

Euphemism Preferences among Swahili-speaking Netizens in Death-related Communication

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Abstract

Death is a culturally sensitive and linguistically distasteful topic, often requiring euphemisms to refer to it. While previous studies on death-related euphemisms in Swahili have mainly relied on questionnaire-based data, little attention has been given to naturally occurring data in digital communication among Swahili-speaking netizens. Consequently, the present study examined the euphemistic language used by Swahili-speaking netizens when discussing death. Specifically, the study investigated the nature of expressions used to talk about four subthemes related to death, namely dying, the corpse, the grave, and burial, as well as the linguistic strategies underlying their formation. The study is mainly grounded in Politeness Theory and supported by Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The study's data stemmed from naturally occurring interactions on JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Data collection involved observing written comments on JamiiForums and WhatsApp, and listening to YouTube discussions about death. The collected data were analysed qualitatively. The findings indicate that euphemistic language in digital communication about death among Swahili speakers is mainly shaped by their cultural norms, religious beliefs, and social considerations of politeness. Furthermore, the choice of euphemism is mainly determined by the interaction setting on these digital platforms, where users make linguistic choices depending on the audience and the privacy of communication. The identified euphemisms are expressed through metaphors, slang, borrowing, and circumlocution. By identifying and describing contemporary euphemisms used in actual digital communication about death-related issues, and by examining the influence of culture and politeness on their use, this study provides insights into the evolution of euphemistic expressions in Swahili sociopragmatics and digital communication.

Keywords: Digital death euphemisms, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Netnography, Politeness Theory, Swahili death discourse, Swahili-speaking netizens, Swahili taboos

1 Introduction

In different cultures, certain aspects of human experience are perceived as taboo, leading people to avoid referring to them directly (Crespo-Fernández, 2005, 2006; Isaacs et al., 2015; Wang, 2022). To refer to such aspects, one needs to use euphemisms. Euphemisms are linguistic strategies through which one can make statements that may be socially, culturally, or emotionally sensitive softer (Cameron, 1995; Gao, 2013; McGlone et al., 2006). One of the aspects most commonly euphemised is that of death. Death is one of the life experiences considered highly taboo in almost all communities. Due to its sensitivity, it cannot be discussed without linguistic safeguards (Crespo-Fernández, 2006; 2023). Consequently, it has become a significant source of euphemisms, as individuals strive to discuss it indirectly and politely.

Over the centuries, death was a normal event in different communities (Donnelly, 1999). Thus, it was spoken openly and directly, and members of communities treated it as a part of life. As time progressed, people started to consider it a taboo (Lakasing, 2014). This stirred people to speak of it using coded language. Although many reasons are associated with people's desire to avoid discussing the subject of death explicitly, the major one is fear of it (Allan & Burrige, 1991; Bultnick, 1998; Crespo-Fernández, 2006; Jamet, 2010; Kuczok, 2016). Another reason for talking about death euphemistically is the desire to avoid disturbing the family members of the departed person (Enright, 2004). Hence, the use of euphemisms to speak about death is a strategy used to expel it from people's consciousness.

Although people try to avoid mentioning the topic of death, they have not fully succeeded. This is because there are certain circumstances that necessitate the subject to be mentioned. For this reason, the subject has prompted the development of a spectrum of euphemistic expressions for discussing it politely. Allan and Burrige (2006) report instances where some people resort to using some gestures just to avoid mentioning the notion of death. They report cases where gestures, such as a finger-cross or a charm or a knock on wood, are used instead of mentioning death openly. They further report on cases where people opt to remain quiet as a strategy to avoid mentioning the notion of death and dying. All these strategies are used to circumvent the explicit mention of the subject of death.

Although there exists extensive academic literature on euphemisms of death in various languages and cultures (Adepoju, 2016; Barker, 2000; Bultnick, 1998; Cheung & Ho, 2004; Crespo-Fernández, 2006; Hume, 2000; James, 1981; Kuczok, 2016; Marín-Arrese, 1996; Marshall, 2006; Miller-Lewis et al., 2021; Ong'onda, 2018; Owiredu, 2020; Özçalışkan, 2003; Phillips, 2007; Sexton, 1997; Sun, 2005; Tsai, 2010; Yakub & Agyekum, 2022), little attention has been given to the euphemisms of death in Swahili, especially in digital communication. That is, the available studies address several other aspects of Swahili euphemisms in Tanzania, even including death euphemism, but not in the context of mass media (Charles, 2023; Charles & Ochieng, 2023a, 2023b). On the other hand, people's interactions are now increasingly becoming digitalised. For instance, in Tanzania, with an estimated population of 61.7 million (NBS, 2022), approximately 56.3 million people have access to the internet (TCRA, 2025). This means that many individuals interact digitally, thereby widening the creation and use of new linguistic expressions, such as euphemisms, every day. This makes naturally occurring data from digital discourse a valuable resource for research on euphemisms, which cannot be identified through questionnaire surveys, as in previous studies on euphemisms in Tanzania. Currently, little is known about how modern-day Swahili-speaking populations use euphemisms in talking about death online. Such a situation leaves a contextual, methodological, and empirical gap.

The current study attempts to fill the highlighted gap by identifying and analysing euphemisms used by Swahili speakers in their discussions of death on digital platforms that use the Swahili language. This study, therefore, contributes to the existing literature on euphemisms, death discourse, and digital communication, while also documenting current usage of the Swahili language, particularly death-related euphemisms. This is expected to provide insight into the interaction among language, culture, and technology and serve as a useful source of information for scholars interested in Swahili sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Overall, the study enhances understanding of how modern Swahili speakers navigate culturally prescribed demands for politeness and respect in their digital communication regarding death.

2 Theoretical framework

The leading theoretical framework that guides this study is Politeness Theory. Politeness Theory was developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). It provides foundational explanations of how politeness can be used to save interlocutors' faces in communication. This theory arose from the extension of Goffman's (1955, 1967) notion of face. Goffman was the first one to come up with the concept of face. According to her, face is an individual's self-image delineated in terms of approved social attributes. In developing this concept further, Brown and Levinson postulated that every individual has two types of face: positive face, which concerns the desire to be appreciated, approved of, and liked by others, and negative face, which concerns the need to act freely and independently of others. Consequently, they came up with positive politeness, which involves strategies geared towards satisfying the hearer's positive face by showing solidarity, approval, and friendliness, while negative politeness involves strategies that help reduce imposition on the hearer. Thus, successful communication depends on interlocutors employing appropriate politeness strategies to maintain each other's face and promote harmonious social interaction. The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in the fact that euphemisms for death represent one way for speakers to mitigate the potential danger of offending the interlocutor's face by using appropriate linguistic techniques when dealing with such an emotionally sensitive topic.

In addition, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory was employed in the study. This theory derives its roots from the groundbreaking work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), *Metaphors We Live By*. Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is not just a rhetorical or stylistic device but rather a basic cognitive phenomenon by which people represent and comprehend their abstract experiences using their concrete experiences. According to theory, metaphor entails the transfer of knowledge between the source and target domains, with the former being more concrete than the latter. The mappings between these conceptual structures affect human thinking, reasoning, and communication regarding complicated and emotive issues of life. Since death is both a very abstract and an emotionally sensitive concept, speakers often use metaphorical representations to make it easier to understand and acceptable socially. For instance, death can be thought of as a journey, a going away, a passing, or simply a form of rest. This enables speakers to talk about it in roundabout ways without having to deal with its emotional impact. This theory thus comes in handy to analyse the present study since most euphemisms used by Swahili speakers for death are metaphorically motivated.

3. Methodology

This is a netnographic study complemented by a qualitative approach. The study explored the euphemistic language used by Swahili-speaking netizens to convey information about death by purposively collecting data from JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube. These sites were chosen because they serve as significant digital spaces where Swahili speakers can naturally discuss various issues, including death, the corpse, burial, and the announcement of death-related events. The data were collected by watching and listening to YouTube videos and reading posts and comments from netizens on the other two online platforms (JamiiForums and WhatsApp). In those posts, the euphemistic expressions used in the discourse surrounding death were identified and recorded for analysis.

To enable data collection, the researcher employed several prompts (involving keywords and key phrases) to locate the posts on the subjects under study. On YouTube, the search terms included obituaries, funeral services, and interviews about death-related subjects. Examples of prompts used in Swahili included “tanzia” (obituary), “mazishi” (burial), “kufariki dunia” (passing away), and “kuzika” (burying), among others. Such prompts led the researcher to the YouTube videos containing the content of death subjects. The researcher then watched the videos and noted the euphemisms that surfaced. On JamiiForums, the researcher used various keywords related to death. Some of the keywords used include “tanzia” (obituary), “mazishi” (burial), and “kufariki dunia” (passing away), among others. These keywords are common in contexts related to death and mourning, making it easier to access the required data. Data from six WhatsApp groups were collected after obtaining permission from their members. Six WhatsApp groups were involved in the study. The inclusion of these groups, of which I was a member, was based on the observed use of euphemisms for death in both interesting and creative ways, which inspired me to explore this topic in depth. The researcher focused on the announcement of someone’s death and the comments that followed. The study also involved 29 threads from JamiiForums and 17 YouTube channels, which provided data up to the point of saturation.

The ethical aspects were considered during the collection and analysis of the data. All the data collected was anonymised, and any information such as usernames, phone numbers, and anything that could have identified any participant was stripped away in order to protect their privacy and confidentiality. On all digital platforms involved in the study, only messages related to the research topic were considered. Direct links are also shared for transparency, except for data extracted from WhatsApp (which do not have links), marked N/A (not applicable) in the link column. During data presentation and analysis, minor changes were made to remove direct quotes and details about the deceased to protect individuals’ identities and privacy. Where necessary, pseudonyms or pronouns were used to replace real names. These changes were made without distorting the original meaning of the message. Data analysis was done with utmost care and respect.

The data were analysed using a qualitative content and discourse-based approach. To start with, all data gathered from JamiiForums, WhatsApp, and YouTube were systematically collated and carefully read several times to become familiarised with them. Next, euphemistic expressions referring to death were identified based on their use in the context and their indirect reference to death-related notions. Then, the euphemistic terms identified were systematically coded and organised in the form of data in a table. After that, the data were systematically categorised depending on the semantic fields pertaining to death-related references, such as euphemisms related to dying, dead body, the act of burying, and euphemisms about the grave. Finally, every category was analysed to establish the linguistic strategies used in the creation of euphemisms, including the use of metaphor, borrowing, circumlocution, and slang. The classification of euphemistic expressions relied upon semantics and context. The first category consisted of expressions denoting the phenomenon of dying, targeting euphemisms implying the transition from life to death. The second group consisted of linguistic expressions employed to avoid mentioning the corpse directly. The third category consisted of expressions used to talk about burial practices, while the fourth category included expressions denoting the grave. Classification was based on context, not on the isolated lexical meanings of expressions, to ensure it reflected their actual usage.

3 Findings

After analysing the data from the three digital platforms, a total of 371 euphemistic tokens were identified, representing 43 unique euphemistic expressions across the four subthemes. This section, along with the subsequent subsections, presents the findings obtained. The presentation begins with euphemistic expressions that netizens utilised to describe the act of dying. This is followed by euphemisms for a corpse, then those for a grave, and finally euphemisms for the act of burying. The section concludes with an overview of the strategies employed to create these expressions.

3.1 Euphemisms preferred for referring to the act of dying

As pointed out earlier, people avoid speaking blatantly about the act of dying. This happens due to the fear and the discomfort that this act generates in the community. This avoidance inspires the search for and use of alternative expressions perceived as more palatable than the explicit Swahili word *kufa* ‘to die’. The analysed data revealed different polite expressions that were used to refer to this phenomenon. Those expressions, which are grouped as formal, informal, and religious, are presented in the subsequent subsections.

3.1.1 Formal euphemistic expressions for dying

These are euphemistic expressions generally accepted across social groups to refer to the act of dying in a respectful manner. These expressions are widely used in various settings, such as the media, government, and professional contexts, to show respect for the deceased, the bereaved family, and the community at large. Consider the italicised expressions in Table 1 in the column titled “euphemism”.

Table 1: Formal euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Ameфарiki dunia ghafla mchana wa leo</i>	He suddenly passed away this afternoon.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Ameфарiki kwa maradhi ya moyo</i>	He died from heart disease.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS_D_k4KWk
(c) <i>Kilichosababisha kufariki ni majeraha ya kupigwa.</i>	He died from injuries.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_t8iarv2TQ
(d) <i>Maisha ya watu yanapotea kisa uchaguzi</i>	People’s lives are lost because of the election.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/g55-wanapaswa-kusimamishwa-uanachama-chadema.2325399/post-53361332
(e) <i>Tumempoteza kiongozi wetu shupavu</i>	We have lost our strong leader.	YouTube	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qS_D_k4KWk

(f) Tumefarijika yeye <i>kupumzika</i> kwa amani.	We are comforted by the fact that he has rest in	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-
(g) <i>Ameondoka</i> mapema sana.	He left too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/gardner-g-habash-mtangazaji-wa-clouds-media-afariki-
(h) Jasiri <i>ameumaliza mwendo</i> .	He has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/hayati-rais-magufuli-alijua-kuwa-maisha-yake-yapo-

The expressions given in Table 1 are examples of formal polite expressions that netizens used to appeal to the act of dying. Such expressions are common in daily conversation and can be used in any speech situation. The phrase *kufariki dunia* (which means to be separated from the earth) is widely used as a replacement for the word *kufa* ‘to die’, which is highly sensitive in the Swahili-speaking community. The phrase *kupoteza maisha*, which literally means ‘to lose life’, is used diplomatically to refer to the act of dying. It simply means that someone who has had life has lost it, meaning he/she has passed away. The verb *kupumzika* literally means ‘to rest’. This probably stems from the worldview that life is full of struggles and cares (e.g., Kaur et al., 2021). Thus, when one departs, the remaining perceive the departed as having gone to rest from all the troubles. Likewise, the agglutinative word *ameondoka*, which means ‘he/she has left’, when used in the context of death, means someone has passed away. This means that the one who was on the planet Earth has departed to another place. The phrase *kumaliza mwendo* ‘to finish the journey’ probably arises from the worldview that life is a journey (Katz & Taylor, 2008). Thus, the finality of this journey is death. Consequently, when one dies, it is perceived as the end of life's journey.

3.1.2 Informal euphemistic expressions used for dying

Some euphemisms are informal and can be used only by certain groups (mostly uncultured youths) in certain settings, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Informal euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Jamaa <i>amelamba sakafu</i>	The man has licked the floor.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Anakata moto</i> kama mtu wa presha	He cuts out fire like someone with high blood pressure.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613356
(c) Kila mmoja ana namna yake ya <i>kukata moto</i>	Everyone has their cutting out of fire.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613415

(d) Bora <i>kadondoka</i> angetuletea balaa	It is better that he has fallen off; he would bring us troubles.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/aliyekuwa-sultani-wa-mwisho-zanzibar-sultan-sayyid-jamshid-al-said-afariki-usiku-huu-omani.2292574/post-52400673
(e) Watu wanazidi <i>kupukutika ghafla</i>	People are increasingly falling like leaves suddenly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/serikali-haijatanka-kuwa-serious-kuzuia-corona.1894812/
(f) Tayari mtu <i>kaliwa kichwa</i>	Already someone's head has been eaten.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686850
(g) Duh! kumbe huyu mwamba <i>alishavuta?</i>	Oh! So, this man had already conked out?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wanachama-wa-jamiiforums-waliotangulia-mbele-ya-haki-fariki-r-i-p.210561/post-52383739
(h) <i>Kayeyuka ghafla</i>	He has melted suddenly.	WhatsApp	N/A
(i) Fasta <i>kakata roho</i>	He died very quickly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/mchekeshaji-maarufu-mc-pilipili-afariki-
(j) Ilipofika jioni <i>akakata roho</i>	When evening came, he died.	YouTube	https://www.google.com/search?q=video+mijadala+kifo+cha+magufuli&sca_esv=6dd62d64f8d909b8&rlz=1C1GCEA_enRO1099TZ1212&sxsrf=APpeQntPMqq
(k) <i>Kamaliza mwendo</i>	She has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jenista-mhagama-mbunge-wa-peramiho-afariki-
(l) Siku ya pili <i>alilamba udongo moja kwa moja</i>	The second day he died directly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/tuwe-makini-na-pombe-zinaua.2174673/post-49016980
(m) Mwishowe <i>Jamaa kadedi</i>	At the end, the man died.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/afariki-ghafla-akiwa-na-mpenzi-wake-kwenye-nyumba-ya-wageni-guest-house-huko-

The examples given in Table 2 represent the euphemistic expressions rooted in informal terms or phrases to replace the direct Swahili word *kufa* 'to die/dying'. The use of such expressions is very common among younger users of the language. The use of informal expressions allows people, especially youth, to talk about sensitive subjects, such as death, in lighter, indirect, sometimes

sarcastic, and humorous language. This helps to mitigate fear and emotional distress when discussing the concept of dying. The use of humorous language in the context of death is not a new phenomenon. In fact, in some parts of Tanzania, it is very normal to find the use of jokes in the context of death to alleviate sorrow and pain from the bereaved (see Lucas, 1974; Mikidady, 2023). However, since these expressions are not directly connected to death, they are highly context-dependent and thus make little sense out of context. For instance, the expression in Table 2 (a) can literally mean pulling the tongue out and licking the floor. These expressions help to discuss the act of dying in a more easy and relaxed way.

3.1.3 Religious-based polite expressions for dying

These are euphemistic expressions that are predominantly used in religious contexts. Consider examples in Table 3.

Table 3: Religious euphemisms for dying

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Bwana <i>ametwaa</i> mja wake.	The Lord has taken what is His.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Ajaliwe <i>kukutana na Mungu</i> muumba wake pasi na shari.	May he meet his Creator peacefully.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612489
(c) Naona wengi <i>wamerudi</i> kwa Muumba.	They have returned to the Creator.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/balozi-juma-mwapachu-afariki-dunia.2323144/post-53296587
(d) Mungu <i>amemtwa</i> angali kijana.	God has taken him while he is still young.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-
(e) <i>Amerudi mavumbini</i>	He has returned to the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rais-magufuli-alishatangulia-mbele-za-haki-hakuna-haja-ya-kumtusi-wala-kumsimanga.2072815/
(f) Bahati mbaya mama <i>alishatangulia mbele ya haki</i>	Unfortunately, the mother had gone before justice ahead.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/unarudi-toka-kazini-unamkuta-mkeo-anampiga-mama-yako-mzazi-je-utafanya-kitu-gani-kwa-mkeo.2347950/post-54739632
(g) Jamaa <i>amekwenda mbinguni</i> .	He has gone to heaven.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ujumbe-wa-tundu-lissu-kuhusu-hayati-ally-hassan-mwinyi.2190576/post-49535873 or take one from youtube about Pengo.

(h) Askofu anaogopa <i>kwenda peponi</i> ?	Is the bishop afraid of going to paradise?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/askofu-bagonza-nawaombea-hata-waliofika-kuniteka-wakakuta-sipo-wasikate-tamaa-narudi-upesi.2401932/post-55312124
(i) <i>Ameitwa nyumbani kwa baba wa milele.</i>	He has been called home by the eternal Father	YouTube	https://www.google.com/search?q=video+mijadala+kifo+cha+pengo&sc_esv=6dd62d64f8d909b8&rlz=1C1G_CEA_enRO1099TZ1212&sxsrf=APpeQnuEXSwVzhXUYhYTbWnAh23OXATSow%3A1782631023045&e

The expressions illustrated in Table 3 (a-i) are common in a religious context. They mirror spiritual beliefs about death. The example in Table 3(a) is connected to the religious belief that every death, regardless of its nature, is permitted by God Himself (Ayodeji, 2013). From this perspective, death is viewed as something predetermined from the moment of one's birth. By associating the phenomenon of death with God's authorization, such expressions not only lessen the severity of the phenomenon but also provide the bereaved with a sense of acceptance and spiritual assurance of meeting their beloved once they themselves die. This is also linked to the idea that, when people die, they meet their Creator (kukutana na Muumba) in Table 3(b) to live with Him eternally.

The phrase *kurudi mavumbini*, "returning to the dust", likely comes from a shared belief within many religious traditions that human beings were created out of dust (Brueggemann, 2012). Thus, during death, they return to their source of creation, the dust. This belief echoes the cyclic nature of life and death, in which death is viewed as a return to the original form of life. The phrase *kutangulia mbele za haki* is associated with the religious conviction that every human being will be held accountable for their actions (good or bad) on Earth. It is believed that this judgment comes soon after one passes on (Beshai & Lester, 2013). Such a judgment determines the eternal destiny of the deceased person. The expressions *kwenda mbinguni* and *kwenda peponi* are grounded in the belief that death is a gateway to heaven/paradise. This implies that once one passes, they 'go to heaven'. The religious-based euphemisms pave the way for speaking about death in polite ways that reduce fear and grief in the bereavement.

3.2 Euphemisms used to refer to a corpse

In Swahili, *maiti* is the direct term for a corpse. To maintain respect for the deceased and the community affected by the bereavement, a polite expression is used in place of the explicit term. The widely used polite expression to replace the direct term for the corpse is *mwili*, which literally means 'the body'. This expression was found in statements such as *mwili wake uliokotwa beach* 'His body was found at the beach', and *kuhifadhi mwili* 'to preserve the body'. This expression brings the connotation that the referent is lifeless, a true reflection of what happens when someone passes. Such an expression is used in various contexts, including funeral announcements, discussions, and comments from Swahili-speaking netizens. This is done to show respect and alleviate the harshness of the direct Swahili word *maiti*, which is socially, culturally, and linguistically displeasing.

3.3 Euphemism used in the context of burial

The entombing of the body is considered a taboo in many communities, including within the Swahili-speaking community. The taboo is probably based on the aftermath of the act, where the body stays alone, followed by decomposition. These imaginations cause great fear and anguish, triggering people to use roundabouts to talk about the act. This is evident among Swahili-speaking netizens, who used several euphemistic expressions to discuss this subject politely. They avoid using the straight term, which is *kuzika* in Swahili. The common verbs that replaced the direct term include *kupumzisha* ‘to lay to rest’, *kuhifadhi* ‘to preserve’, and *kusindikiza* ‘to accompany’. Consider the expressions illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Burial euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Kupumzisha mwili</i>	To lay the body to rest.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) <i>Kuhifadhi mwili</i>	To preserve the body.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ali-mayai-nakuheshimu-mno-ila-kitendo-cha-kufiwa-na-baba-yako-na-bado-ukawa-busy-na-urais-wa-tff-kumetufanya
(c) <i>Kumsindikiza mwenzetu</i>	To accompany our beloved	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/mtangazaji-swedy-mwinyi-wa-tbc-afariki
(d) <i>Kufukiwa futi sita shimoni</i>	To be covered with soil six feet under the pit	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jiheshimu-wewe-jielewe.2135653/post-47696787

The expressions presented in Table 4 show various conceptualizations of the act of burying the dead body, as used by Swahili-speaking netizens. In Table 4 (a), burying is viewed as the process of resting the body (*laying the body to rest*). This worldview likely stems from the perception of life as marked by struggles and troubles (see Kaur et al., 2021). Within this framework, burying the departed is viewed as relieving them of life's hardships, leading to everlasting peace and rest after their suffering and struggles. Like other euphemisms, burial euphemisms rely on context to make sense. For instance, the expression in Table 4 (b) can also be used to mean preserving the deceased in a mortuary so that it does not decompose before burial. The expression in Table 4 (d) likely relates to the popular myth that the standard depth of a grave is six feet underground. However, studies (e.g., Greinert & Kostecki, 2025; OpenBylaws.org.za, 2003) indicate that six feet is not a standard depth.

3.4 Euphemisms used to refer to the grave

The grave, which in Swahili is *kaburi*, is another subject in death discourse that has taboo connotations. The probable reason for its sensitivity is the imagination of the dark and solitary place where the deceased is buried. Several polite expressions were identified among Swahili-speaking netizens as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Euphemisms for grave

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Wamempumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya milele</i> .	They have laid him to rest in his eternal home	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Mungu aendelee kuwapumzisha kwa amani kwenye <i>makazi yao ya milele</i>	May God continue to lay them in their eternal dwelling.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/leo-ni-kumbukumbu-ya-siku-ya-maandamano-makubwa-ya-oktoba-29-2025.2403811/post-55344222
(c) Yeye yuko <i>six feet under</i> ila mwenzake bado anadunda	He is six feet under but his fellow is still living.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ushauri-idara-ya-makumbusho-ya-taifa-ihifadhi-baadhi-ya-vitu-alivyotumia-jpm-wakati-wa-uongozi-wake.2305228/post-52785301
(d) Yupo kwenye <i>futi sita</i> .	He is inside six feet.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-
(e) Wamempeleka <i>kuzimu</i> fasta	They have sent him/her to hell quickly.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wananchi-wanaomjua-hamza-wanasema-alikuwa-mtu-mzuri-mwana-ccm-kindakindaki-na-mmiliki-wa-

The expressions illustrated in Table 5 (a-e) signal different perceptions and beliefs towards the grave. The expressions *nyumba ya milele* and *makazi ya milele* translate into ‘eternal home’ and ‘eternal dwelling’ respectively. They regard a grave as a permanent place where the departed remain forever. These expressions are centred on the religious conviction that the deceased stays in the grave forever until the day of resurrection (see Punt, 2009). Such expressions can be used by different social groups in different settings. The expression *six feet under*, which is the English version of *futi sita* (in Table 5 (d)), and *kuzimu* ‘hell’ (in Table 5 (e)) are generally less common in the Swahili-speaking community and are favoured by youth speakers. The first two are associated with the myth that the standard grave depth is six feet.

3.5 Strategies used to form death euphemisms

The analysis revealed that death euphemisms are formed through several linguistic strategies that allow speakers to refer to death indirectly and more acceptably. The following section discusses the use of metaphor in the formation of euphemisms for death.

3.5.1 The use of metaphor

A metaphor is an implied comparison between two dissimilar objects where the conceptualisation of one object is conveyed to another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Sopory & Dillard, 2002; Ullmann, 1972). This comparison enables individuals to understand a sensitive act, such as death, in terms

of other known, non-sensitive life experiences. In the current study, several euphemistic expressions were formed metaphorically. Those conceptualisations are presented in the following subsections:

Death as a journey

The polite expressions that conceptualise death as a journey are based on the worldview that, when a person passes, it is like a traveler moving from one place to another. In this journey, the point of departure is earthly life. In this context, death is not regarded as the end of life, but the beginning of another form of existence. In this worldview, which is primarily rooted in a spiritual context, the destination of this journey is considered to be paradise or heaven, the place where God resides (Mamaug, 2019). The following examples in Table 6 illustrate this conceptualisation.

Table 6: Death as journey euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) <i>Ameondoka duniani</i>	He has departed this life.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/xxxntencion-nyota-iliyozimika-mapema.2416959/
(b) <i>Jasiri ameumaliza mwendo</i>	He has finished the journey.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/nigeria-sis-osinachi-nwachukwu-aliyeshirikishwa-wimbo-wa-ekwueme-afariki-dunia.1972361/post-
(c) <i>Tutaiacha dunia na pilikapilika zake</i>	We will leave the world with its cares.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/picha-kutoka-jicho-la-camera-ya-mohamed-shebe.1960500/post-41793880
(d) <i>Siku moja na mimi nitaiacha dunia</i>	One day, I will also leave this world.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686761
(e) <i>Ametutoka mapema sana</i>	She has left us very early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/plo-lumumba-wazungu-wanaichukulia-afrika-kama-zoo-hawajali-utu-wa-watu-wa-
(f) <i>Ameondoka mapema sana</i>	He has gone too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/gardner-g-habash-mtangazaji-wa-clouds-media-afariki-
(g) <i>Unaweza kutangulia wewe ukamuacha yeye</i>	You may go ahead and leave him.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54687354
(h) <i>Katangulia sisi tutafuata</i>	She has gone ahead of us; we will follow.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/tanzia-dalila-wa-tamthilia-ya-jumbala-dhahabu-amefariki-dunia.1433420/post-26805717

(i) <i>Kamfuata</i> kaka mapema sana	He has gone after the brother too early.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/prof-alex-lyatonga-mrema-hatunae.2064048/post-45293142
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Within this framework, the act of dying is conveyed through several verbs/verb phrases associated with the journey. These expressions include *kumaliza mwedo* ‘finishing the journey’, *kuiacha dunia* ‘leaving the world’, *kutoka* ‘departing’, *kutangulia* ‘going ahead’, and *kufuata* ‘going next’, among others. The use of these expressions is a linguistic mechanism for avoiding the explicit mention of dying.

Death as a loss

Conceptualising death as a loss probably stems from the worldview that human beings and the life within are very precious. Thus, when a person departs, it is equated to losing something very valuable. To illustrate this, it is common in the Swahili-speaking community to hear the saying *pengo lake halitazibika*, which translates as ‘the void left by the deceased cannot be filled’. This is rooted in the fact that once a person dies, their life cannot be restored. The following examples in Table 7 reflect this conceptualisation.

Table 7: Death as loss euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Alisababisha watu wasio na hatia kupoteza maisha.	He caused innocent people to lose their lives.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-47174165
(b) Hakuna sababu ya kupoteza maisha ya vijana	There is no need to lose the lives of the youth.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/hakuna-sababu-ya-kupoteza-maisha-ya-vijana.2395821/
(c) Wamepoteza mpendwa wao.	They have lost their beloved.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wanao-jiita-g55-wasiondolewe-chadema-bali-waitwe-waulizwe-kwamba-tunawezaje-kushiriki-uchaguzi-kwa-mfumo-huu-natukapata-haki.2325808/post-53375791

Death as a sleep/rest

Comparing death to sleep likely arises from two main imaginations. One is that when a person passes, they enter a sleep from which they can never wake again in the physical world. Another imagination is grounded in associating death with rest after a journey through life, which, in some cases, is marked by turmoil. Within this framework, death is framed as a source of comfort and peace rather than sadness and fear. The expressions in Table 8 exemplify this conceptualisation.

Table 8: Death as sleep/rest euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Mwamba ndiyo <i>umelala</i> milele	The rock (he) has slept forever.	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Mungu <i>amempumzisha</i> mja wake	God has laid His servant to rest.	WhatsApp	N/A
(c) Tumefarijika yeye <i>kupumzika</i> kwa amani	We are comforted by the fact that he has rest in peace.	Jamiiforums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/jecha-salim-jecha-afariki-dunia-akipatiwa-matibabu-hospitali-ya-jeshi-lugalo.2119267/post-47180346

Death as a disappearance

A few euphemistic expressions conceptualise death as a disappearance. This conceptualisation originates from the worldview that when a person dies, the feelings of their presence in the physical world cease. The euphemistic expressions in Table 9 represent this idea.

Table 9: Death as disappearance euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Covid ilikuwa rahisi sana <i>kumchukua</i> kama ilivyofanya.	It was easy for COVID-19 to take him as it happened.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-raiis-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38136328
(b) Mwizi wa kura <i>ametoweka</i>	The vote thief has disappeared.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/katibu-wa-ccm-wilaya-ya-mkuranga-afariki-dunia.2380989/post-54920655

The expressions *kuchukuliwa* ‘to be taken’ and *ametoweka* ‘has disappeared’ indicate the absence of the referred person. These expressions, when used in the context of death, mean that the referent has passed away.

Death as a transformation

Death is perceived as a physical and sometimes a spiritual change. This conceptualisation leads to the creation of polite expressions referring to death that align with this perception. Consequently, euphemistic expressions with verbs such as *kuyeyuka* ‘melting’ and *kupukutika* ‘falling off’ are formed. Consider the expressions presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Death as transformation euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Watu <i>wanapukutika</i> kama nzige.	People are falling off (dying) like locusts.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rais-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38132475
(b) <i>Maelfu kwa maelfu wanazidi kupukutika.</i>)	Thousands of people are increasingly shedding/falling off.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/waziri-wa-ulinzi-wa-israel-anaomba-msaada-kwa-raia-wa-gaza-wasaidie-kupatikana-kwa-mateka.2154737/post-48341966
(c) Inasikitisha <i>tunavyopukutika</i> mmoja baada ya mwingine.	It is sad how we fall off one after another.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/mtangazaji-swedy-mwinyi-wa-tbc-afariki-dunia.2212747/post-50222712
(d) <i>Kayeyuka</i> ghafla.	He has melted suddenly.	WhatsApp	N/A
(e) Lazima kuna mtu naye <i>ataanguka</i> tu.	Someone else must also fall.	WhatsApp	N/A
(f) Bora <i>kadondoka</i> angetuletea balaa	It is better that he has fallen; he would cause trouble.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/aliekuwa-sultani-wa-mwisho-zanzibar-sultan-sayyid-jamshid-al-said-afariki-usiku-huu-omani.2292574/post-52400673

Surprisingly, in example Table 10 (f), the context of the statement shows the speaker is happy about someone's passing, yet the act of passing is mentioned indirectly. This shows the degree of sensitivity of the notion of dying.

Death as the end/termination

Generally, death is considered the end of a human's life. From this perspective, the life cycle ceases when a person departs. Based on this perception, death is not a transitional stage, as some people perceive. Therefore, when it occurs, it means the end of existence. This perception leads to the creation of certain euphemistic expressions grounded in this perspective. Examine the following expressions in Table 11.

Table 11: Death as end/termination euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Covid <i>imemuondoa</i>	COVID-19 has removed him/her	JamiiForum s	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ningekuwa-rais-wa-tanzania-team-mwendazake-wote-ningekuwa-nishawasweka-ndani-kizuizini-au-

			kuwapoteza-wote.1920779/post-41170377
(b) Korona <i>itatumaliza</i>	COVID-19 will finish us	JamiiForum s	https://www.jamiiforums.com/thread/s/makamu-wa-kwanza-wa-raiz-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38144473
(c) Kisukari na UKIMWI <i>vimemfyeka</i> huyu mzee	Diabetes and AIDS have swept him	WhatsApp	N/A

In the examples in Table 11, the expressions *imemuondoa* 'it has removed him', *itatumaliza* 'it will finish us', and *vimemfyeka huyu mzee* 'they have swept him' are used to indicate the end of life (passing away). They come from the verbs *ondoa* 'remove', *maliza* 'finish', and *fyeka* 'sweep/slash', respectively. When used in the context of death, such expressions imply the passing away of the referent.

Death as the return

There is a worldview that humans were created by God (Nainggolan & Gultom, 2025). This view has its foundations in religious beliefs. Based on this view, when one passes, one is perceived as returning to the original source of life (God). This perspective has led to the creation of several euphemistic expressions that align with this belief. Examine the examples in Table 12.

Table 12: Death as return euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Japo <i>ametwaliwa</i> yungali anaishi	Though he has been taken, he is still living.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ruto-ase-ma-hatasaini-miswada-ya-kifisadi-iliyopitishwa-na-wabunge-ili-kujinufaisha-ashangiliwa-magufuli-magufuli-magufuli.2255667/
(b) <i>Mungu amemtwa</i> angali kijana.	God has taken him while still young.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613852
(c) <i>Amerudi mavumbini</i>	He has returned to dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rais-magufuli-alishatangulia-mbele-za-haki-hakuna-haja-ya-kumtusi-wala-kumsimanga.2072815/
(d) Naona wengi <i>Wamerudi kwa muumba.</i>	I see many have returned to the Creator.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/balozi-juma-mwapachu-afariki-dunia.2323144/post-53296587

(e) Ajaliwe <i>kukutana na Mungu muumba wake pasi na shari</i>	May he meet with his Creator peacefully.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612489
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3.5.2 Slang

This device uses informal expressions to substitute the direct death-related terms. Slang is widely used by younger speakers and other social groups with special common interests. Such expressions are dominant in casual conversations. Consider the examples presented in Table 13.

Table 13: Slang euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Watu <i>wanakata moto</i> balaa.	A lot of people are kicking the bucket.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51612371
(b) Kila mmoja ana namna yake ya <i>kukata moto</i>	Everyone has their way of biting the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/dida-shaibu-mtangazaji-wa-wasafi-fm-afariki-dunia.2263793/post-51613415
(c) Duh! Kumbe huyu mwamba <i>alishavuta?</i>	Oh! So, this dude has already checked out?	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/wa-nachama-wa-jamiiforums-waliotangulia-mbele-ya-haki-fariki-r-i-p.210561/post-52383739
(d) Mzee <i>anavuta wakati aliojichagulia aule vyema uzee wake.</i>	The elder is kicking the bucket when the time comes; he has chosen to enjoy his elderhood.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/ma-kamu-wa-kwanza-wa-rais-zanzibar-maalim-seif-sharif-hamad-afariki-dunia.1838713/post-38134096
(e) Tayari mtu <i>kaliwa kichwa</i>	Already, he has bitten the dust.	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/job-ndugai-aliyewahi-kuwa-spika-wa-bunge-afariki-dunia.2372657/post-54686850

The expression *kata moto*, illustrated in Table 13 (a-b), literally translates to ‘cut out fire’. When it is used in the context of death, it means dying. The association of this expression with death probably emanates from the fact that the body of someone alive is generally warm, but when they pass, the warmth dissipates, making the body (the lifeless body) cold. In this view, life is compared

to fire, representing something active. Thus, when the fire is cut, it is a symbol of inactivity, symbolising death. The expression *kuvuta* is likely associated with breathing, where a person draws their last breath at the moment of death, signifying the cessation of life. Thus, the expression *kuvuta* is probably the shortened form of *kuvuta pumzi ya mwisho* ‘breathing the last breath’, which implies passing away. The expression *kula kichwa* ‘eating the head’ is likely related to the importance of the head to a person’s life. Therefore, in discussions about death, mentioning that someone’s head has been eaten (or removed) suggests the end of that person’s life, indicating death.

3.5.3 Circumlocution

This strategy involves using long expressions (roundabouts) to convey messages about subjects related to death. Examine the italicised expressions in Table 14.

Table 14: Circumlocution euphemisms

Euphemism	Logical translation	Source	Link
(a) Wamempumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya milele</i> .	They have laid him to rest in his eternal home	WhatsApp	N/A
(b) Tutaelekea makaburi ya Njiro kumpumzisha kwenye <i>nyumba yake ya Milele</i> .	We will head to Njiro graveyards to lay her to her eternal home	JamiiForums	https://www.jamiiforums.com/threads/rest-in-peace-valentina-jf-member.2395244/post-55197440
(c) Wanaandaa <i>makazi yake ya milele</i> .	They are preparing his eternal dwelling	WhatsApp	N/A

The examples in Table 14 illustrate paraphrasing with long expressions (circumlocution). Instead of using the single Swahili word for 'grave,' *kaburi*, speakers use longer expressions to avoid the harsh, direct term. These expressions are more common in religious settings. They can be used by different social groups.

3.5.4 Borrowing

Data analysis shows two euphemistic expressions stemming from borrowing. In such expressions, phrases from the English language are used in the Swahili language to substitute a death-related subject. This study identified the expression *six feet under* in the statement *Yeye yuko six feet under ila mwenzake bado anadunda*, which refers to a grave, and *kadedi* (adapted loan) from the expression *Mwishowe Jamaa kadedi*, which refers to dying. By using expressions from another language, speakers feel they can reduce the sensitivity of the notion being referred to rather than using the direct term in their own language (Kiswahili).

4 Discussion

Data analysis indicates that Swahili-speaking netizens are sensitive to the discourse surrounding death. As a result, they often use a spectrum of euphemistic expressions to speak about these experiences using diplomatic and respectful language. Apart from demonstrating the prevalence

of euphemisms, these results imply that indirect communication remains an important norm for the Swahili-speaking population, even in digitally mediated communication channels. Despite the informal nature of online discourse that allows for creativity and innovation in language use, conversations about death are still constrained by the need to show respect, empathy, and harmony in society. This means that digital communication is not undermining traditional politeness norms but provides an alternative platform where these norms are practiced through euphemistic expressions.

The study findings reveal that most of the polite expressions used by netizens to discuss death-related notions carry social, cultural, and religious implications. The use of indirect expressions is a diplomatic way to address the distress caused by someone's passing. The euphemistic expressions linked to the religious perspective inform that death is not the end but a continuation of life in another form of existence. Within this framework, death is considered a transition into another phase of existence, not the finality in itself. Such a worldview is closely linked to religious teachings about the afterlife (Mutie, 2025; Potthoff, 2016; Turner Jr., 2018), in which death is seen as a transition from the current physical form to a spiritual form of existence. In the other part of this doctrine, believers are taught that there is a judgment of the soul that determines one of the two eternal destinies: heaven or hell (see Bahadur, 2020; Ehrman, 2020; Engelhardt & Iltis, 2005; Shepkaru, 1999). Therefore, terms related to these doctrines seem to linguistically frame death as a process of transformation rather than an ultimate endpoint. This construct seems to allow speakers a culturally and religiously acceptable way of talking about loss and showing sympathy towards those mourning their loved ones. The current results thus align with the findings from previous research (Crespo-Fernández, 2023; Kaguda, 2012; Nyakoe et al., 2012; Owiredu, 2020; Rawlings et al., 2017; Yakub & Agyekum, 2022), which found that religious euphemisms are often used across different cultures to soften the harshness of death-related discussions. Unlike previous research that primarily focused on face-to-face interactions, the current findings show that these religious perspectives are equally significant in today's digital interactions among Swahili speakers.

The use of religious-related euphemisms is prominent across cultures. Such expressions instill hope in the bereaved that their loved one is going to be rewarded with something good in the afterlife (see Bahadur, 2020; Bhat & Jose, 2022; Ehrman, 2020; Engelhardt & Iltis, 2005; Shepkaru, 1999). Such hopes are vital in consoling the bereaved. This helps mitigate the harshness and sensitivity of the subject of death. However, religious-related euphemisms can be a double-edged sword. The study by Krause and Hayward (2014) indicates that some people who doubt religion may have high depression and discomfort when such expressions are used after the loss of their beloved. This may lead to prolonged recovery from pain after death has occurred. Thus, religious euphemistic expressions should be approached with caution, as they may deepen the pain of non-believers. While Christian doctrine contributes to the large number of religious euphemisms that can be found in this study, it seems that cultural values of respect for the dead and sensitivity towards the feelings of relatives also contribute to the use of euphemisms. This shows that, in addition to being shaped by religious doctrines, the use of euphemisms is influenced by social values that emphasize maintaining good relations with others and avoiding offense.

Furthermore, the study indicates that some euphemistic expressions are in the form of slang. Some of the slang-related euphemisms arouse a sense of humour. The use of humorous expressions may create moments of light-heartedness in the discourse of death. Although the moments of

bereavement in most cases require polite and pleasant language, the use of humour also helps in dealing with the emotional distress in the case of loss. Studies by Bonanno and Keltner (1997), Booth-Butterfield et al. (2014), Lund et al. (2008), and Wilson et al. (2022) report that humorous expressions are favourable bereavement adjustments that help the bereaved to cope with the reality of loss. In certain parts of Tanzania, people even use jokes to help the bereaved family adjust to the tragedy of loss (see Lucas, 1974; Mikidady, 2023). Additionally, the use of slang-based euphemisms in digitally mediated communication reflects the linguistic creativity that defines digital communication. Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, JamiiForums, and YouTube provide space for individuals to play around with language through the invention of new terms, the adaptation of slang, and the adoption of terms that circulate widely within the digital community. As such, digital communication is an arena that facilitates the creation and wide dissemination of euphemisms. Instead of simply substituting conventional terms, the use of slang allows one to address sensitive issues in a way that connects well with their modern online audience without losing politeness or humour. Therefore, these results add to the previous research on death euphemisms by showing that digital communication is an important arena for the creation of euphemisms. However, the use of such a language should be taken with caution. This is because some of the humour used may be poorly timed and poorly used. This may unintentionally cause emotional hurt to the bereaved by reminding them of the loss of their beloved (Olatomide, 2024; Wilson et al., 2022).

Moreover, the study observes extensive use of metaphors among Swahili-speaking netizens to address the subject of death diplomatically. The metaphorical expressions used in the context of death often reflect cultural values and societal norms that influence how individuals perceive death. Such expressions serve as vital tools for dealing with the discomfort and sensitivity of the subject of death, thereby enabling individuals and societies to discuss death respectfully and in an emotionally manageable manner. The prevalence of metaphor-based euphemisms indicates that metaphors are not just figures of speech but also a way of thinking about death in a more indirect and emotionally unthreatening manner. By using alternative conceptual systems to represent death, speakers can refer to death without using words that may seem too harsh or inappropriate. The results obtained in this study confirm findings from other studies on death metaphors (e.g., Gathigia et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2025; Igbum & Ishima, 2025; Owiredu, 2020) and show that such metaphors continue to prevail even in everyday digital interactions.

While euphemistic language can be considered a cross-culturally accepted form of communicating about death in a respectful manner, it needs to be used effectively and in scenarios where it can be understood, there are several studies (Collins et al., 2018; Pitt et al., 2022; Rawlings et al., 2017) suggesting that the overuse of euphemisms may lead to confusion and poor communication, especially when decisions need to be made for the family members involved.

Generally, the results show that even today, the topic of death remains very sensitive among Swahili-speaking digital users, necessitating the use of euphemisms to maintain politeness and harmony. It becomes evident that the observed euphemisms reflect the interplay among cultural values, religion, and broader social values. The use of metaphor as the primary linguistic tool for the indirect representation of death is particularly significant. In addition, the results show how important digital communication venues are in fostering linguistic creativity, slang development, borrowing, and the creation of new euphemisms. In other words, not only do they reflect existing cultural traditions, but they also provide a venue for the development of the Swahili euphemisms.

5 Conclusion

This study has revealed that Swahili-speaking netizens realise the cultural sensitivity and linguistic taboo surrounding death-related issues. It is evident that euphemisms employed in discourse on the mentioned topics are aimed at bypassing direct mention of the death-related concepts to ensure respectful and polite communication in such culturally sensitive situations. Based on the principles of politeness, the identified and discussed euphemisms reveal culturally, religiously, and socially acceptable ways to engage in polite communication to manage face concerns when discussing death-related issues. To avoid direct language when discussing these topics, several strategies are employed to produce euphemisms. Metaphorical strategies have been found particularly important in this context, where euphemisms produced associations of death with a range of motions, including journeys and returns to the source of life (God). Furthermore, other metaphors associated death with transformation, suggesting physical and locational changes. Such conceptualisation highlights the view that death is a transition rather than the finality of existence. Metaphorical strategies identified in this study support the concept of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, illustrating how metaphor can serve as a cognitive device for defining topics related to death from socially acceptable viewpoints in digital interactions. The findings of this study show that digital platforms function not only as a medium for information exchange but also as an important means of creating, disseminating, and adapting euphemisms among Swahili-speaking netizens. Thus, digital environments not only enable linguistic creativity but also help maintain culturally and religiously defined norms of respectful discourse about death. Overall, this study contributes to the field of digital sociolinguistics by showing that digital interaction does not degrade existing cultural norms but serves as a dynamic tool for their reproduction. From a socio-pragmatic point of view, the study demonstrates that politeness and face management remain important factors in language, regardless of the use of digital communication. In general, the study contributes to the field of socio-pragmatic studies by showing how Swahili-speaking digital users employ existing cultural rules of politeness in certain digital forums. The study further contributes to the literature on Swahili euphemisms by demonstrating how cultural values continue to influence language use in digital forums.

6 Conflicts of interest

The author of this paper declares no conflicts of interest.

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