

## **EUPHEMISMS AS SPEECH SURROGATES IN TIV LANGUAGE**

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### **Abstract**

*Tiv, a central-Nigerian language, teems with blunt, often offensive expressions deemed socially or morally harsh. Speakers therefore rely on 'surlyam'—the Tiv term for euphemism—to “lower the temperature” of such utterances. By substituting indirect, softened wording for crude or embarrassing realities, 'surlyam' preserves meaning while sparing interlocutors discomfort, humiliation or shame. Far from distorting the intended thought, these circumlocutions maintain semantic accuracy and cultural acceptability. Recognising that scholarship on this device is scarce, the study positions euphemism as a vital communicative strategy: it civilises discourse, structures linguistic choices, and enriches the expressive repertoire of Tiv.*

### **Introduction**

Internalised in the structure of every human language are figures that function as surrogates of speech and communication acts. These figures are important in language because they serve specific strategic roles. They enrich the language, endow it with aesthetic beauty and enhance its communicative potential, rhetorical appeal and signifying capacity. Tiv language is not an exception to this linguistic imperative. These figures are many and they range from metaphor, simile, personification, and paradox to alliteration, litotes, metonymy, irony, and most crucially, euphemism, among others. Many times, the figures intentionally deviate from direct literal meaning formations to produce rhetorical or figurative meanings in ways that are emotional, aesthetic and intellectual (Forsyth 2014; Baldrick 2008; Kennedy 2006; Quin 1999; Corbett & Connors 1999). Euphemisms accomplish this task as they mask the embarrassing meaning of events and present them in noble and appealing ways. The cardinal concern of the present paper is with euphemism as a speech and communication surrogate within the dynamic of Tiv language.

Given its inherent character and temperament as an expression that is mild or polite and which substitutes for the harsh and unpleasant, euphemism modulates offensive speech and communication and points it in a normative and positive direction.

There is no controversy that Tiv language is replete with euphemisms. This helps native speakers of the language to employ it in speech and communication acts in place of expressions that are socially deviant and culturally unwholesome. Therefore, within the schema of Tiv language, euphemisms function to help users of the language to be socially correct and culturally compliant with the norms and expectations of decency and acceptable behaviour. The mobilisation of this figure of language, like any other figure, is also a demonstration of linguistic competence, facility and knowledgeability. It is, therefore, a reflection of cultural literacy and a domestication of social habits that are consistent with the codes of normative behaviour. Because language is social, such habits are usually imbibed through individual socialisation within the group through processes of consciousness-raising.

It is important to state that euphemism focuses on existential issues and themes that define the human condition in its peculiarities and complexities. In Tiv language, for instance, euphemisms operate at different grids or levels. These grids may include age/generational difference, ethnic identity, gender, race, the human anatomy/biology, mental and physical illness, human sexuality, pain, despair, and even death. In this paper, my interest is to explore the materiality of euphemisms in Tiv language using an essentially literary methodology which benefits from Tiv performance aesthetics. My examples are therefore informed largely by cultural experiences, especially my understanding of song performance among the Tiv. Through a creative approach which demonstrates mastery of the Tiv idiom, many Tiv folk singers mobilise the rich resources of the language in their lyrical songs and performances, leveraging particularly on euphemisms to articulate their themes and concerns. Where possible, I have drawn attention to and given instances of such euphemisms to put in context the discussion and to give it depth and profundity. I intend to demonstrate how Tiv language uses euphemisms as speech and communication surrogates to express certain existential realities and experiences.

### **The Tiv as a Social and Cultural Category**

The Tiv people on whom this study is based are found in Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa, and Plateau States, central Nigeria, in what is geo-politically known today as the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. They are also in Cross River State in Nigeria's South South region. Across international borders, they are also found in Cameroon. They are traditionally mostly agrarian farmers with a distinctive culture of social organisation, religion, costumes, architecture, theatre, songs, dances, festivals, folklore and worldview which forges for them a unique identity as an industrious, courageous, honest and resilient race (Asante & Mazama 2008); Atel 2004; Jibo 2001; Hagher 1990; Sorkaa 1987; Tseayo 1975). In the context of Nigeria, the Tiv are considered a minority group even though they are ranked as the fourth or fifth largest ethnicity in Nigeria after the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. If this assertion is tenable, it therefore follows that Tiv language is also a minority language. This is a controversial issue, and academic opinion on it is not settled.

The population figures of the Tiv people constitute a contentious site. This is particularly so in a country where the census or head count is irregular, weaponised and politicised. When Benue State was created in 1976, a source published by the Information Division put the Tiv demographic figures at 2 million. Even at the time, this figure was unrepresentative of the Tiv demography because it was exclusive to Benue State and did not account for the Tiv population in other parts of Nigeria and elsewhere. Moti (1984:89) and Wegh (1998:23) put the figures at over 4 million. However, authoritative information is lacking on the exact figures. With a fast-growing population due to increased birth rate and better health/living conditions afforded by modern existence, it can be estimated that the Tiv number over 15 million. Benedict Chia Uille (2025: xviii) is more authoritative when he asserts that the Tiv population today well exceeds "twenty million people".

Tiv is an omnibus term with a tripodal significance. First, it refers to a distinct socio-cultural group whose ancestral homeland is Nigeria's Middle Belt. It is also a linguistic category whose language is rich in tonal variations but largely monolithic and homogeneous without any discernible or distinctive dialectal differences, making it mutually intelligible to all native speakers (Tsaaier 2025: xii). It is also the name of the progenitor.

All Tiv people identify and claim a common ancestry in Tiv, their patriarch. Tiv himself, according to Akiga (1965:3), was “descended from Takuruku”. Gbor (1978:12) and Makar (1986:4) both corroborate Akiga’s source but differ on the exact location. They also postulate that the Tiv first recognised their Tivness at Swem, a perspective Utov and Ioratim-Uba (1998: 9 –10) share, and that they are of Bantu descent. However, Isichei (1983:9) and Imoagene (1990:26) argue that Tiv belongs to a semi-Bantoid extraction. In negotiating the historical origins of the Tiv, Denga (1988: 8) states that the origins of the Tiv people are “enshrouded in a plethora of versions, each making its claims of authenticity”.

### **Euphemism as a Figure of Speech/Language**

Etymologically, euphemism is from the Greek root word *Euphemia*, which means the use of auspicious words or expressions or words of good omen. These auspicious words, according to Smyth (1920), take the place of inauspicious or unpleasant words which quite often offend our sensibilities, morality and social codes. Euphemisms, therefore, establish a distinctive boundary between what is negative and what is positive in language. Rawson (1995), therefore, insists that euphemisms exist precisely to communicate certain harsh realities or truths through a felicitous turn of phraseology which garbs linguistic nudity in fine linen clothes. This means that a euphemism is a mild word or indirect expression used in place of another one which is considered too blunt or harsh. This substitution is usually resorted to when referring to something that is embarrassing or unpleasant. Holder (2003) corroborates this perspective when he asserts that a euphemism is an innocuous word or phrase used to replace one that is considered offensive or suggests that something is unpleasant. An instance is when we refer to old men or retirees as senior citizens. The latter epithet is more dignifying and noble than the former, which is dishonourable and debasing.

Similarly, Keith and Burrridge (1991) use the metaphors of shield and weapon to characterise euphemisms. According to them, this figure of language is a weapon which shields something from the powerful and poisonous barbs of pungent language. This implies that euphemisms are temperate words or expressions that work as a counteractive force against

language that is abrasive or aggressive. To Heiderpeter and Reutner (2021), some euphemisms are meant to amuse or entertain, while some others are bland and inoffensive expressions for concepts that users wish to downplay. In other words, euphemisms quite often function as speech surrogates or communication conduits for the expression of humour, playfulness and light-heartedness.

Euphemisms can be used to mask obscenity or profanity or refer to topics that are considered taboo. These topics may include mental illness, physical disability, sexual intimacy, bodily excretions, violence, pain, death, etc., using polite language. The continued currency of euphemisms in speech and communication acts from antiquity to contemporary times demonstrates what Keyes (2010) describes in amorous terms as our love affair with euphemisms. Since this figure of speech affords language users an alternative expressive armature which serves as a pleasant and agreeable foil to what is morally repugnant, socially ignoble and culturally objectionable, humanity gravitates towards it in a love affair that has endured throughout the annals of history.

### **Expressivity of Tiv Euphemisms as Speech/ Communication Surrogates**

Among the Tiv, a strict sense of moral propriety and sexual conduct is highly valued. Before modernity introduced and espoused a culture of sexual permissiveness and depravity, traditional Tiv society promoted and encouraged this ideal as a touchstone for social control and societal stability. This was especially for young women who were nubile or had reached the age of puberty, who were expected to uphold the verity of purity and virginity until they were married. To safeguard girls from sexual predators and philanderers before marriage, there was a cult practice whereby an elderly woman who had reached menopause and had mastered fertility and other cults put the empty shell of a snail (ikyôôr) around the neck of girls, which served as a protective pendant. The snail shell meant that the girl was untouchable. Any man who violated such a girl ran afoul of the cult (akombo) and incurred the wrath of the cult. He could only be purged after undergoing ritual cleansing. This scrupulous sense of sexuality among the Tiv is, as such, reflected in their language use through the appropriation and domestication of euphemisms.

Sexual euphemisms abound in the language. They operate as a means of referring to sexual acts or biological parts in a polite, indirect or morally acceptable idiom. Sexual euphemisms are, in this regard, figurative because of their indirectness. This is particularly so in social and cultural contexts, where using direct and brutal language may be considered inappropriate and non-normative. For instance, the female sexual organ in Tiv is *ikyur*, and that of the male is *ijua*. To render these terms in a decent and less disagreeable language, the Tiv sometimes use *anam* (thighs) to designate the female sexual organ and *gbela* (vein/muscle) to refer to the male sexual organ. These alternative lexical items are morally acceptable and stand in for those that are offensive. Similarly, the word *kwagh* (something) can be used to designate sex, as in, for example, a husband telling his wife, “Se er kwagh” (Let’s do something), which is an amorous request for sexual gratification that is indirect and less explicit. This means that even within the context of privacy and spousal relations, euphemistic language, which is delicate and persuasive, functions as an appropriate strategy to articulate tenderness and intimacy as against language that is unguarded and blunt.

Within the arc of Tiv sexuality, there are also euphemistic expressions which instantiate how scrupulous Tiv language negotiates matters relating to intimacy and privacy. For example, the female menstrual cycle (awambe azan) is simply referred as the moon (uer) which euphemistically signifies the monthly rhythmic flow of blood associated with female sexuality and reproductive cycle. Also, the menstrual flow is sometimes referred to as a visitor (orvanya). This is a euphemism for the blood which visits every month. A wife who wants to politely turn down her husband’s sexual advances can express this by telling him that her monthly visitor has arrived. These euphemisms are polite and less egregious ways of expressing sexual realities which are otherwise considered taboo and so unfit to be used in everyday conversations because of their sensitive nature.

Following what Toril Moi (1988) characterises as sexual and textual politics, the offensive or indecent language of sexuality among the Tiv is tempered by euphemisms to lessen the rawness associated with sexual encounters or relations. In this regard, the sexual act is euphemistically presented, not so much

as a physical act, but as a psychological one. For instance, the Tiv will say: “Kwase fa or/Or fa kwase” (The woman has known a man/The man has known a woman). Here, the emphasis has shifted from the physical act implicated in sexual intimacy to cognitive knowledge, which is more psychological. This transfer is achieved through the deployment of euphemism, which masks the obvious reality of the sexual act. Interestingly, this is the language that Holy Scriptures also mobilise to express sexual union because of its sacredness. In Genesis 4 1 – 2, the Bible tells us that “Adam *knew* his wife, Eve...” which is a veiled reference to the inaugural sexual intercourse between the first couple. The Bible accomplishes this through the power of euphemism. Other euphemisms the Tiv use to describe sex are particular about “yav” or “mnyam” (sleep). For instance, the expression “Yav a kwase/Yav a nomsoor (Sleep with a woman/Sleep with a man) underscores the sexual act as to “sleep”. In ordinary language, “sleep” is an act which is necessary for relaxation, rest and restoration of energy. As a euphemism, sleep typifies sex or coitus, a physical encounter. The difference is that whereas sleep as rest or relaxation does not require physical activity, sleep as a sexual encounter is physical but also relaxing, ultimately. Thus, in the Tiv language and sense of morality, the human anatomy generously benefits from euphemisms which mediate the offensive nature of discourses navigating sex and erogenous zones of the body.

It is important to state that this ideation of sleep (mnyam) as indexical of sex was popularised by swange, a Tiv metaphorical dance form which began in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when Tiv society was undergoing the throes of rapid transformation from tradition to modernity. Thus, the dance became an expression of moral laxity and sexual perversity, which was associated with the new ethos inaugurated by Western culture. It was common to hear in the renditions of swange maestros or practitioners like Atule Hôn, Orshio Adaaker, and Mike Mbatyerevde lyrics such as “Wan la fa mnyam” (That young man knows how to sleep), “Kpaa ikyur aôndo la a gba” (Have sex let the heavens fall), referring to the sexual prowess and libidinal drive of young men and women who indulged in a loose life of sexual debauchery. Although swange as a dance form has since evolved and undergone significant transformation from a lurid dance to a musical and dance performance adopted by Pentecostal

new religion, its genealogy can be located within the social dynamic of moral turbulence and social morass that penetrated Tiv society at a time of rapid change. What is important here is that while Swange is notorious for the use of sexually suggestive and compromising lyrics in its song texts, its language and idiom can sometimes be euphemistic as it struggles to modulate and articulate sexual and textual politics.

Still on the theme of human sexuality, Saaôndo Bem, a Tiv popular poet in the Baka musical tradition, appropriates euphemism as a stylistic choice to articulate his message. In a creative manipulation of Tiv language to suit his artistic intentions, Bem deploys euphemism to sarcastically attack promiscuous and permissive young women whose corrupt sexual behaviour offends Tiv cultural values and mores. He excoriates such young women and is specific about one of them when he states:

Gum kwase a iyav,  
 Ngu a vanya,  
 Ngu a wan ave,  
 M va mer na'm wan m za na ngô... (2x)  
 Young woman who's pregnant,  
 With a visitor,  
 And a baby in her arms  
 Hand over the baby to me to give granny... (2x)

In the above lyrics, the young woman in question is a prostitute or whore who uses her body for sexual gratification for monetary gain. However, the poet deliberately chooses not to call her a prostitute. But beyond that, she does the unthinkable and therefore offends Tiv's sense of sexual morality and decent conduct. Firstly, she is pregnant. Secondly, she is entertaining a male customer, and thirdly, she is still carrying a child in her arms. This is too much for one woman who is obviously a single mother without a husband, an indication that she is either separated or divorced from her husband or has not been married at all. Medical science and Tiv culture advocate child spacing for the health and well-being of the mother and the child, but this young woman flagrantly violates that social and moral code. She is pregnant while carrying another child, she has not weaned and is still having sexual intimacy with a man who is a customer.



The artist avoids calling her a prostitute, which is strong, direct language and instead uses euphemistic idiom to artfully describe and tactically vilify her behaviour, which offends Tiv morality and sense of decency. In a plaintive voice, the poet begs that the young woman should at least give him the baby in her arms to take to her mother, that is, the grandmother of the little child, for safe rearing. That perhaps will make it less burdensome for the young woman to practice her trade. As malleable clay is in the hands of the potter, Bem brilliantly uses the language of euphemism and moulds it to accomplish his artistic intentionality.

Tiv language is also a fertile ground for the efflorescence of euphemisms associated with illness. Illness is a quintessential part of the human existential condition, and it is unavoidable. Illness can be physical, psychological or spiritual. In this paper, however, we are concerned with physical ill-health, which afflicts the human body. In the past, there were few illnesses among the Tiv, ranging from the simple and less problematic like *iyav-mbunyion* (stomach ache) and *ityogh-kinanden* to complex and sometimes terminal ones like *ikyurce* (gonorrhoea), *gwarmou* (syphilis), *ayavkyule* (typhoid fever), *amile* (chicken pox), *agina* (small pox), *awo* (elephantiasis), *imiande* (leprosy), *houbar* (tuberculosis), *ikyungu* (epilepsy), *ikyur* (hernia), among others. These illnesses had their therapies, and traditional healers administered appropriate and expert medical services for efficacy.

When the Tiv want to express the severity of a person's illness, they normally articulate it with the words "Or gba angev/ Or ngu uange". For instance: "Torsar Torhembe gba angev/ngu uange (Torsar Torhembe is down with illness/or is ill). However, when they want to be tactical about a person's challenged medical condition, they deploy the euphemism, "Or tsee" or "Or gbanya". The first expression literally suggests that the person is hot, meaning that the person's temperature is astronomical, high or abnormal. This is a physical condition that is synonymous or consistent with illness. However, this euphemism often expresses illness that is severe and has endured for some time. The second euphemism, "Or gbanya" literally signifies that the person has fallen to the ground, or is bedridden, that is, confined to a bed or place due to ill health. As a result, the person is unable to move about freely or attend to

routines or normal business. Thus, illness is euphemistically announced using linguistic undertones which lessen its severity and hence convey an otherwise desperate health situation in a less disturbing or pungent manner. This euphemism functions as a speech or communication surrogate that does not raise alarm or cause panic in suspecting members of the family, community or distant relations. Sometimes, too, there is the pathological fear of diabolically minded persons in the family or community who may aggravate the condition of the sickness and even cause death, so the Tiv are nuanced by using euphemism to downplay the severity of illness.

In the same mould, there are euphemisms in Tiv language that negotiate the subject of death. For instance, when illness defies medical therapy and culminates in death, the Tiv have a way of mobilising the resources of language to articulate this traumatic experience. They may choose to express a death occurrence in metaphoric and imagistic idiom that will evoke its gruesome nature as encoded in one elegy:

“O! Azembe tôô ve!! (O! the hawk has taken away!!).

The above words brutally convey death in the metaphor and image of a hawk, a bird of prey, which swoops on a helpless brood of chicks and takes one of them away with its sharp talons. This leaves the mother hen with the other chicks distraught and traumatised in the same way the death of a person leaves the family, friends and community in shock and a mournful mood. In a similar vein, an accomplished Tiv poet, Obadiah Orkor, also employs euphemism through the metaphor of abiem u kyegh, an avian predator, to underscore the prevalence of death among Tiv illustrious sons or elite. Orkor wove a dirge to mourn the passing of the late Governor of Benue State, Apollos Aper Aku, who died on 17 November 1987 at the age of 50 years. But he also mentions other iconic Tiv elite, including Col Joe Tyowua Akaahan, the first Tiv-Nigerian chief of army staff who died in a helicopter crash in 1967 at the age of 31 years and Joseph Saawuan Tarka, a notable Nigerian nationalist and foremost politician who died in a London hospital in 1980 at the age of 48 years. In his words:

Mnder: Aper Aku za hana?...

Abiem u kyegh ngu he Tiv

U kôron Tiv anomakyegh  
 Sha igbum-nguhar  
 Kwagh gande pe fan sev ve... (kimbir kwa imiôngo)

Chorus: Where has Aper Aku disappeared to?...  
 There's a bird of prey in Tivland  
 That specializes in predating on Tiv cocks  
 With its overgrown talons  
 And the land is at a loss (repeated severally)

In the above song text, rather than state straightforwardly that Aper Aku is dead which is too difficult to accept because of the trauma and high emotions that defined the sudden death of the late chief executive of Benue State, Orkor decides to resort to euphemism to somehow cushion the disconsolate mood and feeling that enveloped Tivland and Benue State following the death of the late Aku.

Thus, instead of stating the obvious using the raw, artless expression "Or Kpe", that is, a person has died, as in Orga Akpera kpe (Orga Akpera has died), the Tiv are more diplomatic. They are less direct in announcing death by employing the use of euphemisms. In rendering this reality in a disguised manner, the Tiv will rather say that "Orga Agera sule nyian" meaning that "Orga Agera has gone cold today". Tarker No 1 Golozo, an astral Tiv poet, states in his elegy mourning the transition of HRM, Orcivirigh Gondu Aluor, Tor Tiv II in such terms when he states aptly:

Tor Gondu Aluor sule veooo  
 Tar wase gba huan viing

Chief Gondu Aluor has gone cold  
 And our land has become utterly quiet

In the above example, the emphasis is on becoming or going cold, an indirect and pleasant way of characterising death to make it somehow less offensive. Coldness here represents when someone is dead. In medical science, when someone is pronounced clinically dead, the heart stops beating or palpitating and so cannot pump blood. As such, blood stops circulating to the brain and other parts of the body. The body itself loses warmth

and becomes cold. With the intervention of time, it gradually becomes stiff in what is medically known as *rigor mortis*. After this stage, the body becomes soft, and if it is not properly preserved, the process of decomposition sets in.

Also, to register the painful reality of death, especially when the deceased is advanced in age, the Tiv will say “Via za kohol uter nav; or Via rumun myel u Aôndo (Someone has gone to meet his ancestors (forebears)/Someone has accepted the call of God. This euphemism indirectly draws attention to death occurrence but does so in a polite and less traumatic way.

In a memorable dirge, the Tiv folksinger, Joseph Saawuan Kor mourned the tragic passing of Iorwundu Ami, the late chairman of Ukum Local Government of Benue State, Nigeria in an auto crash with the euphemistic declaration:

Ami ooo Iorwundu Ami Hon a hingir ikyom

(O! Hon Iorwundu Ami has become a lifeless remains).

Sadly, Ami did not perish alone in the 1995 car accident. His brother, Dr Raymond Msôn was also a victim. However, the folksinger is less artful or figurative by rendering Msôn’s victimhood in bold strokes when he laments thus:

“Dr Msôn kpa kpe, Dr kpe Ukum vôr a ku

(Dr Msôn also died, Dr died, and the Ukum agnate is tired of death).

In the same song lamenting two deaths, one is pungent while the other is expressed in a less severe manner using the euphemism of the victim becoming mere remains. This demonstrates that language is a double-edged sword in that one edge can be blunt or brutal in expressing existential reality while the other can be philosophical and nuanced such that it somehow deadens consciousness, even if momentarily, and throws into sharp relief the gravity of a situation through the employment of euphemisms.

Similarly, in a dirge lamenting the frequent deaths of chiefs in Tivland, another Tiv folksinger, Aôndohemba Ayenge (Ayengesman) expressed this sad phenomenon in undisguised language. After mentioning a litany of chiefs who died in quick succession, the lamentation reaches a crescendo when he mentions the sudden transition of the Tiv paramount ruler himself, HRM Dr. Alfred Akawe Torkula, Tor Tiv IV in 2015.

According to Ayenge, “Alfred Akawe Torkula kpe kpum kpum” (Alfred Akawe Torkula died completely) somehow suggesting the finality of his demise as if there is death that is gradual and in instalments. But in the same dirge towards the end, the poet deploys euphemism when he asserts that “Torkula kohol uter nav mbatsev” (Torkula has joined his ancestors) which scores the point more politely in a cultural sense.

There is another euphemism the Tiv enlist to register death. This euphemism presents death understandably as a universal phenomenon, a debt that every mortal owes and must pay. It is seen also as a moment every human being stays outside in the compound at night until the time they have to enter the house to sleep. The Tiv composer, Tarker No. 1 Golozo impressively captures this reality when he avers in one of his songs:

Ku ka imiôngoteman;  
Ka a kuma’u ú nyôr ooo,  
Or môm nan a tsôr gaooo

(Death is the time to wait outside the house  
When it’s time, you go in  
Nobody will live forever.

Still on the existential theme of death and its expressivity through the instrumentality of euphemism as a speech/communication surrogate, the Tiv use language to modulate its physically and psychologically shattering consequences. Among the Tiv, like many other autochthonous communities, the death of young members of the community who represent the future of the society is more devastating and keenly felt than that of the aged. The latter is usually considered a celebration of life while the former impoverishes society and threatens its future promise. Thus, when an elderly man or woman succumbs to death, especially if the deceased has children to survive them, the Tiv articulate this reality by declaring almost lightheartedly: “Via oo a oo” (The person has merely sloughed). This pronouncement is supremely imagistic as it captures the renewal or regeneration snakes, or other reptiles undergo when they shed their skins to take on a flamboyant new look.

For instance, when the late Senator J. S. Tarka, leader of ethnic minority rights and foremost Nigerian political juggernaut, died, the Tiv poet, Tarker No.1 Golozo averred that Tarka had left behind a young son, Mbakorkaa, which meant that he had merely sloughed:

“Kpa wan na Mbakorkaa ngu heregh  
A gande or ka wanye ga”

(But his son Mbakorkaa has survived him  
And he is impressionable, not a baby).

Among the Tiv, hereditary right is a very important cultural imperative and leaving an heir to inherit one's property and continue the family genealogy is considered paramount. It is perhaps one of the reasons why patriarchal Tiv society prizes the male child as against the female, even though this calculus is slowly changing as female children are also gaining traction as heiresses in the inheritance equation.

The Tiv also have elaborate burial rites and customs. But this is more in these days with the onslaught of modernity and its variegated innovations and tendencies. In contemporary Tiv society, death has increasingly become commodified as a money-making and spending event, a celebration and site of media spectacularity with professional mourners, competing dance troupes and even comedians in attendance for entertainment purposes. In those days, death was a solemn event shorn of celebration, glitz and glamour. “U iin or” is to bury someone in Tiv language. This means to lower the body into the earth. From the womb to the tomb, the earth is metaphorised and humanised by the Tiv as a mother. First, she incarnates the child in her womb, gives birth, nurses and nurtures it, and after its trajectory of life, returns to the earth's womb in the form of a tomb. This makes Jomo Kenyatta, the Kenyan anthropologist and politician, assert that the earth is a more consequential mother than our biological mothers because we come from her at birth and return to her in death.

Thus, to express the burial of a person to blunt the edges of linguistic starkness, the Tiv deploy a euphemism. They state it thus: “Koso ikyom” (Safeguard the remains). This euphemism imagines burial as an act of keeping safe something that is

valuable. For instance: “I koso ikyom i u Tor Tiv mba ve saa cii sha Gboko” (The remains of all the deceased Tiv paramount rulers have been interred in Gboko). Here, the emphasis is on the euphemism of safeguarding the remains as a treasure and not “burial” which is a brutal expression of the reality.

The Tiv also have euphemisms for health and sanitation. In the past, rural Tiv country was notorious for certain unhealthy and unsanitary practices. One of such practices was open defecation, where the bushes in the outskirts of the home and the open country were used for convenience purposes. This obviously adversely compromised community health and jeopardised public well-being. Today, modern toilet facilities can be found in private homes and public places to stem the tide of open defecation, even though the unwholesome practice persists in some rural communities. The Tiv word for faeces is *ambi*. To pass out faeces is *nyia ambi*. These expressions in their raw forms out-rightly offend Tiv sense of propriety and decency. To avoid this disgusting language, the Tiv have fashioned euphemisms which better express this without offending the senses. One of these expressions is “Za akongo - Za sha toho” (To visit the outskirts/To visit the bush). In the Tiv imagination, the use of these euphemisms better substitutes for the original expressions, which are stark and even nauseating.

To avoid such expressions which assault human sensibilities, the Tiv resort to euphemisms that function as linguistic equivalents. For example, in one of his songs, late Ajo Agôr, a notable Tiv raconteur, expressed the reality of relieving himself in the night by going to the outskirts of the home. In the context of the song, going out at night to relieve himself functions as a metaphor to express his financial quandary or insolvency, which imposes on him great inconvenience as he is unable to meet his financial responsibilities. Going to the outskirts of the home to relieve himself at night is a reference to seeking monetary help from some of his resourceful and benevolent patrons. According to him, his financial conundrum is akin to stomach upset in the heart of the night, which requires him to run to the outskirts to relieve himself. In his straitened circumstances, this is akin to calling for the intervention of his patrons to assist him.

### Conclusion

This paper, has identified euphemism as a universal and pre-eminent figure of language which is present in all languages of the world. It is a speech and communication surrogate which helps to express reality in a polite and mild manner. It, therefore, substitutes expressions that are rash, impolite and even impolitic. Tiv language is especially replete with euphemisms which help to garnish and refine language that is immoral, blunt and impolite. The case of Tiv language is particularly significant in an academic sense because the language of euphemism has not been subjected to scholarly study or scrutiny. This is why the present paper is strategic as it helps to study this linguistic phenomenon concerning its expressive capacity as a speech and communication surrogate. It is revealing in this paper that euphemisms in Tiv language operate at variegated levels. These may be age, identity, sexuality, human anatomy, illness, pain and even death. At all these levels, euphemism intervenes to render speech and communication acts socially pleasant, culturally acceptable and emotionally stabilising as against language that is unsettling and abhorrent to Tiv sense of decency, morality and acceptable behaviour or conduct. In this regard, euphemisms in Tiv language, to appropriate textile metaphors, have the legacy of clothing expressions unfit for public spectacle in fine linen and silky clothes and presenting them in ways that conform to Tiv ethos of saying and doing things and appeal to Tiv social and cultural sensibilities.

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