies constitute the primary participants in any battle. This conceptualization is further illustrated in the proverbs discussed below.

(5) Eyayi nyakopiryooŋori kidiŋi yokᴐ.
is brown feather amongst us.
[Lit.: There is a brown feather among us.]
There is someone in our midst who should not know our discussion.

This proverb is built on the following metaphor. The source domain is *feather*. In Toposa culture, the cultural encyclopedic entries for feathers indicate that they are used as decorations, particularly during dances and festivities. The feathers gathered for such events are typically white, while brown feathers do not blend in and are therefore not chosen. Consequently, a brown feather is culturally perceived as a misfit. This concept of misfit is then mapped onto the target domain, which is *a person among other people*. Drawing on the metaphor of the brown feather, the hearer can extend the meaning to understand that there is a person who does not fit in with the surrounding group. Within the broader domain of warfare, a person who is a misfit may be interpreted as an enemy or a spy. Additionally, two

more proverbs in the Toposa repertoire directly refer to the Dinka, the political adversaries of the Toposa, thereby reinforcing cultural knowledge and social boundaries in times of conflict.

(6) Eya ta amaakeŋe ka Munyen ne.
are-resent uncles of Munyen here
[The uncles of Munyen are present.]
The Dinkas are present.

This proverb builds on the metonymy of *Munyen*, a common name used to refer to the Dinka. The proverb functions as an alert to the audience regarding the presence of Dinkas or their spies, signaling that one should avoid speaking openly. To interpret the proverb, the encyclopedic knowledge associated with the name *Munyen* must be accessed. Historically, *Munyen* was the name of a child born to a Dinka father and a Toposa mother. Consequently, the name evokes the Dinkas, who are regarded as the "uncles" of Munyen, and by extension, the proverb warns the audience that Dinkas, Toposa's political adversaries, are nearby. Therefore, anyone wishing to speak up is cautioned that an enemy may be present. The subsequent metaphor similarly addresses the Dinka, reinforcing social and political vigilance within the Toposa community.

(7) Eya ta nakooma ne.
are-present easy-breaking-ones here
[Lit.: Those who can easily be broken are here.]
The Dinka are here.

The encyclopedic information accessed in the above metonym is that of *"easy breaking ones."* In Toposa cultural understanding, the Dinka are perceived as opponents who can be easily defeated in raids and warfare. As a result, *"the easy breaking ones"* has developed into a metonymic expression referring to the Dinka. The following metaphor likewise foregrounds the concepts of *enemy* and *spy* within the broader domain of warfare.

(8) Eyayi lopero kookị lopero kopọ ne.
he.is- lying stomach ground here
There is someone who is lying on the ground here.
There is someone who should not know our conversation here.

Access to this metaphor is provided by the encyclopedic entries of the phrase “lying with the stomach on the ground,” which is embedded within the domain of posture. In Toposa culture, sleeping or lying on the ground is interpreted as a concealing posture. Individuals who assume this position are understood to be attempting to hide or conceal something. The source domain of concealment is thus mapped onto the target domain of a person, producing a metaphorical understanding in which the individual is perceived as behaving like a spy. Consequently, the utterance functions as a covert warning to thaudience about the presence of a spy.

Metaphors and Marriage

Marriage and marriage customs play a central role in Toposa culture, which is organized along polygamous lines. The society is structured around strict role patterns: boys are grouped into age sets and are trained by their fathers to herd livestock, beginning with goats and sheep, and eventually taking responsibility for their own cattle as they mature. Girls, on the other hand, are taught to manage the household, care for the farms, and attend to the needs of the elderly and children. Social events that unite the Toposa in both joy and sorrow include dances, marriage celebrations, funerals, and cattle raids (Kwekudee, 2013).

Within this framework, the roles and expectations of girls are clearly defined. A girl’s ultimate aspiration is to marry and establish her own home. While she remains in her father’s homestead, she is considered to be without a home; her true home is the homestead of her future husband. The following metaphor should therefore be interpreted within the conceptual and cultural domain of marriage, taking into account the values, social roles, and expectations embedded in Toposa marital practices.

(9) Acamitị ataanyụ aaŋạ daŋạ nyekalẹ.
I-want to find I also home
[Lit. I want to find a home also.] [Said from the perspective of a lady].

I also need to get married.

To understand this metaphor, the encyclopedic entries of the domain *home* must be accessed and profiled as the source domain. In Toposa culture, a home provides protection, love, and identity. A girl in her father's homestead lacks a full social identity; she is regarded simply as a "girl." She acquires her identity as a woman only upon marriage, when she moves to her husband's homestead. The encyclopedic entries of *home*, protection, social recognition, and identity are therefore transferred to the target domain, the girl, implying that she seeks a home through marriage. In this way, a woman fulfills her culturally prescribed role, including receiving protection, engaging in procreation, and establishing her social identity within the society. The subsequent metaphor conveys a similar meaning.

(10) Nakinae nakookoni tonokunea nyekalẹ kaŋa.
Give me your daughter (in marriage) to light home my
Give me your daughter in marriage so that she lights up my home
[can bear children for me].

This metaphor must be interpreted against the cultural background in which a barren woman seeks to adopt a girl. Such a situation may arise if her husband has passed away, or even if he is alive, when she desires children, she can consider her own. In such cases, the woman approaches a family to request one of their daughters and is expected to provide payment from her own cattle, cattle she acquired through her labor, purchased with her grains, inherited from her late husband, or received from relatives at previous marriages. The purpose of this action is to "lighten" her home by introducing children through the adopted girl's marriage. The children born to this adopted girl are regarded as if she were their biological mother.

Although only implied, the domain *marriage* is activated in this metaphor. Within the encyclopedic entries of the marriage domain, the subdomain of *procreation* is profiled. In Toposa culture, children are considered the "light" of the home. The offspring of the adopted

girl bring continuity, provision, and protection: boys carry on the family name and care for the cattle, while girls bring in additional cattle, thereby increasing wealth. Marriage is thus an ongoing, cyclical process in Toposa society. The concept that children are the "light" of the home is further reinforced by the following metaphor.

(11) Erwoniki̲ nyekale̲ ŋolo.
become dark home that
That home has become dark.
[Implied meaning: All the children of that home have died].

This metaphor represents the opposite of example (10). The house is dark because all the children have died. People in that homestead are hopeless; the continuity is no longer guaranteed, there is nobody to look after the parents in old age, and no wealth will be provided. The next metaphor profiles another aspect of the domain 'home'.

(12) Acakuni̲ ŋina kana napete̲.
has fallen that one from the baby carrier.
[Lit.: That one has fallen from the baby carrier.]
She has stupidly left where she was being cared for really well.

The understanding of this proverb is grounded in a metaphor based on the concept of a *baby sling*, which falls within the subdomain of *children* in the broader *marriage* domain. In Toposa culture, a baby sling symbolizes care, protection, and love. These encyclopedic entries form the basis for interpreting the utterance. The attributes of care, protection, and love, together with the meaning of the verb *fallen*, are mapped onto the target domain of a person. Thus, the proverb conveys that a person who has "fallen out of the sling" voluntarily fails to appreciate the care and love provided by the home. The final metaphor in the domains of *home* and *marriage* addresses the characteristics and expectations of a wife.

(13) Nakinae nyesigirya.
Give me a donkey
[Give me a donkey.]
Give me your daughter for a wife.

In the above metaphor, a wife is referred to as a *donkey*. The encyclopedic entries

associated with a donkey, being hardworking, enduring, and capable of carrying heavy loads, are accessed in the source domain and mapped onto the target domain, *wife*. This metaphor reflects the societal expectations that the Toposa place on a wife. Specifically, it conveys that a good wife is one who demonstrates diligence, endurance, and the ability to fulfill her domestic and familial responsibilities effectively.

Characteristics of Persons

The following section discusses how persons are characterized in the Toposa culture. A man is viewed in the metaphor below as follows.

(14) Nyekilye erai Nyakujʉ.
A man is God (said by a woman)
[Lit. A man is God]
The man is the protector/provider.

In this metaphor, the source domain is *God*. God is culturally and cognitively associated with protection, provision, and the bestowal of peace, joy, harmony, goodness, and love. Just as God holds authority over mankind, a man in Toposa society is expected to exercise authority over his household while embodying the same qualities attributed to God. Thus, the metaphor conveys that a man is socially and morally obligated to act as a protector and provider, ensuring that his home is characterized by harmony, love, joy, and security.

The next metaphor describes the stupidity of a man.

(15) *Ilemolemo iyoŋo kana kipi koŋina.*
Floating you inside water just
Lit.: You are floating just inside the water.]
You do not know what you are talking about.

The encyclopedic entries of the domain 'water' are accessed. The profile in that domain is taken from the predicate ‘floating inside the water’. Objects that float do not follow a certain direction; they move aimlessly. The idea of moving without any direction is mapped on a man and his speech. So the man does not know what he is talking about; he is

just ‘floating’. The next metaphor is also talking about the stupidity of a man.

(16) Elemwaana nyitoonɨ ŋini.
be-hornless person is that
[Lit.: That person is hornless.]
That stupid man can’t comprehend anything; he is stupid.

The entry point for the understanding of this metaphor is the domain of ‘cattle’. Within the cattle domain, different sub-domains occur, like cows and their shapes and colours. In Toposa culture, cows have to have horns. So a cow without horns is useless, as that cow cannot fight. So the idea that horns are essential for fighting is transferred to the target domain, man. As it is required to be a fearless fighter in the Toposa society, a man that has a head without horns means that man is like the cow missing the essentials for life, he has no ideas, he does not have a sharp mind, and basically, he is stupid and cannot reason well.

Naming System

Metaphors also show up in the naming system of Toposa men. Every Toposa man receives a name given by the community. Usually, the name reflects some of the behaviour he displayed during warfare. This name-giving practice is a reflection of the warlike culture of the Toposa, but also contributes to the cultural identity of a person. See the following example,

(17) Lojale nyedokorọ
Lojale Scorpion
[Implied meaning: Lokale can sting like a scorpion in a fight, etc.]

Lojale is characterized as a *scorpion*. In this metaphor, the encyclopedic knowledge associated with the source domain *scorpion* is activated. Scorpions are known for their vicious and unexpected attacks and for the intense pain caused by their sting. When this imagery is mapped onto the target domain *man*, it characterizes Lojale as a warrior who killed an enemy in a sudden and ferocious manner. The name thus encodes his reputation in

battle and functions as a warlike metaphor, comparable to other metaphorical names found in the Toposa naming system.

(18) Lokayi Nyemunu̱
Lokayi Snake
[Implied meaning: In a fight, his bite is as poisonous as that of a snake.]

This man is described as fighting like a snake. In Toposa culture, a snake is associated with a poisonous sting, stealth, and the ability to strike unexpectedly and kill. This encyclopedic knowledge is accessed through the concept *Nyemunu̱* 'snake', which functions as a source domain for another warfare-related metaphor used as a personal name.

(19) Lopuke Nyengatuny
Lopuke Lion
[Implied meaning: Lopuke is fierce and fearless.]

Here, the fierce and fearless qualities of a lion are attributed to *Lopuke*, highlighting his bravery and ferocity in battle. However, personal names do not always reflect the warlike aspects of Toposa culture; they may also serve to describe an individual's character more generally.

(20) Lokale Nyakure
Lokale Thirst
[Implied meaning: Like thirst, does to the people, Lokale can be like thirst to people who are against him.]

This name activates the cultural knowledge about thirst. Thirst in the Toposa culture is frequently experienced, as the climate can be very hot. The Toposa people experience thirst as very painful. Transferring this information to the target Lokale, people experience Lokale as very painful. In the Tugen name giving system- Tugen is a Southern Nilotic community of Kenya- names given by the community are those that are distributed after female and male circumcision (Jerono, 2016b).

Some people are also known for good and famous deeds. See the following examples:

(21) Teyaratuna

Saviour of the people

(22) Lowuruwi
The one, whose *Kraal smells*.
[Implied meaning: people are always fed in his kraal when visiting.]

In the last metaphor, the encyclopedic entries of the domain smells from a kraal have to be accessed. When the kraals smell it is usually because meat is roasted. So the roasting of meat attracts people, and they visit, and the kraal is known to provide the people with meat.

Famine and Hunger

The next metaphors are talking about the ever-occurring famine and hunger season of the Toposa, see below:

(21) Emona nyekaru lo.
be-hot year this
[Lit.: The year is hot.]
This year is great famine and sickness.

Here, the encyclopedic entries of the *year* are exploited. Within the domain *year*, the subdomains of *dry season* and *rainy season* are accessed, since the annual cycle in Toposa culture is conventionally divided into these two seasons. Cultural knowledge associated with the *dry season* provides the information that rainfall is absent and that temperatures are extremely high. From this source domain, several inferences can be drawn: if a particular year is characterized by an exceptionally hot, dry season, a drought is likely to follow. Such drought conditions result in poor agricultural yields, leading to limited food availability, which is frequently followed by periods of hunger. The Toposa experience droughts on a regular basis; consequently, when drought strikes the land, food becomes insufficient, and widespread hunger affects the community. Such a period will often be accompanied by sickness. Another way of saying that no food is available is the following.

(22) Eperiti̱ nyiiŋoko̱ lokeno.
slept dog in cooking place
[Lit. A dog slept in the cooking place].
People are sleeping hungry because no one cooked anything.

In this proverb, the domain of *cooking* is activated. In the Toposa culture, women have a designated kitchen or cooking place located outside the house, with a fireplace situated at the centre. When cooking takes place, the cooking area becomes hot, making it impossible for a dog to lie or sleep there. Consequently, if a dog is found sleeping in the cooking place, this serves as an indication that no cooking has occurred and that the household has gone without food. The same conceptualization of hunger and food scarcity is expressed in the metaphor discussed below.

(23) Kutwara ŋikenyi̲.
You-chase:away birds.
[Lit.: You chase away the birds.]
The person in question came after the people had eaten all the food.

Here, the domain harvest is activated. The encyclopedic entries associated with harvest include the practice of guarding crops against birds that might eat the grain. During harvest season, people actively chase birds away to protect their food supply. Thus, the source domain chasing away birds provides the key for interpreting the proverb. If birds are not chased away, they will consume much of the grain, resulting in little or no food being available. Therefore, the statement that one is chasing away birds implies that people are currently consuming the harvest and that the birds have already been driven off. Consequently, the proverb conveys the idea that the food has been exhausted and that no food is available anymore.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper began with the claim that metaphors provide a window into how people experience the world and construct their culture. It examined metaphors and proverbs from the Toposa, a pastoralist community living around Kapoeta in South Sudan. The analysis was grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which holds that the interpretation of metaphor is a cognitive process involving systematic mappings between a

more concrete *source domain* and a more abstract *target domain*. The meanings of Toposa metaphors and proverbs emerge from culturally shared cognitive domains and their associated encyclopedic knowledge, reflecting the lived experiences and worldview of the Toposa people. These metaphors are readily understood by community members precisely because they mirror their social realities and everyday experiences.

Although the paper focused on a limited selection of cultural domains, it highlighted key aspects of Toposa life, including warfare, marriage practices, gender roles, and the recurrent experiences of drought and famine. The mappings between source and target domains reveal deeply embedded cultural assumptions and values that structure social life. In particular, the study identified numerous metaphors that articulate societal expectations of men in warfare. A man is expected to defend his cattle during raids, even at the cost of his life, and such a sacrifice is celebrated as heroic. In contrast, cowardice, symbolized through the animal metaphor of the rabbit, is strongly condemned, and men who flee during raids are socially stigmatized and deemed unworthy of marriage. The omnipresence of death in warfare is expressed indirectly through metaphors involving vultures or sleep, while warnings about spies or enemies are conveyed through metaphors describing posture or concealment. The threat posed by the Dinka, the archenemies of the Toposa, is also encoded metaphorically and metonymically, particularly through the name *Munyene*, which indexes historical intergroup relations.

Metaphors related to marriage further illuminate the societal roles assigned to women. A girl is expected to leave her father's homestead to establish a new home in her husband's compound, thereby transitioning from girlhood to womanhood. Marriage grants her social identity and defines her responsibilities, which center on caring for the homestead and children, roles that currently constitute the primary socially sanctioned path for women in

Toposa society. The metaphorical portrayal of wives emphasizes diligence, endurance, and hard work as core expectations.

The role of men as husbands is similarly constructed through metaphor, notably through God-like imagery. While men are portrayed as having authority over women, they are simultaneously expected to embody protection, care, harmony, and provision within the household. Metaphorical expressions are also prominent in personal naming practices, where war-related names attribute qualities such as bravery, ferocity, and heroism to men, reinforcing social ideals and desired conduct.

Finally, the paper showed that seasonal hardship, drought, and famine are conceptualized metaphorically, allowing speakers to address calamities indirectly. Describing a year as "hot" invokes shared knowledge of drought, disease, hunger, and death. Proverbs referring to an unlit fireplace or a dog sleeping in the cooking place metaphorically signal food scarcity without explicit mention. Such indirectness reflects culturally appropriate ways of discussing suffering and deprivation. The metaphors and proverbs of the Toposa encapsulate central aspects of their lived reality: cattle raiding, rigidly defined gender roles, socially meaningful naming practices, the cyclical threat of hunger, and enduring conflict with the Dinka following prolonged war. These figurative expressions demonstrate how metaphor functions not merely as a linguistic device but as a powerful cognitive and cultural tool for organizing experience, transmitting values, and sustaining collective identity.

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