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Masculinity, Honour, and Verbal Aggression among Gĩkũyũ Men in Kiambu County, Kenya

Dianah Wangari Kabiru ¹

Nelson Ndiritu ²

Florence Mwithi ³

(1,2,3) Laikipia University, Kenya.

Main author's email: kabirudianah@gmail.com

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine male-to-male insulting as a culturally embedded communicative practice through which masculinity, honour, and social status are negotiated among Gĩkũyũ men in Kiambu County, Kenya. The study addresses a gap in scholarship on masculinity and language in African contexts, particularly the limited attention given to how insults are culturally embedded and employed in negotiating masculine identities and social relations within specific Bantu communities in Kenya. The participants were 20 adult Gĩkũyũ men, and data were collected through participant observation, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and naturally occurring discourse. Data were analysed thematically and interpreted using Speech Act Theory and Social Identity Theory. The findings indicate that Gĩkũyũ verbal insults have less to do with verbal aggression than with pragmatic practices used to challenge courage and responsibility, assert authority, and reinforce culturally significant notions of manhood. Their meanings are largely shaped by shared cultural knowledge, social identity, and the communicative context. Although insults may appear offensive, they can function as mechanisms for regulating social behaviour, correcting conduct, asserting social authority, and renegotiating masculine identities. The study contributes to African socio-pragmatics and gender linguistics by demonstrating how language functions as a resource through which masculinity is constructed, challenged, and negotiated in everyday interactions among members of the Gĩkũyũ community.

Key words: Gĩkũyũ, masculinity, Social Identity Theory, Speech Act Theory, verbal insults.



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INTRODUCTION

Language is a key tool for the building and enactment of social identities. It conveys information, but it can also be used to negotiate power, develop relationships, and reflect cultural values. Of these identities, masculinity is constantly performed in culturally sanctioned ways of acting, such as speech. In many African societies, language is a significant instrument of men's expression of authority, courage, responsibility, and social legitimacy.

In the Gĩkũyũ community in Kenya, masculinity is not just about being a man, but also about possessing certain desirable traits like bravery, wisdom, leadership, responsibility, and protecting the honour of the family and community. These ideals are passed on during socialisation and are strengthened in daily interaction. Verbal insults are one of the communicative resources that are used to assess and control masculine behaviour. Insults are generally considered offensive, but they can have other social functions such as correcting behaviour, challenging authority, reinforcing communal values, and negotiating social status.

In Gĩkũyũ society, insults between men have a special significance. There is no need for unnecessary verbal aggression to threaten social harmony, but there are socially acceptable insults in situations of competition, correction, or the defence of honour. In these contexts, insults are pragmatic tools used to establish dominance, to doubt the courage or responsibility of another, and to negotiate social hierarchy. Their meaning cannot be understood in a literal sense of the words, but is based on common cultural knowledge, participants' relationship and the communicative context.

Research on Gĩkũyũ language and gender has shown that masculinity is created and sanctioned in the daily use of language. The results from Gitu et al.'s (2016) analysis of Gĩkũyũ proverbs using Wodak's (1988–1999) DH approach and Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) hegemonic masculinities approach revealed that proverbs are a discursive strategy that serves to assert control of the community discourse and to inscribe dominant discourses of manhood. African scholarship is more recent, and insulting and abusive language is still a vibrant and dynamic topic of sociolinguistic study throughout the continent. A review of the literature on social media abuse in Ghanaian social media discourse by Thompson and Amuzu (2025) revealed that indigenous language abusive expressions are deliberately

preserved in their original form to magnify the emotional impact, reinforce cultural identity, and undermine authority, rather than being spontaneous. Muhammad et al. (2025) noted that while there is already a lack of high-quality, locally annotated data available for abusive and hate speech in high-resource languages, this is not the case in African languages such as Swahili, which is widely spoken in Kenya.

This collection of work shows the continued relevance of insult and abusive language as a locus of African sociolinguistic research and the continued underrepresentation of Kenyan indigenous languages in this body of research. But the study of insult and abusive speech in Gĩkũyũ has been either a description of an incidental aspect of proverbial wisdom or gender representation Gitu et al., 2016, or a description of an incidental aspect of gender representation in Gĩkũyũ. Likewise, the most recent African research on abusive and hate speech has been concentrated on online, public, and political speech Muhammad et al., 2025; Thompson & Amuzu, 2025, rather than on the insult exchanges that take place offline and are culturally regulated, and that rely on indigenous concepts of honour. The paper thus differs from previous work in two ways: first, it is empirical in that it draws on primary qualitative data on naturally occurring male-to-male insult exchanges among the Gĩkũyũ rather than on proverbs or secondary texts or online corpora; second, it focuses on insults as a specific context of negotiation of masculinity and honour, not as a general feature of discourse or representation of gender. The lack of empirical studies on the use of Gĩkũyũ insults, and the absence of explicit discussion of masculinity and honour in insult research in Africa generally, means that little is known about the role of language in the performance and negotiation of masculinity in the everyday.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how verbal insults are used by Gĩkũyũ men to construct, negotiate, and challenge masculinity. Drawing on Speech Act Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study conceptualises Gĩkũyũ verbal insults as culturally mediated communicative acts through which honour, authority, and masculine identity are negotiated. Specifically, the study investigates the nature of Gĩkũyũ insults as speech acts in everyday interactions among men, identifies the masculine values and ideals expressed through Gĩkũyũ insulting practices, and examines how such insults reinforce, negotiate, or challenge social hierarchy and honour among Gĩkũyũ men. In doing so,

the paper contributes to the fields of African socio-pragmatics and gender linguistics while advancing the emerging study of indigenous discourse practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, Masculinity, and Verbal Aggression

The research literature on language and gender always records the fact that masculinity is not a natural, biological attribute, but it is socially and discursively constructed (Connell, 1995). Men's daily interactions enact culturally valued forms of manhood as they use language that is authoritative, confident, emotionally stunted, and dominating. Language is then an important tool used to perform, negotiate, and contest a man's identity between societies.

Connell's 1995 'hegemonic masculinity' suggests that societies create privileged models of manhood which legitimate men's rule and devalue other forms of manhood. They are culturally diverse but share values of courage, independence, competitiveness, leadership and emotional resilience. Men constantly negotiate these attributes in social interactions, especially in situations where one's reputation, honour and social status are at stake, and they are culturally assessed. In more recent years, Langa et al (2024) reviewed the history of masculinities research in South African psychology in its 30-year history and found that essentialist and singular constructions of masculinity were yielding way to more plural, non-hegemonic ones; thus, there is no suggestion that hegemonic masculinity exists uniformly in African contexts, rather, a call for local analysis to avoid the transplantation of Western and Pan-African models.

Likewise, Kiesling (2005) suggests that masculine identities are not simply possessed but performed through interaction. Male talk often consists of competition, teasing, verbal challenges, and playful aggression, all of which are a means of establishing relationships and negotiating status. It is not a failure of communication but a socially recognised interactional tool that men use to demonstrate their confidence, resilience and solidarity, and its effectiveness is influenced by their shared cultural norms regarding "masculine" appropriate behaviour. But as with many foundational texts on language and masculinity, Kiesling's analysis is based mainly on data from the interactions of a Western (mainly American) community, and she does not provide any definitive conclusions about how similar processes might be found in another

community with a different indigenous culture of insult exchange.

Research on verbal aggression also reveals that insults can be used more broadly than simply to attack the person; they serve as pragmatic tools that can be used to question authority, to negotiate power, to create social identities. An expression can be interpreted as a teasing joke, a friendly comment, or an insult, depending on the context, the participants' relationships, and cultural norms. This context-dependence is supported by recent pragmatics research in Africa: Mohr et al. (2023) present a special issue on communicative interaction across Nigeria, Cameroon, Namibia and South Africa, which demonstrates that speech act theory and other pragmatic approaches ought not to be applied in a universal manner to the autochthonous African languages, as speech acts are interpreted and felicitous in the context of local sociocultural norms. It highlights the importance of research into speech acts (e.g., insults) within a specific African linguistic community rather than taking them for granted.

Conversely, studies of abusive and insulting language in African contexts have mostly focused on online and mediated discourses and ignored face-to-face conversation. For example, Thompson and Amuzu (2025) demonstrated how certain social media users in Ghana strategically use indigenous language abusive expressions to accentuate the emotional force and contest the sociopolitical authority, while Muhammad et al. (2025) pointed to the persistent lack of annotated data on abusive and hate speech in Africa in general, specifically in Swahili in Kenya. Although the studies mentioned above validate insult and insulting speech as an area of critical African linguistic investigation, they neglect to examine how insults function as face-to-face, orally transmitted practices within indigenous kinship and age-set and honour systems, as is the case with Gĩkũyũ male insults.

Gĩkũyũ, Gĩtũ et al (2016) showed that Gĩkũyũ men, through an analysis of proverbs, were using language to inscribe and legitimate dominant conceptualisations of manhood, and to regulate community discourse. This is not to say that Gĩkũyũ linguistic practice was not a space where masculinity was constructed, but rather that the study examined the meaning of the proverbs as fixed texts, communicable amongst a community, not as insults or spontaneous, face-to-face speech acts negotiated between men as they would speak to one

another. It thus does not reflect the dynamic contestations to masculinity, honour and status in real-time interaction as dealt with in the present study.

Combined, this literature has identified three points: First, it is discursive rather than a simple matter of inherent characteristics that constitute masculinity (Connell, 1995), and second, insults and abusive language can serve as an interactional tool for establishing status, not just a communication breakdown (Kiesling, 2005), while third, African pragmatic phenomena such as insults and foul language must be analyzed from within their own contexts, where their meaning is not given from Western or purely digital contexts (Mohr et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2025; Thompson & Amuzu, 2025).

None of this scholarship, however, looks at the specific male-to-male insulting practices of the Gĩkũyũ or theorises about the ways they can be viewed as both speech acts and sites of masculine identity negotiation. This leaves an empirical gap in that there were no primary data regarding the use of live male insults of the Gĩkũyũ people, and a theoretical gap in that there was no integrated theory that connects the pragmatic (speech act) theory to the social identity negotiation theory in the field of African masculinities studies. The present study aims to overcome these limitations by considering a combination of Speech Act Theory and Social Identity Theory in analysing the naturally occurring Gĩkũyũ insult data, which will be described below in the theoretical framework.

Insults in African Sociocultural Contexts

Across African societies, insults constitute culturally meaningful communicative practices rather than simple expressions of hostility. Their interpretation depends on shared cultural knowledge, social relationships, age, gender, and the communicative situation. African scholars have consistently observed that insulting expressions reflect broader systems of morality, communal values, and social organisation.

Agyekum (2010) characterises insults as a form of "linguistic warfare" through which speakers strategically employ language to challenge opponents, defend personal honour, and negotiate social superiority. His analysis shows that insults are carefully constructed acts whose success depends on both linguistic creativity and cultural competence. Similarly, Obeng (1997) argues that verbal aggression in African societies frequently

performs socially sanctioned functions — correcting undesirable behaviour, expressing disapproval, and reinforcing communal norms — rather than merely provoking conflict.

Within many African communities, insults frequently draw on semantic fields associated with animals, bodily functions, kinship relations, sexuality, morality, and social behaviour. Such expressions derive their force not simply from lexical meaning but from the cultural values attached to these domains. Interpreting an insult therefore requires speakers and hearers to hold extensive background knowledge of shared beliefs, taboos, and systems of social evaluation.

Among the Gĩkũyũ, insults function similarly as culturally embedded evaluations of behaviour and character, often employing animal imagery, references to bodily features, kinship relations, moral conduct, and social responsibility to express criticism or ridicule. Such expressions are rarely interpreted literally; instead, they invoke culturally recognised stereotypes that let hearers infer the speaker's intended meaning. The acceptability and force of an insult further depend on contextual factors such as age difference, kinship relations, gender, social status, and the circumstances of the utterance.

Taken together, the literature in this chapter converges on a single cumulative gap. Masculinity is established as a discursively performed, continually negotiated identity (Connell, 1995; Kiesling, 2005; Langa et al., 2024); verbal aggression and insult are established as legitimate, culturally governed resources rather than mere hostility (Agyekum, 2010; Obeng, 1997); and African insults are shown to be culturally embedded practices whose meaning depends on locally shared knowledge, including among the Gĩkũyũ (Gitu et al., 2016). Yet few studies bring these strands together to examine insults as resources for constructing masculine identities within African speech communities — research has instead focused on classifying insults or describing their linguistic and social functions, treating masculinity construction as incidental rather than central. The present study addresses this gap by examining Gĩkũyũ male insults as practices through which honour, authority, and masculine identity are actively negotiated, using the theoretical framework outlined below.

Theoretical Framework

The study was conducted with the guidance of Speech Act Theory proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle

(1969), and Social Identity Theory as proposed by Tajfel & Turner (1979). These two theories can complement each other in explaining not only the communicative acts carried out in the context of insulting but also the social identities produced in the process of insulting.

Speech Act Theory considers language as a form of action and not just a means of communicating information. According to Austin (1962), utterances have actions, and Searle (1969) elaborates that speakers convey specific communication goals by means of their illocutionary acts. In this context, the term insult is not only equivalent to an insulting expression, but also a speech act that challenges, ridicules, threatens, reprimands, humiliates or corrects its target. Their interpretation is not only based on the linguistic form but also on the intention of the speaker, on the assumption he makes and on the recognition of that assumption by the hearer. This is relevant when discussing the negotiation of authority, the protection of honour, and the regulation of behaviour in the context of insults as used in Gĩkũyũ societies.

This approach is complemented by a social identity theory which accounts for language as an index of group membership and social categorisation. Tajfel and Turner (1979) contend that people get some of their identity from being part of the in-group and constantly negotiate relations between in-groups and out-groups. Language is thus an important symbolic resource that is used to establish and sustain social boundaries. In male-to-male relationships, insults demarcate acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, assert group values, and validate culturally defined ideals of manhood. They build their own identity and manage their own group's norms for men's proper behaviour at the same time.

Speech Act Theory and Social Identity Theory are combined to offer a broad perspective of the phenomenon of Gĩkũyũ verbal insults. Speech Act Theory accounts for the effects of insults in interaction, whilst Social Identity Theory accounts for the processes of constructing, reinforcing and contesting masculine identities through interaction.

These two theories, when combined, can shed light on the relationship between language, social action, power and identity, and are thus well suited for the pragmatic and sociocultural aspects of male-to-male insults by the Gĩkũyũ.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study was qualitative research aimed at exploring the construction and negotiation of masculinity among Gĩkũyũ men in Kiambu County, Kenya through the use of verbal insults. The data used in this article were extracted from a larger study for the PhD degree on the pragmatics of Gĩkũyũ verbal insults. A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for gaining deeper insight into real-world language contact processes in their sociocultural settings and for interpreting what the speakers intended to say and what the participants perceived as insulting behaviour.

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants in the wider study who were Gĩkũyũ speakers and had a high level of knowledge of the language and its sociocultural norms. The study participants comprised 40 (20 males and 20 females) from Limuru sub-County in Kiambu County. Participants were split into two age groups: 20-35 (youths) and 60 years or older (elderly adults), which represented different generational points of view on the use and interpretation of verbal insults.

They came from a wide range of work experiences, including farming, business, teaching, public service and informal work, reflecting a wide range of community experiences. This article is dedicated to masculinity and verbal aggression, so it's only the data from 20 male participants that is analysed.

Participant observation, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions and observation of naturally occurring verbal interactions were used to gather data. Specific efforts were made to focus on male-to-male communicative environments such as a friendship talk, community meetings, family gatherings and any other social situation where verbal insults might be expected. Multiple data collection methods enabled the triangulation of the data, which increased the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings as they were based on genuine communication as opposed to elicited and contrived responses.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had sufficient local linguistic experience and knowledge of the local sociocultural norms of insults directed at the target person, as they had been living in the study area for a long time and were fluent in the local language Gĩkũyũ. The sub-locations of Limuru Sub-County

(Rironi, Bibirioni and Ngecha) were the sites of recruitment of participants. Community leaders and local contacts helped to identify members who were willing and recognised within the community as being competent speakers of Gĩkũyũ. There were 40 participants (20 male and 20 female) in the parent study. For this article, however, since it is about masculinity and verbal aggression, only data from the 20 male participants were analysed.

The data in this article were collected via the use of participant observation, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussions, and the documentation of naturally occurring verbal interactions. The male participants were interviewed (20 semi-structured interviews) to get an idea of their perceptions and experiences of the use of insults in male social interaction. Moreover, a single focus group discussion was held with 10 men, and the main goal was to elicit a consensus opinion on the meanings, functions, and acceptance of verbal insults by men. Naturally occurring verbal exchanges were observed and recorded in the field notes during the participant observation in informal social settings like community meetings, family gatherings, and conversations with peers.

Moreover, there was documentation of any naturally occurring interaction involving the male participants when verbal insults occurred in spontaneous encounters during everyday interactions. The use of multiple sources of data allowed for triangulation and helped increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, as they were based on real communicative practices, not on elicited responses or artificial communication.

The study centred on the analysis of such insulting expressions that are used repeatedly between men, the linguistic strategies used in the expression,

communicative contexts in which insults are used, and the meanings and social function attributed to the insults by the participants. Thematic analysis of data and the use of Speech Act Theory and Social Identity Theory to interpret data were used to explain the communicative function of insults and their role in the construction of masculine identity, negotiation of social status, and reinforcement of hierarchy among Gĩkũyũ men.

All ethical principles were adhered to during the study. Participants gave informed consent to participate in interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation. They were anonymised, and confidentiality was upheld using pseudonyms and by removing identifiable information. As offensive and taboo terms are culturally sensitive, all offensive and taboo terms were recorded and analysed strictly for academic purposes only and were treated with appropriate respect for the linguistic and cultural norms of the Gĩkũyũ community.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Insults as Performances of Toughness

Frequently, insults are used to signal toughness. Often, insults are enacted as displays of toughness. The results showed that verbal insults were a significant tool that Gĩkũyũ men used to invoke and perform manhood and to engage in negotiated manhood. It was found that participants believed a socially accepted “real man” should be able to insult effectively and also be able to hold his tongue under verbal provocation and not be too emotionally vulnerable. Courage, emotional control, confidence, and responding well to challenges were then considered as significant indicators of masculinity. Examples of the insults that were used by the male participants to challenge courage, resilience, and the ability to turn words into action are presented below.

Table 1: Insults as Performances of Toughness

Gĩkũyũ insult	English translation	Masculine quality challenged	Pragmatic interpretation
<i>wĩtue ta mũthuri</i>	Man up!	Courage and emotional resilience	Challenges the target to demonstrate behaviour associated with masculine toughness and self-control.
<i>wee no mũnua, na ciĩkũ hatirĩ</i>	You are big-mouthed/all talk but no action.	Competence, courage, and action	Ridicules a man whose verbal claims are not supported by corresponding action.
<i>mũthuri mũnene, na no guoya mũtheri!</i>	Big man, small courage!	Courage and masculine competence	Contrasts outward stature with perceived cowardice, thereby undermining the target's masculine status.

1. *Wĩtue ta mũthuri* (Man up!)

Rude exchanges, especially between age-mates and male friends, thus served as a sort of unofficial duel for toughness, a test of each other's capacity to keep a cool head and to react with appropriate replies. This is reflected in the phrase *wĩtue ta mũthuri* ('man up'), which asks someone to act like a man. In a practical way, the phrase not only challenges the idea of courage, but it also puts the speaker in a place where he or she isn't meeting some masculinity ideal and asks him to show emotional and social strength. The speech act is an act of challenge and social evaluation (Searle, 1969; Austin, 1962), and Relevance Theory can be used to understand how its intended meaning is understood, based on culturally shared assumptions of appropriate masculine behaviour (Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

2. *Wee no mũnua, na ciĩkũ hatirĩ* (you are big-mouthed/all talk but no action)

The idea that a man's manliness should be made evident rather than by words being expressed is further highlighted by *wee no mũnua, na ciĩkũ hatirĩ* (you are big-mouthed/all talk but no action). The expression negatively describes a perceived difference between what the target says and what he does. The speaker is saying that he is not competent, or not brave, or not powerful, when the target says that he is. The speaker is devaluing the competence, bravery, or power of the target, who has claimed them in *ciĩkũ hatirĩ*, 'there is no action'. The insult therefore defines masculinity, which is to be shown in behaviour and not just declared in words. Within this context, verbal confidence that is not accompanied by action is a source of ridicule and loss of social credibility. The expression then carries a sense of interpersonal responsibility, revealing the target's perceived failure to embody the qualities that they assert he or she should embody, or ones that he or she is expected to embody, as a male. In this way, male participants could validate a

common assumption that a competent man could be able to translate words into action.

3. *Mũthuri mũnene na no guoyamũtheri!* ('big man, small courage!)

In the same vein, one can see an assessment of courage in *mũthuri mũnene na no guoyamũtheri!* ('big man, small courage!'). The expression sets one against the other, *mũthuri mũnene* – 'big man' and *guoya mũtheri* – 'small courage', differentiating between physical or social height and real tough manliness. The insult is powerful and might give him social presence, but deflates his target by showing him to be lacking in bravery. The word therefore reveals that size, age, and social status are not the only criteria needed to determine a man, but also one in which he can show courage when challenged. It is ironic, as it further emphasises the face-threatening aspect of the insult since it also confirms the target's assumed rank and reveals what the insulter is claiming as being a major male deficiency. The evaluations can be seen as a way to maintain expectations about desirable masculine behaviour from a Social Identity Theory point of view (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

These expressions illustrate that Gĩkũyũ insults between men were not just verbal attacks but also tools of social interaction and the assertion of masculinity. The speaking; *wĩtue ta mũthuri* implies that it is a man's duty to be brave and brave-faced; the not doing; *wee no mũnua, na ciĩkũ hatirĩ* suggests that a man's word should be backed by action; the not doing; *mũthuri mũnene, na no guoya mũtheri!* means to differentiate between outward appearance and inner strength. The insults thus aimed to assess and manage attributes deemed essential for the male identity such as tenacity, self-assurance, bravery, and interpersonal resilience. This interpretation was thus contingent upon the interactional context and shared cultural understandings of what would be an

acceptable masculine manner. Insulting practices were in this way a space for the constant performance, negotiation, and contestation of 'manhood'.

Honour, Authority, and Moral Policing

4. *Wee wĩ kũmbani* – *ũtindanagia na atumia othe ta ũtarĩ na waku* (you are a womaniser; you move around freely with any woman without any remorse)

The data also showed that insults played a role as moral regulation devices in the society of Gikũyũ. These were not only expressions of hostility; they were also employed to assess behaviour that was conceived as being contrary to socially valued responsible manhood. This is clearly seen in the expression *wee wĩ kũmbani* –

ũtindanagia na atumia othe ta ũtarĩ na waku (you are a womaniser; you move around freely with any woman without any remorse). The insult reinforces the target's sexual behaviour as excessive and uncontrollable, and broadens a reference to sexual relationships into a moral judgement. Therefore, the phrase *kũmbani*, when used as it is, not just as a description, but as a social evaluative description, is not only descriptive but also socially derogatory and challenges the restraint and respectability of the person being described. This list of expressions shows how men's actions were judged against the culturally accepted norms of sexual restraint, shame, and social respectability.

Table 2: Honour, Authority, and Moral Policing

Gikũyũ insult	English translation	Norm challenged	Pragmatic interpretation
<i>wee wĩ kũmbani</i> — <i>ũtindanagia na atumia othe ta ũtarĩ na waku</i>	You are a womanizer—you move around with every woman as if you have no restraint.	Sexual restraint and responsibility	Polices male sexual conduct by portraying excessive involvement with women as morally irresponsible.
<i>mũthuri ũtarĩ thoni</i>	Shameless man.	Shame, dignity, and respectability	Publicly marks the target as lacking the moral restraint expected of a respectable man.
<i>gathenge ga itũra!</i>	A village he-goat!	Sexual/moral conduct and social restraint	Uses animal imagery to ridicule behaviour perceived as sexually assertive, stubborn, or socially undesirable.

According to Relevance Theory, this broader interpretation is achieved by the hearer's integration of the lexically available meaning of *kũmbani* with the contextual assumptions of what is acceptable for sexual relations and what is masculine responsibility (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). The insult thus symbolically demonstrates the policing of male sexuality through the use of language for the purpose of indicating behaviour that goes beyond the socially acceptable.

5. *Mũthuri ũtarĩ thoni* ('shameless man')

Expressions such as *mũthuri ũtarĩ thoni* ('shameless man') also help to link masculinity and social prestige. The noun *mũthuri* ('man') makes the target very clearly part of the subclass of adult men, and *ũtarĩ thoni* ('without shame') is a negative evaluation of his moral quality. The insult does not just criticise some action, but it threatens the social identity of the target by claiming he is lacking in *thoni*, the culturally important concept of shame, modesty, and socially appropriate action. A respectful gentleman should be aware of conduct that would be socially disapproved of, and this is the basis of

its pragmatic force. In this sense, the expression serves as moral policing, as it publicises the target's action as an act that has breached an expected behaviour. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) reveal that the speech act serves more than a description; it also censures, shames, and calls for behavioural correction.

6. *Gathenge ga itũra!* ('a village he-goat!')

The expression *gathenge ga itũra!* As another illustration, the use of animal imagery can be used to control male behaviour, as seen in ('a village he-goat!'). Pragmatically, the expression does not refer to the he-goat connected to the village, but it can be interpreted as referring to the village. In context, *gathenge* might arouse culturally familiar connotations of assertive sex, stubbornness or socially inappropriate male activity. The phrase *ga itũra* ('of the village') further enhances the image, making the target a visible and noticeable member of the village, whose actions are clearly visible in the community. As such, the insult can serve as a public means of ridicule and make the behaviour of the targeted group or individual subject to a communal

examination. It is the moral force that is derived from the common cultural knowledge of interlocutors which allows them to recognise the negative qualities being attributed to the target. The expression thus illustrates moral policing that can be accomplished by means of metaphor and culturally salient imagery without the need for a clear condemnation of wrongdoing.

All these are examples of words of insult which, when combined, illustrate ways Gĩkũyũ could be used to uphold honour, control behaviour and signal community standards for appropriate manhood. *Kĩũmbani*, which condemns over- or indiscriminate relationships with women, alleges shame and respectability as standards of masculine conduct, and *gathenge ga itũra!* lampoons undesirable behaviour through the medium of animal imagery. The validity and impact of such expressions also depended on the relationship between speaker and addressee. An insult that was produced by a father, elder, clan leader, or other “socially respected” individual in a “corrective” context can have a different meaning from that of the insult if it was produced by someone other than a family member.

In terms of Social Identity Theory, this behaviour helps sustain collective group norms as it signifies behaviours that are socially disapproved and helps to reinforce expectations about appropriate behaviour (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Insults were not only directed at the other person, but they also served as culturally situated strategies for the negotiation and preservation of honour and social responsibility. Students will develop an understanding of insults, hierarchy, and respect.

Insults, Hierarchy, and Respect

7. *Mũthuri aikarĩre njũng'wa onaga haraihu gũkĩra kĩhĩ kĩ mũtĩ igũrũ* ('an elder seated on the traditional stool can see farther than an uncircumcised boy sitting on a tree').

The analysis also showed that there was a hierarchical set of norms that were clearly recognised and influenced the use and interpretation of insults among the Gĩkũyũ men. Participants distinguished insults given by peers from insults given to people in different ages, statuses, and authority positions. Insults to age mates can serve as competitive banter, demonstrations of verbal talent, or a fleeting victory over another without harming the relationship. This is reflected in the statement *mũthuri aikarĩre njũng'wa onaga haraihu gũkĩra kĩhĩ kĩ mũtĩ igũrũ* ('an elder seated on the traditional stool can see further than an uncircumcised boy sitting on a tree').

The contrast with *mũthuri* ('elder/man') and *kĩhĩ* ('uncircumcised boy') forces a hierarchy to be drawn between the two terms, ranking them according to their age, their experience, and the socially recognised maturity. The lower horizontal placement of the younger person on the tree may imply a lower rank, but the elder is shown to have more knowledge and understanding of social interaction. The expression therefore exemplifies how the assessment of linguistic competence can support the idea that social knowledge and authority are not necessarily linked to physical place but rather to culturally acknowledged authority. The next set of examples illustrate the varying meanings and impact of male-to-male insults and how this was influenced by age, class, and the legitimate authority of the speaker.

Table 3: Gikūyū Male-to-Male Insults and Their Meanings, Hierarchical Dimensions, and Pragmatic Interpretations

Gikūyū insult	English translation	Hierarchical issue	Pragmatic interpretation
<i>mūthuri aikarīre njūng'wa onaga haraihu gūkīra kīhī kī mūtī igūrū</i>	An elder seated on a traditional stool sees farther than an uncircumcised boy on a tree.	Age, experience, and status	Reinforces the superior social knowledge and authority associated with age and maturity.
<i>ūreciria wī mūdūrūme wa nakū?</i>	Man, who do you think you are?	Status and assumed superiority	Challenges the target's perceived attempt to claim superiority or importance.
<i>nūū ūkūheire hinya ūcio?</i>	Who gave you that authority?	Legitimate authority and entitlement	Questions the target's right to exercise power, command, or dominate others.

8. *Ūreciria wī mūdūrūme wa nakū?* ('man, who do you think you are?')

There were also negotiations of hierarchical relations that were accomplished directly through challenges to someone's perceived social standing. The question is: *ūreciria wī mūdūrūme wa nakū?* ('man, who do you think you are?') is a challenge to someone's supposed importance or authority. In contrast to the rhetorical question, which asks for information about the identity of the referred-to person, the question addressed to the addressee in the rhetorical question challenges the addressee's right to the status being claimed.

Therefore, its pragmatic power comes from the unstated refusal to raise oneself above others of the recipient. It is an expression that can be directed at age-mates to challenge temporary superiority but is more serious in challenging someone whose behaviour is regarded as going beyond what is warranted by his social status. According to the Speech Act Theory, the utterance does not just ask for an answer, but challenges and rejects the status of the other person (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Its meaning, therefore, is relative to the authority or status that the recipient is purporting to assume, and to the relationship of the parties to each other.

9. *Nūū ūkūheire hinya ūcio?* ('Who gave you that authority?')

The link between the insult and a legitimate authority is even more apparent in *nūū ūkūheire hinya ūcio?* ('Who gave you that authority?'). The expression is similar to the previous one in that it asks a question, but it is not used for informative purposes as in the previous expression, but rather for confrontational purposes. By challenging the other person to defend the authority he is asserting, the speaker also questions the other's right to

command, reprimand, or dominate him/her. As a result, the expression demonstrates how the power negotiation in interpersonal encounters can be carried out through insults. This interpretation is explained by the notion of relevance theory because the hearer is required to infer the meaning intended by the questioner, to the extent that they can, based on their own assumptions and expectations about the situation, the authority of the questioner, and the personalised role of the questioner and the hearer (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). It may therefore be used as joking friendly banter between equals or as a serious challenge against an individual who is believed to be abusing or overreaching his authority.

Combined, these expressions show that insults of Gikūyū had a strong relation to the social rank and culturally determined expectations of respect. *Mūthuri aikarīre njūng'wa onaga haraihu gūkīra kīhī kī mūtī igūrū* means that age and experience are respected; *ūreciria wī mūdūrūme wa nakū?* puts the onus on the individual wishing to claim the superiority; and *nūū ūkūheire hinya ūcio?* questions the authority exercised.

The information thus suggests that the acceptability and the pragmatic power of an insult were not only shaped by the linguistic structure of the insult but also by the relative social positions of the dialogic partners. Insults might help turn the situation into a verbal contestation or a short-term negotiation of status between equals, while insults towards elders or acknowledged leaders can be significant violations of respect. Insulting behaviour in this way was not a separate system in itself, but was a dynamic expression of, and at times a challenge to, the present status quo in terms of age, respect and authority.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several contextual and methodological limitations that need to be considered in interpreting the findings. First, the study was focused on Gĩkũyũ insults in spoken form within the Gĩkabete variety, and the study was undertaken in selected areas of Limuru Sub-County in Kiambu County. The results are thus a result of the language community represented in the study and may not be transferable to other communities or other language varieties of Gĩkũyũ. The meanings of insults are especially sensitive to the local cultural knowledge, interpersonal relationships and situational context; that is, sometimes what is humorous and corrective in one context may be more serious or offensive in another.

Another constraint relates to the qualitative study design and the rather small purposive sample of participants. Interviews, focus group discussions, participant observation, open-ended questionnaires and the naturally occurring and social media data yielded rich contextual information, but the results did not aim to provide statistics or make generalisations about the population. It is also important to consider that the accounts of the participants may have been influenced by social desirability, especially when insults are based on sexuality, morality, family, and respect, which are socially sensitive. As a result, some participants might have reported moderate, omitted, or reinterpreted specific experiences when they discussed practices of insult. When describing experiences of insult, some participants may have thus reported moderate, omitted, or reinterpreted specific experiences. The data interpretation was also subjective in nature, but it was assisted by data triangulation, and data verification of the Gĩkũyũ data and the translations was done by native speakers.

Lastly, the study is not exhaustive of all aspects of aggressive or conflictual communication, but instead it concentrated on verbal insults and their pragmatic functions. Non-verbal gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, laughter, proximity and immediate emotional reactions may have played a role in the understanding of

insults, but were not systematically analysed in all the interactions. The limitations do not undermine the findings, but rather they provide context to the findings. Despite this, the study offers valuable evidence for the understanding of the culturally embedded nature of Gĩkũyũ insults as discursive processes that help to negotiate masculinity, moral expectations, authority, hierarchy and interpersonal relations.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion: The purpose of this particular study was to look at the pragmatic functions of verbal insults as manifested by Gĩkũyũ men and the ways in which they help to construct and negotiate masculinities, honour, authority, and social hierarchies. Analysis showed that insults were not simply expressions of hostility or interpersonal aggression. The meanings and functions were influenced by context, cultural knowledge, interpersonal relations and the relative social position of the participants. Within male-male relations, the insults might assess manliness and emotional staying power, manage behaviour deemed 'unmanly' and/or inappropriate, and establish authority and respect.

Analysis also revealed that Gĩkũyũ insults were pragmatic in that they had meanings beyond the literal. The communicative aspects of the expressions *wĩtue ta mũthuri*, *kĩũmbani*, and *nũũ ũkũheire hinya ũcio?* have been based on culturally shared assumptions about courage, sexual conduct, responsibility, authority, and social status. The explanatory framework of Relevance Theory, Speech Act Theory, and Social Identity Theory complemented these explanations on how the meanings were inferred, how the social actions were enacted through insulting expressions and how the masculine and hierarchical identities were negotiated. The results show that the gĩkũyũ insults are pragmatic practices that are entrenched in the culture, reflecting the speaker's assessment of the recipient's behaviour, subverting or validating a social role, and reinforcing or refuting a recognised social norm.

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