

## **The syntax and semantics of the verbs “to have sex” in Dholuo**

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*In most African societies, not only is sex a subject severely restricted in public discourse, but also, lexical choices in direct reference to sexual intercourse and sexual organs are allowed to feature only in periphrastic and euphemistic terms. Such terms, although derived from the lexical resources of the language just like any other expressions, are always, more often than not, culturally and socially constrained. This paper examines the syntax and semantics of Dholuo verbs which are semantically equivalent to the English verb “to have sex” with a view to identifying some culturally important aspects of sexual intercourse among the Luo people of Kenya. Adopting the view that societies operate with linguistic and cultural relativity to the extent that specific languages in their syntax, semantics, morphology and phonology in various degrees reflect distinctions which are culturally significant in their life, the paper rejects the linguistic determinism of the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis”, especially in its strong form. To enhance the appreciation of the meanings of the activities described by the verbs, meanings of related terms in the semantic field are outlined and an attempt at a cultural interpretation of the same is made. It is argued that the syntax and semantics of the verbs “to have sex” are not merely linguistic notions, but are also culturally and socially constrained such that the verbs that are used to express the act of sexual intercourse are reflective of the cultural beliefs, customs and ethos of, Joluo, the Luo people.*