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SWAHILI RIDDLES AS COGNITIVE TOOLS: METAPHOR AND METONYMY IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract: Metaphor and metonymy are central to human cognition and language use, yet the process through which individuals especially children acquire the ability to use these conceptual tools remains an important question. This paper argues that riddling, as practiced in African communities, particularly among Swahili speakers, plays a significant role in developing metaphorical and metonymic competence. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Constructivist Theory (CT), the study demonstrates how riddles serve as culturally embedded cognitive tools that support abstract reasoning and language acquisition. Through qualitative analysis of Swahili riddles, the paper illustrates how their linguistic structures characterized by phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic parallelism mirror the conceptual mappings inherent in metaphor and metonymy. Examples from everyday life, computer terminology, and science pedagogy highlight how riddles facilitate understanding of abstract ideas through familiar domains. By examining ten validated riddles (five metaphorical, five metonymic), the study reveals their pedagogical value in fostering critical thinking, figurative language use, and cultural literacy. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the integration of indigenous knowledge systems, such as riddling, into contemporary education. Doing so not only enriches language instruction but also supports a decolonial pedagogy that values African epistemologies and oral traditions.

Key words: riddles, Swahili, metaphors, metonymy, cognitive linguistics

1. Background to the study

Language acquisition in African communities is shaped by unique cognitive and cultural processes, often embedded in oral traditions and everyday social interactions. Unlike formal instruction, these processes unfold through immersive, community-based practices such as storytelling, songs, proverbs, and riddling. Among these, riddles stand out as an underexplored but powerful pedagogical tool. They facilitate linguistic development while fostering abstract reasoning through metaphorical and metonymic structures.

This study argues that riddles play a central role in shaping both language and thought, functioning as culturally grounded strategies for transmitting knowledge. In particular, riddling encourages learners to make connections between concrete experiences and abstract ideas an essential cognitive skill in metaphor and metonymy acquisition. Despite their widespread use and cultural significance, riddles remain largely marginalized in formal education and scholarly discourse, especially within African linguistics and education research. This paper seeks to address that gap by examining how riddles, as part of indigenous knowledge systems, contribute meaningfully to language learning and cognitive development.

Riddles, which often exploit word of mouth to transmit knowledge, play a fundamental role in facilitating the acquisition of language skills. According to Madonsela (2020), riddles are considered part of African oral traditions, which generally apply to the spoken literary traditions of most African communities. Finnegan (2012) also argues that riddles have commonly been considered as a type of oral art form and have long been included in the studies of oral literature. Riddles often involve metaphorical or metonymic commentary on society and its value systems. Competence in language, especially in the African context, requires not only acquisition of language aspects but also equipping oneself and appreciating the nuances of metaphorical and metonymic thinking expressions. This is because metaphors and metonymy are deeply ingrained in the fabric of human cognition. They also shape our

perception of the world, hence, enabling us to draw connections between concrete and abstract entities.

In this study, we note that there is a close relationship between riddles and metaphorical expressions. According to Kövecses (2008), a metaphor is a cognitive process where one conceptual domain is understood in terms of another. It allows for abstract concepts to be expressed through more concrete or familiar terms. Ndung'u & Ntabo (2023) also point out that a metaphor is an expression whose meaning cannot be reached from the symbols used alone. This is because the intended metaphorical meaning is often contained in the prediction of linguistic expressions used that require cognitive effort to enhance interpretation. The history of metaphor research has seen it evolve from being treated as an esoteric poetic technique to one that plays a pivotal role in our conceptual system. Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) novel research led to a paradigm shift in the study of metaphor. Henceforth, metaphor and metonymy began to be regarded as a conceptual phenomenon rather than a mere rhetoric tool. As a conceptual model, metaphor is considered as a cognitive mechanism which is useful in giving an account of one domain of experience (target domain) in terms of another one (source domain). In this case, the target domain, which is obscure, is partially understood on the basis of the source domain that is often familiar. It is worth noting that metaphorical riddles both hide and reveal their object. They often lead the listener astray and seek to provide a new perspective on something familiar to the listener. The concepts that are familiar to the listener (source domain) are employed to make sense of the abstract ones (target domain). This leads to knowledge and skills acquisition.

Modonsela (2020) notes that some riddles used in African languages are metonymic in structure. Metonymy is traditionally regarded as a rhetorical device where one word or phrase is substituted for another one with which it is closely associated. This association can be based on various factors such as: proximity, cause-and-effect relationships, part-whole relationships, or cultural connections among others (Guan 2009). In riddles, metonymy is used to create vivid images in language by invoking something closely related to the intended word or concept.

After the publication of Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) book, metonymy, like metaphor, came to be known as not only as a figure of speech but also as a powerful cognitive tool for people's conceptualization of the world (Guan 2009). It facilitates our conceptualization of one thing by means of its relation to something else. Guan further notes that metonymy helps to structure abstract concepts not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. It allows us to relate complex ideas to more tangible or familiar elements.

To unveil the intricate structure of riddles, the present study draws data from the Swahili language for analysis. Swahili, or Kiswahili, as the speakers of the language call it, is one of the indigenous languages that also serves as a lingua franca in East Africa. Kiswahili is significant in enabling interaction and cultural exchange among various communities and fostering regional unity. The language enjoys the status of national and official language in Tanzania and Kenya. In addition, it is spoken as a second language in many African countries namely: Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Kenya and Tanzania among others.

Maitaria & Wafula (2018) argue that Swahili linguistic riddles are deeply rooted in Swahili culture. These riddles often exhibit complexity at the surface level and in the depths of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. In addition, Swahili riddles also manifest elements of parallelism, alliteration, rhymes, structural similarities, and dualism among others. The present research seeks to lay bare how these linguistic features provide a fertile ground for exploring the interplay of riddles with metaphors and metonymy. Moreover, the study focuses on the Swahili riddles which are employed in everyday life. Specifically, the Swahili riddles that illuminate the use of metaphors and metonymy in various domains of human life are studied. The focus is to observe how these linguistic devices infuse everyday language, computer jargon, and the pedagogical realm. This serves to illustrate their influence on how we communicate, perceive, understand, and generally acquire knowledge.

Metaphor and metonymy are best studied using cognitive linguistics (CL) framework. According to Faber (2002), CL is an approach to

language study that emphasizes the relationship between language, mind, and socio-physical experience. It is used to explore how linguistic structures are shaped by human perception, thought processes, and cultural context. CL focuses on understanding how these processes reflect the way humans conceptualize and make sense of the world through language. It treats metaphor and metonymy as a central linguistic unit of language analysis (Gathigia 2014). Ntabo (2019) also notes that CL investigates the relationship between cognition, language and culture. Linguistic realization is, therefore, a product of a nexus which exist among: social physical experiences, language and the mind. Fauconnier & Turner (2002) provide that CL is a branch of linguistics that provides that meaning is the product of the general cognitive systems that human beings use to conceptualize all aspects of reality. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), CL was originally started in the early 1970s out of dissatisfaction with formal approaches to language and linguistics like semantics and pragmatics which were dominant at the time. Palinkas (2006), therefore, developed a framework for explaining phenomena like analogy, metaphor, metonymy and counterfactual reasoning which are not accounted for by the formal linguistics approaches.

In this quest to unravel the intricate relationship between riddles and metaphors, and metonymy, the study not only contributes to our understanding of language acquisition but also reveals the parallels that extend to the broader space of human cognition. The findings advocate for the elevation of indigenous education forms which include riddles. The study advocates for integration of indigenous knowledge into contemporary education and media landscapes. This will help enrich the linguistic and cultural diversity of African communities. It will also promote a more comprehensive appreciation of the significance of riddles in the intricate journey of language acquisition.

In this paper, the argument is developed in the next four sections. Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework of the study. This is followed by a description of the data used in this study in Section 3. The analysis of the data and discussion are presented in Section 4. Concluding remarks and recommendations appear in Section 5.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theories: Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), developed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980), and Constructivist Theory (CT), articulated by Hein (1991). Together, these frameworks provide a robust lens for understanding how riddles function as cognitive and pedagogical tools within African communities. Riddles are positioned both as conceptual mechanisms that map abstract ideas through familiar domains (CMT), and as culturally embedded strategies for experiential learning (CT).

CMT offers insight into how metaphors and metonymy are not merely stylistic features of language but fundamental structures of human thought. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980), metaphors shape how we perceive, conceptualize, and interact with the world. CMT holds that human cognition operates through conceptual mappings between two domains: the source domain (concrete, familiar experiences) and the target domain (abstract, less familiar concepts). In this process, understanding is achieved by projecting knowledge from the source domain onto the target domain (Kövecses 2005; Ntabo 2022). For example, riddles that describe a "potato with eyes that cannot see" metaphorically map the familiar concept of vision onto an agricultural object, inviting learners to engage in abstract reasoning.

A central tenet of CMT, therefore, is that metaphor and metonymy are cognitive systems rather than linguistic ornaments. These systems structure how individuals comprehend abstract ideas by relating them to tangible, everyday experiences. This framework is especially useful in analyzing riddles, which rely on metaphorical and metonymic language to encode cultural knowledge and cognitive complexity.

In parallel, Constructivist Theory (CT) provides a learner-centered perspective on how knowledge is actively constructed. As Hein (1991) explains, constructivism posits that individuals build understanding through their interactions with the environment and social context. Knowledge is not passively received but is constructed through experience, interpretation, and reflection. Modensela (2020) further

emphasizes that CT views learning as a process of meaning-making shaped by the learner's cultural and cognitive background.

Within the context of African communities, riddles are integral to indigenous learning systems, especially in childhood socialization. They encourage learners to engage in self-discovery, problem-solving, and collaborative interpretation. CT thus aligns well with the pedagogical function of riddles by highlighting the learner's active role in making sense of metaphorical and metonymic expressions.

By integrating CMT and CT, this study provides a comprehensive framework for examining riddles not only as linguistic forms but also as cognitive and cultural artifacts. CMT explains how riddles encode metaphorical thought, while CT accounts for how learners internalize these riddles through culturally situated experiences. Together, the theories illuminate how riddles contribute to both language acquisition and cognitive development, making them a vital part of indigenous education systems.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate the role of riddles in language acquisition within African communities. As Kothari (2004) explains, qualitative research prioritizes in-depth understanding of phenomena through non-numerical data. The approach was deemed appropriate given the study's focus on linguistic and cognitive patterns embedded in Swahili riddles.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select twelve participants with demonstrable expertise in Swahili riddles. These participants included educators and linguists well-versed in indigenous oral traditions. The primary inclusion criterion was familiarity with and the ability to articulate Kiswahili riddles used within their communities. Through semi-structured interviews, a total of 24 Swahili riddles were collected. To determine which riddles were metaphorical or metonymic in nature, the data were analyzed using the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU), a linguistic tool developed

at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Steen et al. 2010). A lexical item was classified as a Metaphor or Metonymy Related Word (MRW) if its contextual meaning diverged significantly from its basic or literal sense.

To ensure validity and reliability, the study employed an inter-rater reliability check involving four independent annotators. Each annotator was instructed to evaluate and score the metaphoricity or metonymic quality of each lexical unit on a scale of 0.25 per positive identification. If at least three annotators agreed, yielding a cumulative score of 0.75 or above, the lexical unit was accepted as metaphorical or metonymic. This threshold follows Cameron's (2003) standard for metaphor identification in educational discourse analysis.

Out of the 24 riddles initially collected, 10 riddles (five metaphorical and five metonymic) met the criteria for inclusion in the final analysis. These selected riddles were then analyzed through the dual theoretical lens of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Constructivist Theory (CT), enabling an exploration of both the cognitive processes involved in understanding figurative language and the learner's active role in constructing meaning.

The study acknowledges limitations related to sample size and participant background. While the sample was small, the depth and specificity of participant knowledge contributed to the reliability of the findings. Nonetheless, future research could benefit from a broader demographic to capture more diverse riddling practices across Swahili-speaking communities.

4. Data analysis and discussion

Riddles encode complex linguistic features such as parallelism, contradiction, and semantic ambiguity, functioning as powerful tools for abstract reasoning and conceptual thinking. Through illustrative examples, this study demonstrates how metaphorical and metonymic mappings within riddles reflect domains such as agriculture, technology, ecology, and social organization affirming the deep epistemological value embedded in African orature.

To examine this further, the study employed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Constructivist Theory (CT) as complementary analytical frameworks. CMT helped uncover how riddles foster cognitive development by enabling learners to understand abstract concepts through familiar domains. CT, on the other hand, highlighted how individuals actively construct meaning from riddles through interaction with their cultural environment. Using these frameworks, the study analyzed five Swahili metaphoric riddles and five metonymic riddles to explore their role in language acquisition and their connection to broader cognitive-linguistic processes. The selected examples are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Swahili metaphoric and metonymic riddles

No	Riddle	Translation	Category
1.	*Nina macho lakini siwezi kuona*	I have eyes but cannot see	Metaphor
2.	*Ninaweza kuona vitu vyote, lakini sina macho. Ninasikiliza maneno yako, lakini sina masikio. Naweza kufanya hesabu, lakini sina ubongo. Ni nini mimi?*	I can see everything, but I have no eyes. I listen to your words, but I have no ears. I can do calculations, but I have no brain. What am I?	Metaphor
3.	*Nina meno lakini siwezi kula*	I have teeth but cannot eat	Metaphor
4.	*Nina miguu lakini siwezi kutembea*	I have legs but cannot walk	Metaphor
5.	*Nina nguvu ya jua na hunisaidia kutoa mwangaza usiku, lakini mimi si jua. Nina maradhi mengi na chachu hufanya kazi yangu, lakini mimi si mgonjwa. Ni nini mimi?*	I have the power of the sun and help to provide light at night, but I am not the sun. I have many diseases, and yeast does my work, but I am not sick. What am I?	Metaphor
6.	*Chombo cha mfalme*	The king's vessel	Metonymy
7.	*Ndege wa msitu*	The forest bird	Metonymy
8.	*Mwenye kulima ardhi*	The one who cultivates the land	Metonymy
9.	*Mdomo wa mto*	The mouth of the river	Metonymy
10.	*Nyumbu wa nyika*	The wilderness beast	Metonymy

Table 1 highlights the Swahili metaphoric and metonymic riddles that were identified for analysis. The metaphoric and metonymic riddles in this study were identified by analyzing the contrast between the basic or literal meaning of terms and their contextual or figurative use within the riddle. This contrast was helpful in revealing how a term shifts meaning to represent something conceptually similar (metaphor) or related by association (metonymy) in the given context. The metaphoric and metonymic annotation procedure as indicated in Section 3.0 was also helpful in marking the metonymic and metaphoric riddles for study.

Example (1) is significant in unveiling the crucial role riddles play in language acquisition especially in African communities. Riddles, particularly the metaphorical ones, are presented as important cognitive tools that human beings use to conceptualize reality. In this case, perception is presented as a concept of having eyes without the ability to see. This is suggested in the metaphorical riddle (1).

(1) *Nina macho lakini siwezi kuona.*
'I have eyes but cannot see.'

Example (1) above metaphorically describes a potato. It is important to note that 'eyes' on potatoes are the growing points on potato tubers. Each potato tube often has a little stem bud which matures as the tube develops. The stem bud is normally figuratively described as 'blinking'. Potatoes are usually not grown from small seeds like most crops. Instead, they grow from small cubes of tubers cut into portions with at least two eyes known as seed potatoes (Ungerer & Schmid 2006). It is these eyes that sprout and form new tubers underground for digging and eating. Potato eyes only form and sprout under favorable growing conditions and after breaking from a dormant state. Many times, stored potatoes break dormancy when they find their space favorable for sprouting. This causes the potatoes to develop sprouting 'eyes'.

CMT is used to make sense of example (1) above. The source domain, which is potato "eyes", is mapped onto the abstract domain, which is *macho ambayo hayaoni* 'eyes that do not see', to help give

an account of some human beings' inherent weaknesses, such as our inability to perceive certain important things, in life. From this conceptualization, it is apparent that African communities, especially the Swahili, are endowed with experiential riddles such as (1) that they employ to enhance acquisition of knowledge. The metaphoric riddle (1) can also imply a contradiction as having eyes normally translates to the ability to see. This riddle can be interpreted as a reflection of a deeper cognitive structure which can be used to indicate a conflict between a perceived state and an actual one.

The Constructivist Theory (CT), whose main principle is that knowledge is actively built by learners through their experiences, interactions, and the cultural context in which they are situated, was also used to interpret (1). In this, riddles are regarded as models for language acquisition that challenge learners to think creatively and make connections between familiar and unfamiliar concepts. For instance, the riddle (1) invites learners to engage in a cognitive process where they need to reconcile the contradiction between having eyes (sensory experience) and not being able to see (a conceptual or abstract contradiction). Learners are, therefore, encouraged to construct meaning by recognizing the metaphorical nature of the statement and the challenge it poses to their understanding.

Worthy to note is that riddle (1) above constitutes an intricate structure at the phonological, morphological, and semantic levels. For example, there is a phonological structure that is realized through the repetition of the phoneme [*Nguvu ya jua* 'power of the sun' is used to metaphorically refer to a candle's ability to emit light, like the sun does. A candle is, however, not the sun. This metaphor draws a parallel between a candle and the sun. It is used to illustrate the concept of light-giving without being the source of light itself as insinuated in (5).

The phrase *maradhi mengi* 'many diseases' is also metaphorically employed to signify the bends or irregularities on the candle. Worthwhile to note is that these imperfections, which are equated with diseases, do not hinder the candle's functionality but rather add character to it.

Chachu 'yeast' is also metaphorically associated with the wax or material from which the candle is made to signify the structure of candles. It is the wax that enables the candle to fulfill its purpose of emitting light without being impaired or 'sick' in the process.

Riddles (5) also serves as a cognitive tool which helps to facilitate language acquisition. It does this by employing metaphors which are central in engaging children to think critically to unravel the riddle. This is useful in promoting linguistic creativity. It is also important to note that indigenous education systems often utilize riddles as a means to impart not only linguistic skills but also cultural values and expressions. This is in line with Ishengoma (2005) who posits that riddles make an important contribution to children's full participation in the social, cultural, political, and economic life of African communities, especially by fostering critical thinking and transmitting indigenous knowledge. It is, therefore, important to integrate such traditional forms into contemporary education to help enrich language acquisition. This will also foster a deeper understanding of cultural nuances.

The present study also subjected five metonymic riddles to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Constructivist Theory (CT) for analysis and discussion. This study notes that metonymic riddles foreground the cultural and cognitive aspects that facilitate language acquisition especially among the Swahili. The study also reveals that use of metonymic riddles within the context of Swahili language and culture showcases how riddles are fundamental tools for teaching both linguistic skills and cultural concepts. Study riddle (6).

(6) *chombo cha mfalme*
'the king's vessel'

The riddle (6) relies on metonymy. In this case, *chombo* 'vessel' is used to represent the concept of a *crown*. In this metonymic construction, the vessel is a part of the king's regalia. It often symbolizes the entire concept of kingship. This metonymic riddle demonstrates how abstract and complex concepts, such as royalty and authority, can be conveyed using a more concrete and easily understood representation.

The use of *chombo* to represent a *crown* relies on the cognitive process of understanding one concept in terms of another. This helps in realizing the cultural and experiential associations of African communities particularly the Swahili. It is clear that the role kingship played in the governance and development of the Swahili is passed down from one generation to the next through use of oral traditions such as riddles.

Constructivist Theory (CT) is also employed to reveal that riddles are integral to language acquisition in African communities. For instance, (6) is a product of the cultural context where the Swahili language is spoken. Learners acquire not only linguistic skills but also cultural understanding through riddles. The riddles often rely on shared cultural knowledge and associations. The metonymic riddle (6) is also an example of indigenous education practices. This is because it teaches cultural values and concepts. Such values include the symbolism of a crown in Swahili culture which is closely related to authority and kingship.

Example (7) is useful in unveiling the crucial role riddles play in enhancing language acquisition especially in African communities. Riddles present a unique opportunity for children to acquire knowledge about the natural environment.

(7) *ndege wa msitu*
'the forest bird'

The riddle *ndege wa msitu* is a metonymic representation where the phrase *forest bird* stands for an owl. This employs metonymy which is a figure of speech where something closely associated with the intended meaning (a bird found in the forest) is used to refer to the specific thing (the owl). CMT, which helps to enhance our understanding of abstract concepts on the basis of concrete ones was used to interpret (7). In this case, the *forest bird* is mapped onto the owl because owls are commonly associated with forests. This creates a conceptual link between the two to facilitate knowledge acquisition about our natural environment. Bond et al. (2022), for example, note that most owls are synonymous with forests. This is because owls, especially

in many African communities, are considered as creatures of the night which can only be attributed to forests. Maitaria & Wafula (2018) also note that most Swahili regard owls as mysterious and mystical since owls are often masters of camouflage which are often more heard than seen. This explains why parallelism is drawn between owls and forests in Swahili. It is also important to note most Swahili consider forests as areas of darkness that are mysterious and mystical like owls.

Riddles can also be employed as cognitive tools to enhance comprehension of abstract concepts. For example, riddle (7) uses metonymy to help create awareness about the natural environment. In this case, the term *forest bird* is used to refer to *an owl*. This challenges the literal understanding of the phrase and requires individuals to engage in mental reconstruction to decipher the hidden meaning. As revealed in this study, most Swahili regard owls as forests since owls are considered dark figures that can be associated with the darkness that is often characterized with thick forests. Riddle (7) is, therefore, useful in encouraging young people to learn about natural things such as forests and owls.

The metonymic riddle (8) is useful in foregrounding the resourcefulness of farmers in the production of food. Example (8) is also helpful in highlighting the role riddles play in language acquisition within African communities. Thus:

(8) *mwenye kulima ardhi*
'the one who cultivates the land'

In this riddle, the phrase "the one who cultivates land" serves as a metonymic representation for a farmer. It uses a term associated with a specific action (cultivating land) to refer to the person performing that action (the farmer). It is typically the role of a farmer to undertake the tasks of *kulima* 'cultivating land', planting, fertilizing, and harvesting of crops. These roles are fundamental in ensuring a stable and secure global food supply. Riddle (8) also insinuates that the role farmers play extends beyond mere production of food to encompass environmental stewardship, innovation, and social and economic contributions to communities and nations.

In addition, riddle (8) challenges individuals to reconstruct their understanding by associating the phrase "the one who cultivates land" with the specific role of a farmer. This encourages active engagement and cognitive reconstruction. It also helps in knowledge acquisition by relating a farmer to the deep-rooted importance of agriculture and farming in many societies. Moreover, (8) emphasizes the significance of a farmer in not only cultivating land but also in undertaking the tasks of nurturing, conserving, end enhancing both local and global food security.

The metonymic riddle (9) can also be useful in discussing the role of riddles in African language acquisition. (9) is, for instance, employed to make a commentary on the concept of water bodies in the African context.

(9) *mdomo wa mto*
'the mouth of the river'

In this riddle, "the mouth of the river" serves as a metonymic representation of the source of the river. It uses a term associated with part of the river (mouth) to signify the origin or starting point (source). CMT, which posits that we understand abstract concepts through more concrete experiences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), is used to structure (9) above. For example, (9) evokes the image of the point where a river begins. This is a mapping of the specific part of the river (the source) to a human and animal's body part (mouth) hence establishing a conceptual connection between the two.

The study also notes that riddles engage individuals in active learning by presenting familiar terms in novel contexts. For example, riddle (9) challenges individuals to reconstruct their understanding of language by associating the phrase "the mouth of the river" with the specific concept of the source of the river. This promotes cognitive reconstruction and active engagement. Worthy to note is that the initial description might evoke various interpretations related to the mouth of a river. Learners are, however, prompted to reconcile the discrepancy between the literal interpretation and the specific representation of the

source of the river. This fosters cognitive reconstruction to align with the intended meaning.

The metonymic riddle (10) is also used to enhance indigenous knowledge acquisition especially concerning wild beasts. In this case, a wild animal is metonymically regarded as a beast.

(10) *nyumbu wa nyika*
'the wilderness beast'

This riddle employs metonymy to instantiate a lion. In this case, the noun phrase "the wilderness beast" metonymically describes a lion's natural habitat and its status as the king of the jungle. Additionally, *nyumbu* 'dweller or resident' is used to refer to a lion. *Nyumbu* serves as a part representing the whole in this riddle. It highlights a lion's association with the wild, as a resident or dweller of the wilderness. The use of metonymy in (10) is insightful in revealing the cognitive process of understanding a broader concept "lion" through a more concrete or related one "dweller of a jungle". Worthwhile to note is that the use of *nyumbu* in (10) above to signify a lion is connected to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). This is because the riddle draws on cultural and cognitive associations to facilitate acquisition of skills. For instance, through the principle of conceptual mappings, the Swahili speakers are enriched by learning about the lion's habitat in the wilderness, and the Swahili symbolism of the lion as a marker of strength and wildness.

The Swahili riddle (10) also plays a vital role in facilitating language acquisition among the Swahili. Through the riddle, learners' knowledge on the habitat of a lion and a description of a lion as a king of the jungle is not only enhanced but also transmitted from one generation to the next through use of such riddles. This helps to reflect the cultural context in which the Swahili language is used. On the basis of this background, the present research notes that riddles such as (10) give learners an opportunity to not only acquire language skills but also cultural insights.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This study concludes that riddles are vital to language acquisition in African communities. They function not only as tools for teaching metaphor and metonymy but also as gateways to deeper cultural understanding and cognitive development. As part of indigenous education systems, riddles carry significant linguistic, cultural, and philosophical value. They foster familiarity with figurative language, including proverbs, thus enhancing learners' communicative competence and cultural literacy.

In light of these findings, the paper recommends the integration of riddles and other indigenous knowledge forms into contemporary education systems. Embedding them into curricula, teacher training, and digital learning platforms can enrich language instruction and promote cultural continuity. Preservation and wider dissemination of such oral traditions are essential to ensure that African epistemologies thrive alongside formal educational practices. Ultimately, this study supports the adoption of a decolonial pedagogy that values and centers African ways of knowing.

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