

Stigma and HIV/AIDS Discourse in Zimbabwe

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Introduction

The HIV/AIDS pandemic looms larger in Africa than anywhere else in the world (McFadden 1992:190). Denial, stigma and discrimination against those infected by HIV/AIDS are some of the factors fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS. Stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS denies them basic human rights to dignity. Discussion of AIDS is still taboo in most African societies essentially because of its relationship with the sexual act (McFadden 1992:157-158). In Zimbabwe the subject of HIV/AIDS remains shrouded in mystery and is regarded as taboo. This bars open dialogue on the subject as the following examination of the Shona language suggests.

Shona is the national language of Zimbabwe together with Ndebele. It is the mother tongue of about 80% of Zimbabwe's population of about twelve million. Shona is the ensemble of all Shona dialects namely, Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Korekore and Ndau. The term Shona is a linguistic creation that came into use when the five Shona dialects were standardized by Professor Clement Doke who published a *Report on the Unification of the Shona Dialects* (1931).

In the Shona language, the words for private body parts are too strong to be used openly. A culture of silence therefore surrounds matters pertaining to HIV/AIDS. According to cultural standards, being HIV positive is an immoral act because traditionally, sickness and disease are considered to be punishment by one's ancestors. HIV/AIDS is therefore a disease of shame as people who are infected are treated with contempt.

This article argues that language is central to how stigmas are perpetuated and constructed. The use of words is a powerful means to stigmatize (see Mbwambo 2003). Stigmatizing language is commonly found in the media, education materials, song and poetry and is also used by individuals in daily discourse. The focus of this paper is on everyday discourse.

Data Collection

This study reports on research conducted by the writer in the city of Harare, Zimbabwe. The study involved 35 Shona first language speakers, comprising 15 women and 20 men, all of whom were between 20 and 30 years old. The subjects, who were randomly selected, were asked to list words or phrases that are used to refer to HIV/AIDS. In addition, the researcher drew on data collected from everyday discourse, through listening to conversations in public places.

The data was transcribed giving literal translations and metaphorical meanings. The data was analyzed to determine how language, and especially metaphor, works in naming the HIV/AIDS disease and people with HIV/AIDS. The analysis of the structure of HIV/AIDS discourse in Shona reveals that the interpretation of any particular text is governed by a variety of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors, for meaning involves much more than the literal references of words.

In this study, I utilize the theoretical frameworks of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is sometimes defined as the analysis of language 'beyond the sentence'. This contrasts with types of analysis more typical of modern linguistics, which are chiefly concerned with the study of grammar: the study of smaller bits of language, such as sounds, structure and meaning (Hudson 1980).

HIV/AIDS - Related Stigma

One way that language can be stigmatizing is in the use of derogatory references to those with HIV/AIDS. Words with negative connotations that describe HIV/AIDS form part of daily conversation. Name-calling, gossip, and derogatory references to HIV/AIDS are strong and common forms of stigma. Speakers are often unaware that they are stigmatizing others with

their words, nor are they aware of the damaging impact of what they are saying (Nyblade 2003:37). Following Nyblade and Mbwambo (2003), who studied HIV/AIDS stigma and language as part of their work in Tanzania, Zambia and Ethiopia, this paper focuses on how HIV/AIDS is named and how stigma is constructed linguistically in Shona. Nyblade's and Mbwambo's (2003) works are important to this study because they capture how stigma is constructed linguistically in other African languages spoken in Tanzania, Zambia and Ethiopia.

The major aims and objectives of this study are summarized as follows:

- To deepen analysis of the linguistic construction of stigma in HIV/AIDS discourse.
- To explore the gender dimension of linguistic stigmatization of Zimbabwean women.

Stigma has ancient roots (Aggleton 2002:8). The origins of the word can be traced to classical Greece where outcast groups were branded or physically marked as a permanent measure of their status (Aggleton 2002:8). Stigma has been defined as 'an attribute that is significantly discrediting' (see Goffman 1963). Stigmatization therefore describes the process of devaluation within a particular culture or setting. In the case of HIV/AIDS, stigma may be applied to actual infection or to the behavior believed to lead to infection. Speaking ill of a person with HIV/AIDS is one of the most common manifestations of stigma. People recognize the use of language as a tool for stigmatizing and this carries negative power. Talking, gossiping, whispering and pointing fingers are all forms of stigma. Much of HIV/AIDS - related stigma builds upon the belief that infected people deserve it because they have done something wrong. Often, it is imputed that the wrong-doing is linked to sex (Aggleton 2002:8).

The literature about how HIV is transmitted considers how ignorance and misinformation contribute to stigma. The shame of having a disease that is strongly associated with sex generates the stigma. HIV/AIDS confirms stereotypes and underlying assumptions that people carry around on a daily basis, for example, the idea that prostitutes are bad people.

Nyblade, (2003:9) identifies the following as causes of stigma:

- Incomplete knowledge about HIV transmission and prevention, and the lack of in-depth knowledge about the difference between HIV and AIDS.
- Fear of casual transmission, for instance through sharing utensils, shaking hands.
- The belief that people who are HIV- positive are not productive; they are viewed as already dead, for instance in the use of terms such as *akakwira bhazi*, which translates as s/he boarded a bus (suggesting that s/he is on the journey to death, s/he is a walking corpse).

Similar examples have been reported in research conducted in Tanzania, Zambia and Ethiopia. In Tanzania there is the example of **utakufa kilo mbili**, which means 'you will die weighing two kilos; in Zambia there is **makizi yaku mochari** which means 'keys to the mortuary' and in Ethiopia **yeminkesakes atent** which refers to a 'moving skeleton' (Nyblade 2003:46)

The Linguistic Construction of Stigma

HIV/AIDS stigma is constructed linguistically in Shona discourse in two ways. Firstly, there is the nominalization of the disease and people, and secondly, there is the use of metaphor.

Nominalization of the Disease (See Figure One)

HIV/AIDS attracts multiple threads of stigmatized experience, namely the disease, sexual behaviour, death and gendered bodies. There is widespread pessimism in the discourse of HIV/AIDS whereby the shadow of disease and death is invoked (Jones 1997:397).

Because African languages sometimes do not have scientific words or terms, diseases are given names that best reflect what people fear or feel. African languages generally do not have words for 'immunodeficiency' or 'virus'. As such, the new disease has been given names that closely reflect what the local speakers think of AIDS. One of the words used to refer to HIV/AIDS in Shona is **mukondombera**, which means 'plague'. This word was also used to refer to the influenza epidemic at the turn of the century that killed many people. Dowling (2004: 3) notes that HIV/AIDS is seen as a plague because it seems able to subjugate a nation by

dramatically reducing its numbers. Another term that is used to refer to AIDS in Shona is **shuramatongo**, which means 'an abandoned homestead, a cursed place, or a scene of catastrophe' is also. It alludes to the fact that AIDS wipes out entire households thereby leaving an empty home. HIV/AIDS is also generally referred to as **chirwere** (the disease). Consequently, when HIV/AIDS invites such a reputation, people living with it do not want to be exposed. No one dies of AIDS, but of AIDS-related ailments such as malaria, TB or pneumonia. Due to the AIDS stigma, these ailments are given as the cause of death when in fact the death has been due to AIDS.

Other words in Shona that refer to HIV/AIDS tend to represent the disease as being modern, foreign, fearful, sexually transmitted and catastrophic. People with the disease are named according to their physical appearance for instance, the hair, way of walking and body size.

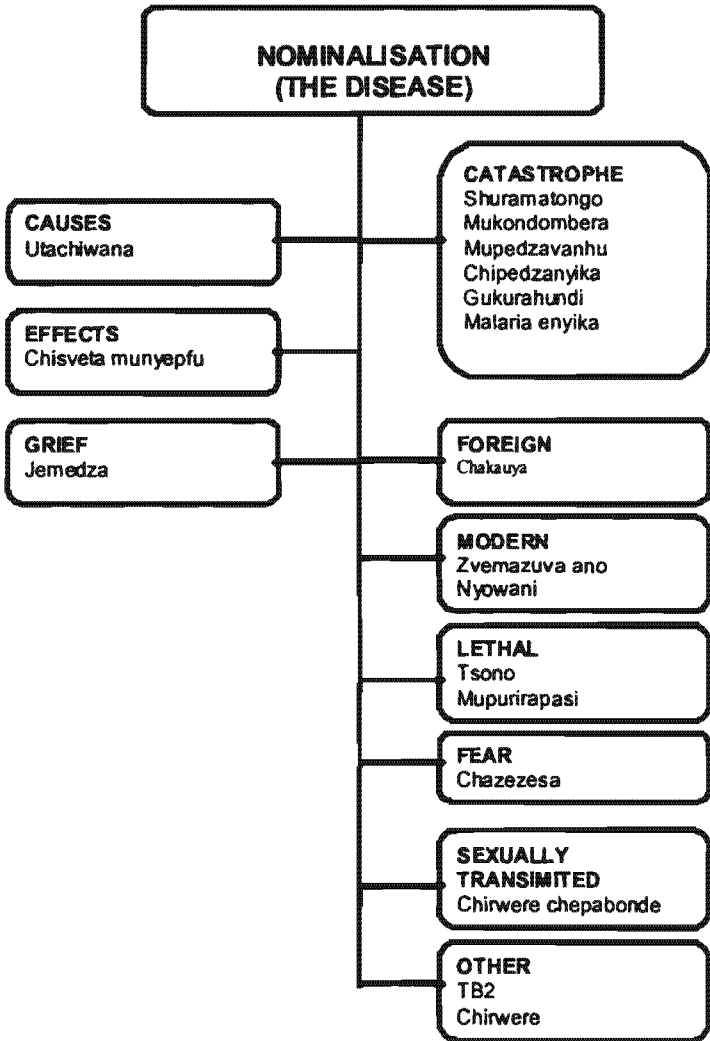
Motherhood and the Disease

In many cultures motherhood is considered as a feminine ideal (Gupta 2000:2). Fertility is a central issue in the definition of sexuality. Using barrier methods or non-penetrative sex as safer sex options therefore presents a significant dilemma for women (see Heise and Elias 1995). Shona women construct their identities as women through their social status as wives and mothers. As such, many women pursue risky sexual relations so as to acquire this status. Despite their seropositive status, the fear of not having children is rife. The risk that the child will be born infected with HIV seems better than not having children at all.

Women of all ages are perceived as the most common 'victims' of HIV/AIDS related stigma. At the same time women are viewed as disease carriers, repositories of infection and are socially and economically ostracized¹. Blame for infection is frequently placed on women: mothers are blamed for infecting their babies, older women are accused of being 'promiscuous' and 'grabbing' young men, and schoolgirls and university students are cited as going for older men just for a few dollars to buy food, clothes and books. Women traders, and especially cross-border traders, are stigmatized for bringing HIV/AIDS (Muzvidziwa 2001:68).

¹ Online at <http://www.beloit.edu/~biology/emggdis/papers/aidszim.html>

Figure One: Nominalization of the HIV/AIDS Disease



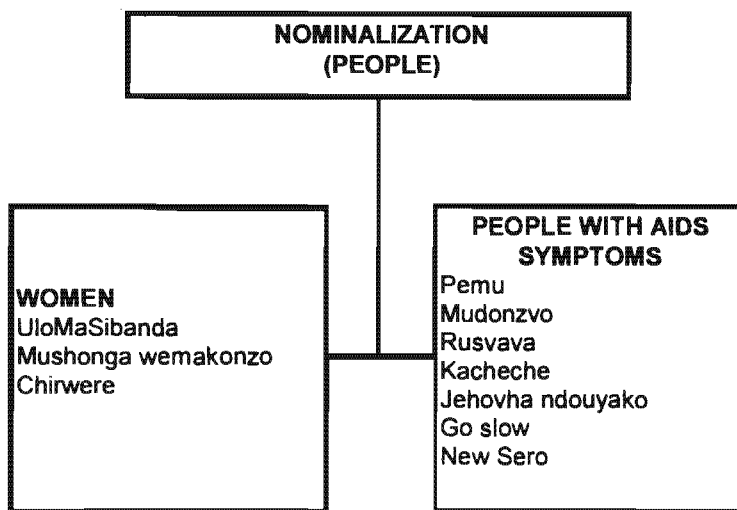
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The meanings of words used to describe the HIV/AIDS disease

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
chakapedza mbudzi	That which destroyed the goats	Death resulting from unreasonable behaviour, this is emanating from the feeding behaviour of goats, they eat anything...
chakauya	That which came	Foreign disease
chakauya ichi	The one that came/from the outside	Foreign disease
chazezesa	A thing that is dreaded	Dreaded disease
chipedza nyika	One that destroys the country	HIV/AIDS destroys the entire nation
chirwere	disease	The meaning of disease has thus been extended to refer to HIV/AIDS
chirwere chepabonde	A disease resulting from sex	Sexually transmitted disease
chisveta munyepfu	Flesh sucker	HIV/AIDS which sucks life out
gukurahundi	Storm that sweeps away the chuff after harvesting	Refers to the destructive nature of the disease
jemedza	That which makes you cry	Sad times awaiting
malaria enyika	Malaria of the country	Serious disease
mukondombera	plague	Refers to the gravity and seriousness of HIV/AIDS

mupedza vanhu	One that destroys the people	the exterminator of people
mupedzanyika	That which destroys the country	Refer to effect of HIV on a country
mupurirapasi	One that knocks you down	Deadly disease
new sero	New sero status	This term has to do with sero-positive status
nyowani	A new disease	Modern day disease
shuramatongo	Abandoned homestead, scene of catastrophe	HIV/AIDS because it wipes out entire families
Tsono	Needle	Painful disease as in the prick of a needle
utachiwana	virus	The meaning of utachiwana 'virus' has been extended to refer to the HIV virus. A virus that makes the body so weak that it is unable to fight off opportunistic diseases that it would easily resist if it is not immuno-deficient
zvemazuva ano	Of the modern/present day	Modern day disease

Figure Two: Nominalization of People with HIV/AIDS



Words used in HIV/AIDS discourse to describe women

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
chirwere chepfambi	A prostitute's disease	Alludes to the fact that only promiscuous people get HIV/AIDS
mushonga wemakonzo	Rat kill	Infected woman who infects a man; poisons him as in rat kill
UloMaSibanda	Ms. Sibanda	Woman of easy virtue

Words used to describe people with AIDS symptoms

Go slow	Go slow	Debilitation effect of HIV/AIDS
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Jehovha ndouyako	Lord I am coming there	Imminent death from HIV/AIDS
kacheche	baby	Infected person now appearing like a baby
mudonzvo	Walking stick	Those infected are referred as such because they walk the aid of a walking stick
new sero	New sero status	New HIV/AIDS status
pemu	Permed hair	Effects of AIDS on the appearance of the hair, it loses its kinky look
rusvava	baby	Looking like a baby, soft hair and small in size

Nyblade (2003:17) contends that while both men and women are blamed for HIV/AIDS 'men are seen as having a natural propensity to sex while women are believed to have more controllable sexual urges'. This implies that women are blamed more easily, often and harshly. Women face the most severe blame and stigma and are perceived as having brought HIV infection upon themselves and others as a result of 'bad', 'immoral' behaviour, the way they dress or behave. As a result, 'women bear a double stigma, they are infected, and they are women' (Gupta 2000:4).

The language of HIV/AIDS reveals female subordination, oppression and exploitation through the perpetuation of patriarchal cultures and traditions which underpin most African societies to the present day (McFadden 1992:192). In general, the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS and women shapes the discrimination that HIV positive women face in the public and private spheres. They are more likely to be blamed, stigmatized and even abandoned by their families and they face greater discrimination in healthcare, education and legal rights. The stigmatization of women confirms the deeply systemic roots of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and is lodged in the very organization of society. Women are more vulnerable because of this form of social organization.

HIV/AIDS related stigma plays into, and reinforces existing social inequalities. These include gender inequalities (Aggleton 2000: 9). A number of languages use terms for AIDS that translate as 'women's disease'.

On the face of it, this appears to blame women for the epidemic. Indeed most sexually transmitted diseases are linguistically described as being of female origin. In Shona, HIV/AIDS is also referred to as **chirwere chepfambi** (see Figure Two) 'a prostitute's disease'. **UloMaSibanda** is used to refer to an infected woman, and the assumption is that she might have acquired the disease through prostitution as she likes goodies so much. The term **mushonga wemakonzo** (rat kill) is yet another term associated with infected women. In this instance, women's bodies are likened to rat poison – sexual contact with such a woman is like taking rat poison, one will certainly die.

Metaphor

Stigma is constructed linguistically, through the use of metaphor. This use of metaphor to describe HIV/AIDS has increasingly become an area of interest in discourse analysis (Sontag, 2001). According to Stillwagon (2003:818) 'a metaphor has suggestive power; it is more flexible than a factual statement because it begins with an image but relies on conceptual displacement so as to maintain the analogy. Specific derogatory words and phrases to describe people with HIV/AIDS add greatly to the suffering of patients and this also inhibits them from seeking proper treatment (see Sontag 2001). In Zimbabwe, people with HIV infection are subject to much labelling and name-calling as the following analysis illustrates. HIV/AIDS is frequently associated with immoral behaviour, extramarital sexual relations, prostitution and deviance. There are also powerful links between HIV/AIDS and death, disease, pain, suffering, isolation and ostracization (see Figure Three). Metaphors of dread and fear as exemplified below, also surround the disease.

Funeral Metaphors (see Table Five)

HIV equals death, learning that one is HIV-positive is tantamount to learning that one is dying. This can be identified by the use of expressions to refer to the funeral such as **manje manje masofa panze**² literally means, 'very soon, the sofas/couches will be outside', which suggests what occurs at a home where there is a funeral. There is also the expression **tinomunwira manje manje** which means 'very soon we will be drinking beer'. This implies that

² NB: In Shona culture, lounge furniture is put outside the house and mourners sit on the floor at funeral wakes.

death is certain. The term **kunwira** refers to the beer drinking at the funeral or the drinking of ritual beer brewed for the post-death rituals.

Self Inflicted Disease

Metaphors relating to individual deviant behavior are also common. The idea that a person was involved in many sexual relationships '**aiwanza magemu**' is literally rendered as 's/he was involved in many games'. The belief is that those who get HIV/AIDS do so through the sexual act. The example **akarohwa nematsotsi** literally means 's/he was attacked by thieves', and carries connotations of wandering at night. Hence, if you wander at night, you will be attacked by the virus. The expression **akatenga stand** means 's/he bought a piece of land' which suggests that acquiring the AIDS virus is like to acquiring a piece of land. When one buys a piece of land in Zimbabwe, it is normal to have to wait for a while before it is ready for building. When it is time for construction to begin, people use the term **yakabuda**, i.e., 'it came out'. The term **yakabuda** is a stigmatizing term to refer to HIV/AIDS symptoms once they appear.

Death Metaphors

An infected person is regarded as being on a journey to death, as exemplified by the following death metaphors: **ava mudepartures lounge** which means 'he/she is now in the departures lounge'³, **akakwira bhazi** which means 's/he boarded a bus [to death], and **bhazi rakasvika** which means 'the bus arrived', i.e., death arrived'.

Foreign Disease

There is a belief that HIV/AIDS came from somewhere else, as is clear from metaphors such as **chakauya**, which means 'the one that came' and suggests that HIV/AIDS is a foreign disease.

Modern Disease

Descriptions of HIV/AIDS as a 'modern disease' are exemplified by **zvemazuva ano**, which means 'of the modern day' or **nyowani** which means 'new disease'. The term **nyowani** is a linguistic borrowing from

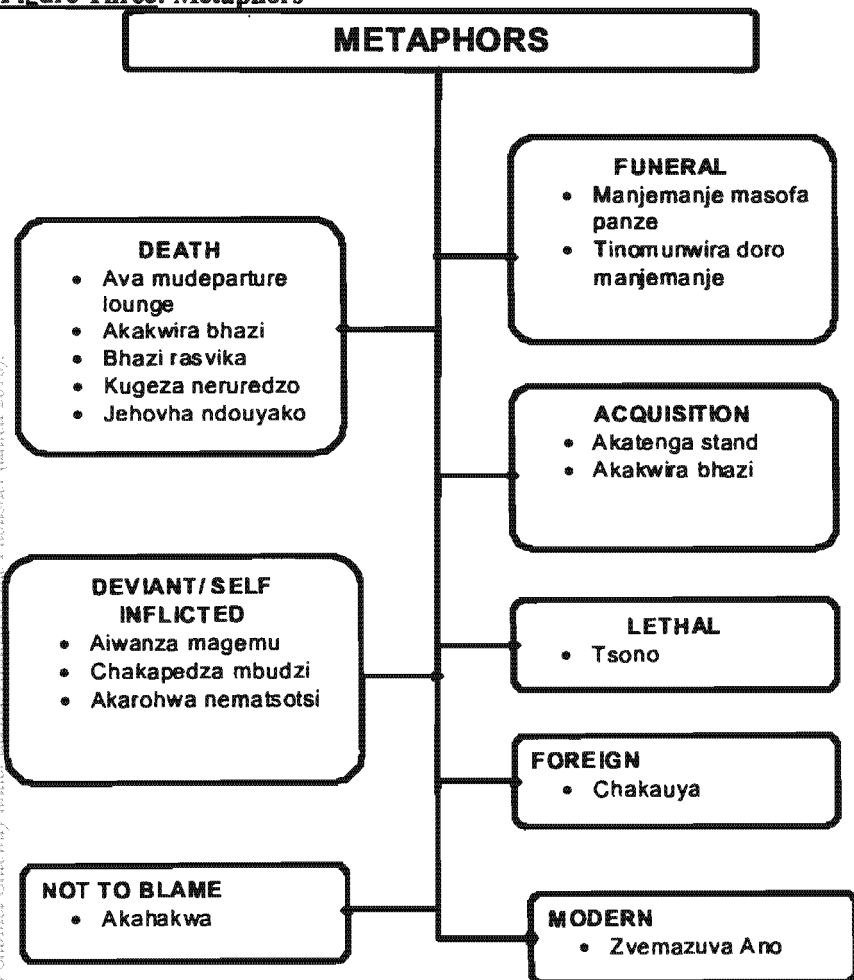
³ NB: Departure lounge refers to the airport lounge, meaning that one will depart/leave soon.

English. HIV/AIDS is also referred to in medical terms, such as **new sero**.

Lethal Metaphor

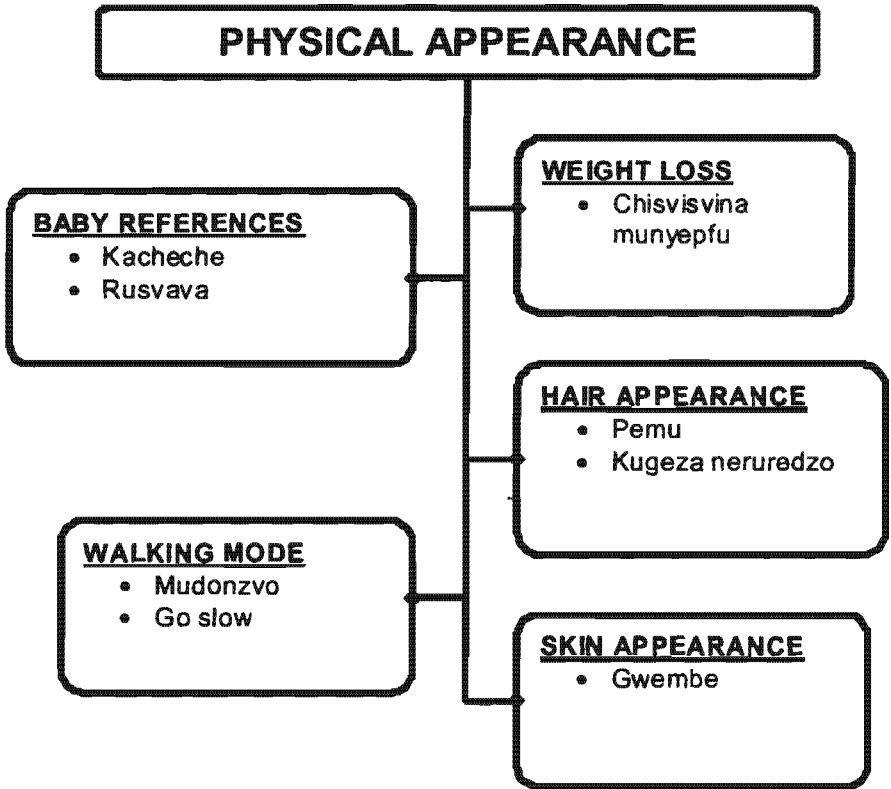
The term **tsono** (needle) alludes to the fact that HIV/AIDS is a painful and deadly disease. It is an allusion to the pain that one goes through.

Figure Three: Metaphors



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Figure Four: Physical Appearance Metaphors



Physical Appearance (see Figure Four)

Metaphors referring to the physical self are also typical. Metaphors such as **pemu** (permed hair) are used to describe the state of the hair of an infected person. Another term is **ava kugeza neruredzo**, which literally means 's/he is now bathing with plant mucilage. This expression refers to the thin hair of a person suffering from AIDS. If one washes one's hair with **ruredzo** (plant mucilage) the hair becomes soft and non-kinky, as seen in HIV positive people. The plant mucilage was used traditionally for bathing and it foams like a shampoo. When used to shampoo the hair, the hair becomes soft and curly. Other terms such **kacheche** or **rusvava** (baby) are also used to refer

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infected people. This refers to the fact that victims often develop frail bodies with very fine skin texture, like babies, and may sometimes become smaller in body size. The images of despair and helplessness conveyed by these metaphors fuel the already powerful images of stigmatization existing in the larger social frame (Jones 1997:409). Weight loss is yet another instance with regard to physical appearance metaphors with examples such as **chisvisvina munyepfu** (flesh sucker). Metaphors such as **mudonzvo** (walking stick) and **go slow** refer to the walking mode of an ill person (see Table Six). Skin appearance is referred to in **gwembe** (incurable skin ailment), which is used to refer to skin ailments believed to be HIV/AIDS related.

Conclusions

This article has identified and examined the powerful imagery, metaphors and euphemisms that are used to talk about HIV/AIDS. It found that terms applying to people with, or suspected of having, HIV/AIDS drew associations with promiscuity, illness, death, denial and guilt. Dominant in such discourse is the blame assigned to people with HIV/AIDS, and assumptions made about their sexual behaviour. Stigma is highly pervasive and found in various forms.

The description of stigma in Zimbabwean languages is by no means complete. There is an urgent need for a fuller and comprehensive study of the linguistic construction of stigma in Ndebele and in Zimbabwean English.

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Table 1: Summary of words used to describe the HIV/AIDS disease

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
chakapedza mbudzi	That which destroyed the goats	Death resulting from unreasonable behaviour, this is emanating from the feeding behaviour of goats, they eat anything...
chakauya ichi	The one that came/from the outside	Foreign disease
chazezesa	A thing that is dreaded	Dreaded disease
chipedza nyika	One that destroys the country	HIV/AIDS destroys the entire nation
chirwere	Disease	The meaning of disease has thus been extended to refer to HIV/AIDS
chirwere chepabonde	A disease resulting from sex	Sexually transmitted disease
gukurahundi	Storm that sweeps away the chuff after harvesting	Refers to the destructive nature of the disease
jemedza	That which makes you cry	Sad times awaiting
malaria enyika	Malaria of the country	Serious disease
mukondombera	Plague	Refers to the gravity and seriousness of HIV/AIDS
mupedza vanhu	One that destroys the people	the exterminator of people
mupedzanyika	That which destroys the country	Refer to effect of HIV on a country
mupurirapasi	One that knocks you down	Deadly disease

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new sero	New sero status	This term has to do with sero-positive status
nyowani	A new disease	Modern day disease
shuramatongo	Abandoned homestead, scene of catastrophe	HIV/AIDS because it wipes out entire families
tsono	Needle	Painful disease as in the prick of a needle
utachiwana	Virus	The meaning of utachiwana 'virus' has been extended to refer to the HIV virus. A virus that makes the body so weak that it is unable to fight off opportunistic diseases that it would easily resist if it is not immunodeficient
zvemazuva ano	Of the modern/present day	Modern day disease

Table 2: Summary of words used to describe the physical appearance of people with HIV/AIDS

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
chisveta munyepfu	Flesh sucker	HIV/AIDS which sucks life out
gwembe	Skin ailment that is difficult to cure	Skin ailment – incurable as in HIV/AIDS
kacheche	baby	Infected person now appearing like a baby
kugeza neruredzo	Bathing with plant mucilage	Referring to the state of the hair of an infected person...it becomes and loses the kinky look

mudonzvo	Walking stick	Those infected are referred as such because they walk the aid of a walking stick Effects of AIDS on the appearance of the hair, it loses its kinky look
pemu	Permed hair	
rusvava	baby	Looking like a baby, soft hair and small in size

Table 3: Summary of words used to describe the people thought to have self-inflicted HIV/AIDS

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
Akatenga stand	s/he bought a piece of land: a plot	Acquiring the disease is likened with applying for a piece of land, when it is ready for building then yakabuda 'it came out'- to refer to the symptoms of full blown AIDS once they appear.
Akakwira bhazi	s/he boarded a bus	To refer to the infection one has contracted, i.e analogy is with getting into a bus, and when the bus arrives bhazi rakasvika is when death comes
Akarohwa nematsotsi	s/he was beaten up by thieves, soldiers	Implications of wandering at night, you get beaten up by thieves, and similarly when you wander at night, you contract the HIV virus
Aiwanza magemu	s/he was involved in too many games	'games', here refers to promiscuous behaviour

Table 4: Words used in HIV/AIDS discourse to describe women

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
chirwere chepfambi	A prostitute's disease	Alludes to the fact that only promiscuous people get HIV/AIDS
mushonga wemakonz	Rat kill	Infected woman who infects a man: poisons him as in rat kill
UloMaSibanda	Ms. Sibanda	Woman of easy virtue

Table 5: Words used to refer to death and funerals

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
Ava mu'departures lounge'	s/he is now in the departures lounge	s/he is about to depart: die.
Manje manje masofa panze	Very soon, the couches will be outside	Refers to the culture of putting furniture outside of the house at funeral wakes.
Tinomunwira manje manje	Very soon we will be drinking beer for him/her	Referring to the beer drinking at the funeral ceremony

Table 6: Other words used in HIV/AIDS discourse

EXPRESSION	GLOSS	MEANING
akahakwa	s/he was caught	Not to blame, innocent victim
Go slow	Go slow	Debilitation effect of HIV/AIDS
Jehovha ndouyako	Lord I am coming there	Imminent death from HIV/AIDS