The Figurative Strategies in Kikuyu Verbal Insults: A Relevance Theoretic Analysis

Dianah Wangari Kabiru, Florence Mwithi, Nelson Ndiritu
Laikipia University, Kenya

Abstract
This study examines the pragmatic and cognitive interpretation of Kikuyu verbal insults using Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) as the primary analytical framework, complemented by insights from Speech Act Theory. It investigates how insulters select and deploy specific linguistic techniques—such as metaphors, idioms, and proverbs—to encode meaning, and how the insulted interpret these utterances within their cultural and social contexts. Using a qualitative approach, the study collected data through natural discourse observation, interviews, and participant engagement. The study addresses the limited attention given to the pragmatic study of insults in indigenous African languages. Its main objective is to describe and interpret the linguistic strategies used in Kikuyu insults and to show how speakers and hearers cognitively infer and contextually negotiate meaning. The findings reveal that Kikuyu insults are not mere verbal abuse but complex communicative acts that convey social meaning, express emotions, and reinforce group identity. The study underscores the central role of pragmatic competence and cognitive processing in understanding insult discourse in Kikuyu communication.

Keywords: Cognitive interpretation, linguistic strategies, Kikuyu insults, pragmatics, relevance theory

Introduction

As Agyekum (2004) observes, insults in African discourse are deliberately crafted to cause pain, embarrassment, and disgrace, often leaving psychological scars that may endure for years. An insult is any word, phrase, or utterance intended to wound the hearer's dignity or social face. Psycholinguistic research on taboo language (e.g., Jay 1999) supports this view, showing that public verbal abuse can trigger long-term emotional distress. Because insults violate the hearer's face wants, they directly conflict with Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle and Brown and Levinson's (1987) later elaboration.

This paper examines the linguistic techniques Kikuyu speakers use in verbal insults. While the capacity to insult appears universal, the form and force of any given insult are highly culture-specific (cf. Culpeper 2011 on impoliteness across cultures). Previous scholarship on Gikuyu largely foregrounds gender, stereotyping, and humour (Munyiri, 2006; Njoroge, 2014), leaving the stylistic texture of insults underexplored. Crucially, the same utterance can sting one addressee yet amuse another because insult interpretation hinges on culturally shared inferences rather than lexical meaning alone (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995).

This study draws on Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995). It investigates whether all verbal insults convey the same pragmatic message, how their meanings are generated and understood, and which linguistic tools signal 'who, why, where, and when' in an insult. The

focus is strictly on verbal (spoken) abuse. While gestures, facial expressions, and silence can also insult, speech remains the most accessible and widely used medium for threatening someone's face (cf. Culpeper 2011).

The study examines how specific linguistic choices, such as metaphor, synecdoche, evaluative morphology, and code-switching, transform ordinary Kikuyu words into powerful insults. For example, calling a misbehaving girl *Wanja kĩhii* (Wanja the boy) invokes gender expectations against her, while calling a talkative man *emuhahi ta mundu muka* (as gossipy as a woman) reinforces masculine norms. These insults can prompt behavioural change but also spark conflict, ranging from household quarrels to church divisions. Labelling someone *Kanyari*, after the televangelist known for faking miracles, metaphorically accuses them of fraud and hypocrisy, showing how modern public figures can serve as shorthand for complex moral judgments.

Language use in educational settings is also significant. Teachers who belittle students in front of peers can cause lasting academic and emotional harm (Jay, 1999). Similarly, parents who insult teachers undermine classroom authority. The paper thus distinguishes explicit insults from those that sting through implicature, showing how listeners rely on contextual cues and cultural knowledge to infer the most relevant, often the most hurtful, meaning.

The Kikuyu Language

The term *Kikuyu* refers to both the people and their language. The Kikuyu are an indigenous Kenyan community, and their language, Kikuyu, is one of the country's major Bantu languages. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2019), the Kikuyu are Kenya's largest ethnic group, numbering 8,148,668 in a multilingual nation with more than forty-two languages.

The Kikuyu predominantly inhabit the Aberdare region (formerly Kenya's Central Province). They are known for being hardworking farmers and businesspeople and take pride in using their indigenous language in daily communication. The current emphasis on teaching local languages in lower primary schools, especially in rural areas, has further strengthened Kikuyu use.

Kikuyu is a first language for native speakers and a second or third language for many non-Kikuyu speakers, particularly in urban areas such as Nairobi. The language has seven mutually intelligible dialects (Mutahi, 1977, p. 4): Ki-Embu (Embu), Ki-Mbeere (Mbeere), Gi-Gĩcũgũ (Kirinyaga), Ki-Mathira (Nyeri), the Northern dialect (Murang'a), and the Southern dialect—also known as Gi-Kabete (Kiambu). The Gi-Kabete dialect is considered the standard variety and appears in major written works, including the Kikuyu Bible and literary texts by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, as well as in broadcast media (e.g., Inooro TV, Kameme FM).

Orthographically, Kikuyu has seven vowels and eighteen consonants (Englebretson et al. (2015)), totalling twenty-five phonemes. As a tonal language, tone plays a major role in differentiating meaning and interpreting insults. For instance, a single vowel sound such as /ú/ can, with tonal manipulation, form a potent verbal insult. Kikuyu speakers frequently use diminutive and augmentative prefixes—such as *ka*, *ga*, *tu* (diminutive) and *ki*, *gi*, *ma* (augmentative)—to express belittlement or intensification. These prefixes are key to producing and interpreting insults.

Existing scholarship on Kikuyu invective remains limited yet insightful. Njoroge's work on euphemisms and taboo words in the Kabete dialect reveals lexical overlap with insult registers and shows how politeness strategies motivate lexical substitution. Munyiri's gender-focused thesis exposes asymmetries in the Kikuyu abusive lexicon, showing that derogatory terms disproportionately target women, thereby reinforcing gender ideologies embedded in Kikuyu culture. Complementarily, Gichohi and Subiyanto (2024) highlight figurative compression (analogy, metonymic shift) as a favoured rhetorical strategy in Kikuyu proverbs, a finding echoed

in online inventories such as the Kenyalogue Contributor (2025) list of common Kikuyu insults, where animal metaphors (*nũgũ* 'baboon', *hĩtĩ* 'hyena') and body-part synecdoche (*ĩtina* 'buttocks') dominate.

Despite these insights, no comprehensive study has isolated the full range of linguistic techniques—phonological, morphological, lexical, and pragmatic—that structure Kikuyu verbal insults. Prior work focuses on taboo lexicon or gender bias, while broader African studies emphasize political rhetoric. This paper therefore contributes to the field by synthesizing pragmatics and Relevance Theory to map the figurative strategies Kikuyu speakers employ when insulting each other, situating the analysis at the intersection of indigenous creativity and everyday conflict talk.

Relevance Theory and Insults

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) is a crucial tool for discourse analysis, including the study of insults. It builds on Grice's claim that communication fundamentally involves expressing and recognizing intentions. This inferential model contrasts with the code model used in earlier communication theories

In an insult, both the insulter and the insulted rely on relevance at that moment. Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that an input is worth processing when it yields the greatest cognitive effect for the least mental effort. Thus, the more effort one expends for minimal payoff, the less relevant the input becomes. In insults, speakers aim to provoke strong effects, such as anger, shame, or reflection, using minimal linguistic material.

A verbal insult constitutes ostensive-inferential communication under Relevance Theory: the speaker produces a linguistic stimulus to fulfil both an informative and a communicative intention, while the hearer infers that intention from contextual and cultural cues. Both the insulter and the insulted engage in mental processing to encode and decode meaning. Relevance Theory posits two core principles:

1. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance: Human cognition is geared towards maximizing relevance, thus achieving maximal cognitive effects with minimal effort.
2. The Communicative Principle of Relevance: Every act of communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance; that is, utterances are worth the audience's attention.

Relevance Theory fits this study because it explains the cognitive processes guiding both the insulter's expression and the insultee's interpretation, and how utterances come to be perceived as insulting based on effort, effect, and shared assumptions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in discourse analysis. The study examined the use of metaphor and other figurative strategies in Kikuyu verbal insults through the lens of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). This design enabled an in-depth examination of how figurative language functions in insults, how hearers derive contextual inferences, and how these utterances operate within Kikuyu sociolinguistic life.

Data were collected from natural and semi-natural settings with Kikuyu native speakers. The primary methods included participant observation, social media mining, focus group interviews, and archival analysis. Participant observation took place in informal settings such as marketplaces, homesteads, public transportation, and social gatherings in Kiambu County. The study obtained verbal consent for recorded interactions and maintained detailed field notes.

The study also drew digital data from WhatsApp chats, Facebook threads, YouTube comments, and Twitter/X discussions, spaces where younger Kikuyu speakers creatively express verbal aggression. Additionally, the study conducted focus group interviews with eighteen Kikuyu speakers (ten men and eight women) aged 20–60. Guided by open-ended prompts, the discussions explored participants' experiences and interpretations of insults, emphasising linguistic form and figurative meaning. All interviews were recorded with permission.

Purposive sampling identified insults that displayed clear figurative devices, such as metaphor, simile, idiom, synecdoche, or metonymy. All data were transcribed and thematically analysed using the relevance-theoretic framework of explicature and implicature. Each insult was examined for its figurative construction, implicated meaning, cultural assumptions, and inferential processing. Analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) coding by figurative type; (2) interpreting contextual relevance; and (3) comparing across gender, speaker role, and setting.

Language Techniques in Insults

When people speak, their utterances often carry meanings beyond the literal. Some interpretations are immediate, while others require inferential effort. Among the Kikuyu, many speakers craft creative, contextually appropriate insults that use figurative language to convey offense indirectly. Agyekum (2010) categorizes African insults into contextual domains such as animal names, diseases, ethnicity, personal behaviour, body parts, sexuality, and religion. This section analyses how the Kikuyu deploy linguistic and figurative strategies—particularly proverbs, imagery, and idioms—to insult. The discussion integrates Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) and Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) to interpret how insults generate meaning, intention, and communicative effects.

Relevance Theory explains that insults rely on implicit meaning (implicature), in which the hearer must infer the speaker's intended insult from shared cultural assumptions. Speech Act Theory complements this by showing how these insults perform expressive (emotional), directive (behaviour-influencing), and commissive (commitment) acts in interaction.

Use of Proverbs

Proverbs are integral to Kikuyu oral communication, traditionally used by elders and now common across all generations. Obeng (1994) notes that proverbs offer strategies for indirect communication—summarizing situations, warning, correcting, and even insulting. Interpreting a proverb requires cognitive effort because meaning is often implicit.

Example 1

Gakiyoha niku koi uria kariina

When dressing for a dance, you know how to do it.

This proverb mocks someone who prepares diligently for an activity yet fails miserably. The insult functions expressively—communicating ridicule—and, in a directive sense, urges the person to acknowledge their failure. Relevance Theory shows that the insult's force depends on the hearer recognizing the irony: effort and failure are incongruent, creating a humorous yet painful relevance.

Example 2
Mwathwa ni nyina ni mukigu
Whoever is controlled by his mother is a fool.

This proverb targets men perceived as dependent on their mothers. It stereotypes women as foolish or manipulative and men as weak if influenced by them. Under Speech Act Theory, this is both expressive (ridiculing dependence) and assertive (stating a social expectation). Relevance Theory helps interpret the insult's pragmatic effect: it presumes shared cultural norms about masculinity and autonomy.

Example 3
Gutiri mundurume nyina wa ungi
No man is a mother to another.

The proverb insults men perceived as overly soft or dependent. The figurative contrast between manhood and motherhood mocks men and prescribes self-reliance. The insult's strength lies in the cognitive dissonance the metaphor evokes, which activates cultural assumptions about gender roles.

Example 4
Karega nyina gatihonaga
A young one that refuses its mother cannot survive.

This proverb scolds disobedient youth. It performs a directive act—urging respect for parental advice—and an expressive act of moral condemnation. Under Relevance Theory, the insult's force depends on the hearer's access to shared knowledge of filial piety and the consequences of defiance.

Example 5
Mundu muka na iguru matiminyagirwo
A woman and the sky cannot be understood.

This proverb demeans women by comparing them to the unpredictable sky. It performs an expressive act of gender ridicule and an assertive act that affirms patriarchal stereotypes. The insult relies on cultural encyclopaedic knowledge associating women with instability. Under Relevance Theory, the insult's effectiveness stems from inferential resonance—linking unpredictability with emotional volatility.

Table 1: Proverbs as Kikuyu Insults

Example	Speech Act Function	Relevance Theory Insight
Gakiyoha niku koi uria kariina	Expressive (ridicule)	Irony produces an implicit insult through the incongruity between effort and failure.
Mwathwa ni nyina ni mukigu	Assertive + Expressive	Relies on shared gender norms to infer foolishness.
Gutiri mundurume nyina wa ungi	Directive + Expressive	Encourages masculine independence through metaphorical inference.
Karega nyina gatihonaga	Directive	Hearer infers moral consequence from parental disobedience.
Mundu muka na iguru matiminyagirwo	Expressive	Inference of unpredictability based on gender stereotypes.

Use of Imagery

Imagery is a key linguistic and cognitive mechanism in Kikuyu insults, allowing speakers to evoke vivid mental representations beyond literal meaning. Imagery lets the insulter achieve maximum pragmatic effect with minimal linguistic input. In Kikuyu discourse, such imagery commonly draws on culturally salient domains such as animals, human body parts, and morphological derivations that carry affective and symbolic weight. By invoking familiar images, speakers perform expressive acts of emotion, assert social evaluations, and issue implicit directives to correct, humiliate, or distance the target.

From the perspective of Speech Act Theory, these insults perform a range of illocutionary acts — including expressives, directives, and assertives — that convey disdain or moral judgment. Relevance Theory further explains how listeners derive intended meaning by drawing on shared cognitive environments, cultural scripts, and associative knowledge structures. Consequently, imagery functions not merely as rhetorical ornamentation but as a potent pragmatic tool for constructing meaning, offering sociocultural commentary, and positioning identity within Kikuyu communicative contexts.

Animal Images

The metaphorical reference to a pig in Kikuyu insult discourse evokes a deeply ingrained cultural schema that associates pigs with dirt, greed, and gluttony. When one says *Ngurue ino* (You pig) or *Kũria ta ngurue* (Eating like a pig), the speaker performs an expressive act that conveys disgust or moral condemnation and implicitly urges refinement and self-restraint. The insult operates on both social and moral levels — it attacks the hearer's character and prescribes behavioural norms.

Example 6

Ngurue ino – 'You pig' / *Kũria ta ngurue* – 'Eating like a pig'

Within Relevance Theory, this insult achieves optimal relevance with minimal linguistic effort; the hearer automatically retrieves encyclopaedic information from shared Kikuyu cultural knowledge linking pigs to filth and lack of discipline. The utterance thus triggers inferential processes that yield a rich array of contextual implications: the addressee is not only unhygienic

but also morally corrupt and lacking in social decorum. The cognitive effort required to interpret the insult is low because the contextual assumptions about pigs are deeply entrenched, making the communicative intent both salient and powerful.

Example 7
Ngũi – Dog

The Kikuyu insult *Ngũi ino!* (You dog!) similarly relies on an animal image with profound cultural connotations. In Kikuyu culture, dogs are often viewed as unclean, shameless, and morally degenerate creatures that scavenge indiscriminately. Calling someone a dog thus performs a dual speech act: expressively, it conveys the speaker's anger, contempt, or moral revulsion; directively, it signals disapproval and warns the target to reform their conduct or attitude. This insult also carries a social identity dimension by positioning the target outside the boundaries of respectability.

From a Relevance Theory perspective, the insult's potency lies in its ability to activate a wide network of shared assumptions, such as the belief that dogs act without restraint or social awareness. The listener instantly infers the speaker's evaluation and the broader social implications without explicit explanation. The cognitive effects are therefore strong and immediate: the insult not only demeans the hearer but also reinforces community norms regarding dignity, self-control, and cleanliness. The dog metaphor serves as a concise, contextually rich vehicle for conveying complex moral judgments.

Example 8
Ng'ombe – Cow

The insult *Ng'ombe!* (Cow!) is commonly used among Kikuyu speakers to depict someone as slow, stupid, or mentally dull. The term metaphorically maps animal characteristics—sluggishness, lack of alertness, and passivity—onto human behaviour. Pragmatically, the insult performs an expressive act by mocking or ridiculing the hearer's perceived intellectual inadequacy while also enacting an assertive act that reinforces community expectations of intelligence, sharpness, and mental agility. Within Relevance Theory, the insult derives meaning from the shared cognitive environment of both interlocutors: in rural Kikuyu settings, cows are often seen as docile creatures that follow commands without independent thought. The speaker exploits this culturally available schema to produce cognitive effects that ridicule the hearer's capacity for reasoning or initiative. The insult thus operates as an efficient communicative device, where minimal linguistic effort yields maximum interpretive outcome.

Furthermore, the cow imagery subtly encodes social hierarchy and cognitive evaluation, positioning the hearer as inferior or intellectually subservient. This illustrates how imagery in Kikuyu insults operates at the intersection of linguistic creativity, cultural cognition, and pragmatic intention.

Table 2: Animal Imagery

Example	Speech Act Function	Relevance Theory Insight
Ngurue ino / Kũria ta ngurue	Expressive + Directive	Cognitive effect from shared image of dirt and gluttony.
Ngũi ino	Expressive + Directive	Hearer infers moral baseness and shamelessness.
Ng'ombe	Expressive + Assertive	Cultural inference of stupidity and passivity.

Body Part Images

Body-part imagery is a core domain in Kikuyu insult discourse because it draws on tangible, culturally meaningful references that carry evaluative, moral, and emotional weight. Kikuyu speakers frequently invoke anatomical features such as the head, hands, or buttocks to convey attitudes towards intelligence, morality, or decency. These expressions serve not merely as physical descriptions but as vehicles for social judgment and identity negotiation.

From the perspective of Speech Act Theory, insults based on body parts perform *expressive acts* that reveal emotions such as anger, disgust, or ridicule; *assertive acts* that ascribe undesirable qualities to the hearer; and often *directive acts* that implicitly urge moral or behavioural reform. Relevance Theory further clarifies how these expressions achieve communicative impact: through culturally shared schemas, hearers draw inferences from bodily imagery to access deeper meanings concerning social character, moral standing, and human worth. Thus, body-part imagery in Kikuyu insults encapsulates moral and cultural evaluation in linguistically compact yet cognitively powerful forms.

Example 9

Itina – Buttocks

The use of *itina* (buttocks) in Kikuyu insults often implies moral and social indecency. This imagery evokes associations with shame, sexuality, and moral pollution. When a person is insulted using *itina*, the speaker performs an expressive act of disgust or moral rejection and an assertive act suggesting the target's vulgarity or promiscuity. From the lens of Relevance Theor**y**, the term activates cultural assumptions in the Kikuyu cognitive environment where buttocks represent privacy and modesty. Calling attention to them, therefore, signals a violation of social propriety. The hearer effortlessly infers that the insult targets their dignity and moral cleanliness, generating strong contextual effects from minimal linguistic input. The insult thereby functions as a socio-pragmatic control mechanism, discouraging deviant behaviour while reinforcing communal values surrounding sexual and moral conduct.

Example 10

Mukono ngamu – Sticky hand

The expression Mukono *ngamu* (literally 'sticky hand') metaphorically portrays someone as greedy, corrupt, or dishonest. It performs a representative act by describing the target as habitually taking what does not belong to them, and an expressive act conveying the speaker's moral disapproval. Through Speech Act Theory, the insult not only reports but also evaluates; it passes moral judgment and stigmatizes unethical behaviour.

Under Relevance Theory, the insult's meaning stems from the cultural association of hands with work, honesty, and social trust. The adjective *ngamu* (sticky) triggers a metaphorical inference that the person cannot resist taking things illicitly. The hearer needs minimal processing effort to arrive at the intended interpretation because Kikuyu cultural scripts readily link the hand's 'stickiness' with theft or corruption. The insult thus achieves optimal relevance by condensing a complex moral evaluation into a vivid, easily interpretable image.

Example 11
Gĩti – Vagina

The term *Gĩti* (vagina) is a potent sexualized insult used to demean, feminize, or humiliate both women and men. It derives its derogatory force from Kikuyu cultural taboos surrounding sexuality and the public mention of sexual organs. Pragmatically, it performs expressive and commissive acts by asserting dominance and condemning the target's moral or social behaviour. Through Relevance Theory, meaning arises from shared cultural knowledge linking the vagina with weakness, shame, and secrecy. In discourse, it serves as a weapon of humiliation—especially when directed at men—because it symbolically strips them of masculinity. Social Identity Theory helps explain how it reinforces gender hierarchies and defines acceptable power boundaries. Thus, *Gĩti* embodies both a gendered insult and a moral accusation within Kikuyu social interaction.

Example 12
Kanua – Mouth

The insult *Kanua* (mouth) targets gossipers, slanderers, or those who talk excessively, as in the expression Tiga *kanua kaingi* (Stop your many mouths). It functions as both a directive and an expressive act, instructing silence while condemning moral impropriety. Within Kikuyu communicative norms, excessive speech is considered socially dangerous because it disrupts harmony and exposes secrets. The insult relies on an inferential mapping between uncontrolled speech and moral recklessness, a key interpretive link. It also performs a face-threatening act, undermining the hearer's social image as a respectful or trustworthy person. From a pragmatic perspective, the utterance constructs a moral order in which restraint and discretion are valued. Thus, *Kanua* encapsulates Kikuyu ethics of speech, self-control, and communal respect.

Table 3: Application of Theories in Body-Part Imagery

Example	Speech Act Function	Relevance Theory Insight
Itina	Expressive	Maps filth to moral impurity.
Giti	Expressive + Directive	Inference from sexual taboo heightens insult.
Kanua	Directive	Gossip is linked to moral weakness.
Mũkono ngamu	Expressive	Sticky hands imply meanness

Morphological Imagery
Morphological imagery in Kikuyu insults involves manipulating prefixes and stems to convey expressive, often derogatory meanings. Prefixes such as *ka-* (diminutive) and *mũ-* (agentive) intensify the insult by implying inferiority or undesirable traits. Speech Act Theory shows that such forms perform expressive acts of disapproval and assertive acts that assign a negative identity.

Relevance Theory explains how these morphological cues guide hearers in inferring culturally grounded meanings. Thus, morphological imagery encodes social criticism and emotional stance with remarkable linguistic economy.

Example 13
Kĩmũndũ / Kamũndũ

In Kikuyu, *mũndũ* denotes a person, but when prefixed as *kĩmũndũ* or *kamũndũ*, it becomes insulting. The prefix *kĩ-* conveys abnormal size or aggression, while *ka-* implies smallness or insignificance. Thus, *kĩmũndũ* mocks someone as brutish and overbearing, whereas *kamũndũ* belittles them as weak or contemptible. Under Speech Act Theory, both perform expressive acts of ridicule and assertive acts that assign negative traits. They may also implicitly direct the hearer to alter socially inappropriate behaviour. From a Relevance Theory perspective, meaning arises from contrast with the neutral *mũndũ*, leading the hearer to infer moral or social flaws. Hence, these forms demonstrate how Kikuyu morphology functions pragmatically to mock, judge, and negotiate power relations.

Example 14
Mutumia, Gĩtumia, and *Gatũmia*

While *mutumia* neutrally refers to a woman, its modified forms *gĩtumia* and *gatũmia* become insults. The prefix *gĩ-* implies argumentativeness, while ga- diminishes worth. As Speech Acts, both express contempt and assign traits such as aggression or inferiority, implicitly directing conformity to gendered norms. Relevance Theory holds that Kikuyu hearers infer meaning through shared cultural assumptions linking ideal womanhood with restraint and obedience. The morphological prefixes serve as cues for interpreting deviation from this ideal. Thus, *gĩtumia* and *gatũmia* function as linguistic tools that ridicule and regulate female behaviour, reinforcing patriarchal expectations and social hierarchies.

Example 15
Kahii and *Kĩhĩĩ*

The insults *kahii* and *kĩhĩĩ* derive from Kikuyu initiation rites, in which circumcision marks manhood. Literally meaning ‘boy’ or ‘uncircumcised male’, they become offensive when directed at adults, functioning as expressive acts of humiliation and as assertive acts that deny masculinity. From a Speech Act perspective, they metaphorically reclassify a man as a child, stripping away social authority. Relevance Theory shows how the insult triggers cultural inferences—linking circumcision to bravery and legitimacy—so that calling someone *kahii* or *kĩhĩĩ* implies cowardice or disgrace. The prefixes *ka-* and *kĩ-* heighten this contempt. Thus, these insults draw power from shared Kikuyu notions of manhood, maturity, and moral standing.

Example 16
Kirigu and *Karigu*

Traditionally, *kirigu* and *karigu* denoted an uncircumcised girl, but they now serve as general insults implying impurity or immaturity. The prefixes *ki-* (argumentative) and *ka-* (diminutive)

intensify ridicule. Speech Act Theory shows that the terms perform expressive acts of derision and declarative acts that symbolically revoke womanhood. Relevance Theory explains that Kikuyu listeners infer disgrace from cultural links among circumcision, maturity, and moral worth. Even today, these insults retain power by evoking ancestral shame and exclusion. Their effectiveness lies in their minimal linguistic form achieving maximum social impact—reinforcing norms around femininity, morality, and social identity.

Table 4: Morphological (Prefix-Based Imagery)

Example	Speech Act Function	Relevance Theory Insight
Kimundu / Kamundu	Expressive	Cognitive contrast between normality and exaggeration diminishes dignity.
Gitumia / Gatumia	Expressive + Directive	Inference of overbearing or powerless femininity.
Kahii / Kihii	Expressive + Assertive	Inferential insult based on violation of cultural maturity norms.
Kirigu / Karigu	Expressive + Assertive	Moral inference tied to initiation expectations.

Kikuyu Idioms as Insults

Idioms are fixed expressions whose meanings differ from the literal meanings of their individual components. As Burfield (2003) observes, idioms are contextually bound and culturally encoded, often reflecting the values, beliefs, and worldview of a speech community. In Kikuyu, idioms are a rich part of everyday discourse, serving not only to entertain or express wisdom but also to convey veiled social judgments. Many idiomatic expressions subtly mask sharp social criticism, enabling speakers to insult or ridicule others without direct confrontation. Thus, Kikuyu idioms serve as indirect yet powerful tools of insult, letting speakers uphold cultural norms of politeness while delivering strong pragmatic and moral messages.

Example 17

Mutumia wa kiero gitune – A woman with a red thigh

This idiomatic insult targets a woman believed to bring misfortune or even death to her husbands, branding her a bearer of bad luck. The image of a 'red thigh' metaphorically associates redness with blood, danger, or death, invoking fear and stigma. Pragmatically, it performs expressive acts of ridicule and contempt and also functions commissively by signalling the woman's social exclusion. Relevance arises from the hearer's ability to infer moral corruption from the vivid image of redness. Through Speech Act Theory, the utterance threatens the woman's positive face by denying her respectability and virtue. Social Identity Theory explains how it reinforces patriarchal norms by defining women's value in terms of perceived purity and fortune. Thus, the idiom subtly enforces moral and gender expectations under the guise of cultural expression.

Example 18

Hīnjio ni maku – Be thinned by your own

This idiom targets nosy individuals who meddle in others' affairs, warning that such meddling will lead to self-inflicted suffering. The figurative 'thinning' implies gradual wasting away,

symbolizing the emotional or social toll of unnecessary involvement. It performs a directive act, urging restraint and self-control while also conveying expressive disapproval. The insult relies on inferential reasoning, in which 'your own' implies that one's family or problems will ultimately be their undoing. Through Relevance Theory, its power lies in the hearer's recognition of this metaphorical mapping. Culturally, it upholds communal ethics that discourage gossip and unnecessary intrusion. Thus, *Hīnjio ni maku* functions as both a moral warning and a face-threatening admonition, all wrapped in idiomatic form.

Example 19
Wanja kihii – Wanja the boy

The insult *Wanja kihii* mocks a girl who behaves in a masculine or socially inappropriate manner, undermining her conformity to traditional gender expectations. The juxtaposition of the feminine name *Wanja* with *kihii* (boy) creates an ironic contrast that produces humour and social critique. Pragmatically, it performs expressive acts of mockery and assertive acts of gender-role enforcement. Relevance arises from the cultural clash between expected feminine behaviour and the masculine label. Within Speech Act Theory, the idiom attacks the hearer's social identity, reducing their face value within the gendered hierarchy. Culturally, it disciplines behaviour, reinforcing the boundaries of acceptable femininity. Hence, *Wanja Kihii* embodies a subtle yet powerful linguistic mechanism of gender regulation in Kikuyu discourse.

Example 20
Thii ukiumaga – Go drying

This vulgar idiomatic insult targets women accused of infidelity or sexual immorality, conveying anger, rejection, and moral condemnation. The figurative 'drying' symbolizes sexual decay, diminished desirability, or spiritual corruption. Pragmatically, it performs an expressive act that communicates disgust and finality, severing emotional or social ties. Its relevance stems from the metaphorical mapping of physical dryness onto moral emptiness or rejection. Within Speech Act Theory, it constitutes a strong face-threatening act aimed at total social discreditation. The insult also reinforces cultural expectations of female chastity, casting sexual autonomy as deviant. Thus, *Thii ukiumaga* reflects moral policing through metaphor, using bodily imagery to articulate rejection and social judgment.

Table 5: Idioms as Kikuyu Insults

Example	Speech Act Function	Relevance Theory Insight
Mutumia wa kiero gitune	Expressive + Commissive	Cognitive effect from the metaphor of a red thigh as misfortune.
Hinjio ni maku	Directive	Inference from 'thinning' as self-affliction.
Wanja kihii	Expressive + Assertive	Clash of gender categories yields pragmatic insult.
Thii ukiumaga	Expressive	Figurative mapping of dryness to rejection or impurity.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, the Kikuyu language employs diverse figurative strategies—proverbs, imagery, idioms, metaphors, and morphological creativity—to encode insults. Understanding these expressions requires cognitive effort and contextual awareness. Relevance Theory shows that insults derive force from the hearer's ability to infer the intended meaning from shared cultural assumptions. Speech Act Theory further enriches this understanding by showing that insults are not mere words but performative acts—expressing emotion, commanding behaviour, or asserting social norms.

Interpretation thus depends on both the cognitive context and the social frame of interaction. What may be humorous to one hearer may deeply wound another, depending on the perceived relevance and the personal experience evoked. Kikuyu figurative insults, therefore, demonstrate the community's linguistic creativity, social regulation, and cognitive sophistication—where each insult is both a performance and a judgment.

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words.* Oxford University Press.

Agyekum, K. (2004). Invective language in contemporary Ghanaian politics. *Journal of Language and Politics, 3*(2), 345–375.

Agyekum, K. (2010). *Akan verbal taboos in the context of the ethnography of communication.* Ghana Publishing Press.

Bortfeld, H. (2003). Comprehending idioms cross-linguistically. *Experimental Psychology, 50*(3), 217–230.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge University Press.

Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence.* Cambridge University Press.

Englebretson, R., Jeon, L., Li, J., Mauney, S., Navarro, A., & Wittke, J. (2015). A basic sketch grammar of Gĩkũyũ. *Rice Working Papers in Linguistics, 6.* Rice University.

Gichohi, L., & Subiyanto, A. (2024). Metaphor and figurative expressions in Kikuyu proverbs. *Journal of African Languages and Literature, 12*(2), 45–58.

Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics, Vol. 3: Speech acts* (pp. 41–58). Academic Press.

Jay, T. (1999). *Why we curse: A neuro-psycho-social theory of speech.* John Benjamins.

Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (Ed.). (2019). *2019 Kenya population and housing census.* Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.

Kenyalogue Contributor. (2025, May 4). *Quick list of Kikuyu abusive words.* Kenyalogue. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from https://kenyalogue.com/quick-list-of-kikuyu-abusive-words/

Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics.* Longman.

Munyiri, J. N. (2006). *Language and gender: A case study of the Ki-Kabete variety of Gikuyu* (Master's thesis). University of Nairobi.

Mutahi, K. (1977). *Sound change and classification of the dialects of Kikuyu.* East African Literature Bureau.

Njoroge, P. (2014). *Gender and language in Kikuyu proverbs* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Nairobi.

Obeng, S. G. (1994). The proverb as a mitigating and politeness strategy in Akan discourse. *Anthropological Linguistics, 36*(3), 349–364.

Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language.* Cambridge University Press.

Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and cognition* (2nd ed.). Blackwell. (Original work published 1986