

## **KENYAN POLITICAL PARTY SYMBOLS: AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND POLITICS IN DESIGN AND CHOICE OF SYMBOLS**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the symbolic design of Kenyan Political Party (KPP) symbols by analyzing 118 symbols drawn from officially registered parties. Using a semiotic framework supported by Critical Discourse Analysis, the study identifies the structural features, types of signs, semantic fields, and sense relations represented in these symbols. The analysis shows that KPP symbols are strategically crafted to convey associative meanings linked to ideology, regional identity, class positioning, religious values, and the lived experiences of ordinary citizens. The findings further reveal that symbols function not only as visual identifiers for voters—including those with low literacy levels—but also as tools for political persuasion and identity construction. Overall, the study demonstrates that KPP symbols carry layered linguistic and political meanings, making them central to the discursive practices of Kenyan electoral politics.

**Keywords:** CDA, Linguistic Manipulation, Political Symbols, Semantic Field, Semiotics

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper takes a linguistic perspective on Kenyan political party symbols. Generally, a symbol is a linguistic or semiotic sign that stands for something in an arbitrary convention-based way. This implies that all KPP names, KPP slogans, KPP symbols, and KPP colours are symbols, though this study confines itself to the image presented alongside a KPP name. Secondly, the multiplicity of symbols that inform the KPP is not only diverse but numerous; such cases of multiplicity are handled by the study. The study establishes that the choice of political symbol is a deliberate well through out matter that often involves an interplay between linguistics and politics. Whereas politics identifies a societal need, Language-Linguistics resources are manipulated to ascribe meanings to the Kenya political party (henceforth KPP) symbol. To achieve that, Critical Discourse Analysis and Semiotics Theory are applied to a dataset of 118 KPP symbols.

Effective mobilization tools, such as language, often spice up competition amongst the Kenyan political parties. Rozina and Karapetjana (2009) observe that linguistic manipulation and political discourse are primarily focused on persuading people to take specified political actions or to make crucial political decisions, such as shifting allegiance from one KPP to another by the use of culture-specific and galvanizing symbols. Kenyan politicians craft and then sell KPP symbols to voters, given that “a Kenyan politician is a master of deception (language manipulating) and will cover their tracks with genius” (Malande, 2013b). KPP symbols are studied as a semiotic sign with attendant conventional and connotative meaning analyzed.

The place of symbols in man's daily life cannot be overemphasized. Yet, despite the fact that man is basically a symbol-using organism, its role in KPP campaigns hasn't been thoroughly investigated from a linguistic point of view. In addressing this omission, the research finds that KPP symbols have an associative meaning, a definite structure that can be linguistically and politically manipulated in choice and design and are classified in semantic types and fields.

Research in Critical Discourse Analysis with the aspect of power, domination, and social inequality has involved Gender inequality, media discourse, political discourse, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and racism. This research confined itself to Political discourse Analysis. Political discourse analysis studies political text and talk, i.e. communicative acts which have "a direct functional role as a form of political action in the political process" (van Dijk 1997) and which are performed by political actors, mostly but not only "professional politicians such as presidents and prime ministers and other members of government, parliament or political parties" (van Dijk 1997). One of the principal goals of political discourse analysis, according to Wilson (2001), is to identify the many ways in which language can be used or manipulated by political actors to produce specific effects in the political realm. This, in the Kenyan case, may be achieved by manipulating lexical items (such as KPP symbols) to galvanize voters along ethnic voting blocs, complete with cultural symbols associated with certain ethnic or geographical locations. Van Dijk (1997) laid out an "integrated approach" which this study adopts, which goes beyond a purely language-based analysis of speeches by examining the functionality of the observed discursive practices in their wider political context. Linguistic choices on the syntactic level of language can be covert operations, i.e., operations that might go unnoticed by the listener or reader because they "lie beneath the threshold of consciousness" (Butt 2004). Choices on the lexical level of language, on the other hand, tend to be more or less overt operations, in the sense that they rarely go fully unnoticed by the listener or reader since they lie above the threshold of consciousness. Both overt and covert operations, however, can be used to political effect and exert the desired influence on public opinion. Words with positive connotations are used to describe the in-group and its qualities, whereas words with negative connotations evoke the out-group and its supposed shortcomings and faults. These antonymous lexical sets are often made up of "moral value vocabulary" (see Chilton 2004). These words help to establish a dichotomy between a moral we versus an immoral them. Antonyms are therefore used where one group expresses itself as the end opposite of the other. Indeed, language and the quasi-infinite number of linguistic choices it offers political actors among the rules and components of its levels allow for the expression of differing and even opposing worldviews and values. In this study, I considered these ideas while analyzing the linguistic strategies at the syntactic, lexical, and semantic levels and the attendant political discourses employed by Kenyan politicians while crafting, designing, creating, and choosing KPP symbols as explained in the data analysis section.

Semiotics Theory, as espoused by Martin & Ringham (2000:1-13), guides us through this study. The term semiotics is derived from the Greek word semeton, denoting 'sign'. Already in the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke referred to semtottfea, which he defined as 'the Doctrine of Signs; the business whereof is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others. In modern usage, the concept of semiotics refers to a theory of

signification. Semiotics, in fact, has a much wider aim: the theory purports to explore the generation of signification, any signification, not only that of the written word, meaning in all its guises, and to its full extent. Semiotics thus covers all disciplines and signifying systems as well as social practices and signifying procedures. Dobrovolsky (2005:557-559) opines that communication relies on using something to stand for something else. Words are obvious examples of this. Each of these things that stand for other things is technically known as a sign. The sign consists of two parts: a signifier, be it a word, a scent, a gesture, or an electrical frequency, and the signified, something that exists in the real world and that is mentally represented by a sign's conceptual content. Because they are conceptual, all signs are associated with a meaning, such as 'danger' or 'item of furniture with legs and a flat top.' Individual instances of signs are called tokens. For example, in the sentence, the politician bribed the voter; there are five word tokens but only four signs. 'The' occurs twice as a token, but it is the same sign in both instances. Dobrovolsky (2005) calls the study of signs in semiotics linked to disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, zoology, genetics, literary study, and computer science. An understanding of signs is essential for understanding how messages are transmitted. We humans, use signs (names, slogans, and symbols) just like animals do, though with considerably more elaboration. We stop at RED lights and go on green; we answer calls and bells, watch the sky for coming storms, and read trouble or promise in each other's eyes. A sign is, therefore, anything that announces the existence or the imminence of some event, the presence of a thing or a person, or a change in the state of affairs. In every case, a sign is closely bound up with something to be noted or expected in experience.

KPP names, KPP slogans, KPP colours, and KPP symbols are studied as meaningful semiotic signs. Semiotics Theory, therefore, enables us to ascribe and decipher both denotative and associative meanings inherent in KPP names, KPP slogans, KPP colours, and KPP symbols.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design combining semiotic and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine political parties' symbols in Kenya. The research data were KPP names, KPP slogans, KPP colors and KPP symbols of political parties obtained from the official website, political documents, and media publications. Semiotic analysis was done using Roland Barthes as the main theory, focusing on denotation and connotation to reveal the literal meaning as well as the cultural and ideological meaning embedded in the symbol design. This approach enables the researcher to understand how the visual choice, such as color, icon, or specific shape, builds the identity and political message that the parties want to be constructed by the parties.

Then, to analyze the construction of ideology and the power relations behind the symbols, this study employed Critical Discourse Analysis from Fairclough's framework. CDA was used to read how those symbols work as a medium of political discourse represents the value or the position in the social context of Kenya. The analysis was done by correlating the visual text (symbol), the society's interpretation, and the social-political practice. The validity was obtained through triangulation, source and repeat checking of visual and textual data to ensure the meaning interpreted from those data.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

#### *Structure And Types of KPP Symbols*

This analysis uses the semiotics theory and Dobrovolsky's (2005:557-9) views. Dobrovolsky divides signs into three basic types depending on: 'whether the signifier naturally resembles its referent, whether the signifier is directly linked with the referent in a physical or mechanical sense, and whether the signifier and the referent are arbitrarily associated.' He comes up with four types, namely iconic, indexical, symptomatic and symbolic signs (see semiotics theory above). Of the 118 KPP symbols (see appendix), 109 are symbolic signs (symbols that bear an arbitrary relationship to the KPP name), 6 are iconic, and 5 are indexical, whereas one is symptomatic.

**Table 1. The Basic Types of KPP Symbols**

Types of Signs	Description	Example of Sign	Example of Referent
Symbolic Signs	Arbitrary association between symbol and referent	109	Umbrella, cup, tree, star, pot
Iconic Signs	Physical resemblance to the referent	6	Orange (ODM), rainbow, traditional torch
Indexical Signs	Partial or physical indication of referent	5	Maize plant, handcuffs, bicycle
Symptomatic Signs	Spontaneous expression of internal meaning/value	1	Sheep/lamb (religious connotation)

#### *Semantic Fields of KPP Symbols*

This section presents an analysis of the denotative or literal meanings of KPP symbols. To achieve these meanings, the symbols are grouped into several semantic fields to show relatedness. Jurafsky & Martin (2009:648) consider the notion of a semantic field as an attempt to capture a more integrated, or holistic relationship among an entire set of words from a single domain. Akmajian (2001) observes that a general and intuitive description is that words in a semantic field are not synonymous, but are all used to talk about the same general phenomenon. According to the semantic field theory, 'a meaning of a word is dependent partly on its relation to other words in the same conceptual area' (Hintikka, 1994). The kinds of semantic fields vary from culture to culture, and anthropologists use them to study belief systems and reasoning across cultural groups (Akmajian, 2001:239). The semantic field of a given word shifts over time. Further, semantic shifts of loaned words may lead to complications.

This study investigates the semantic fields and the semantic shift phenomena in Kenyan political party names, grouping them against their symbols. The KPP obtains several denotations that are grouped in these semantic fields:

**Table 2. The Semantic Fields in KPP Symbols**

<b>Semantic Field</b>	<b>Representative Symbols</b>	<b>Literal (Denotative) Meaning</b>
Animals (wild & domestic)	Lion, elephant, rhino, rabbit	Strength, leadership, agility, identity
Plants & farm products	Maize, banana, coconut tree, flower	Agriculture, growth, prosperity
Everyday tools & utensils	Hoe, pot, ladder, broom	Work, livelihood, support
Transport & communication	Car, radio, bicycle, mobile phone	Movement, progress, accessibility
Human body & gestures	Handshake, two fingers, raised hand	Unity, victory, democracy
Light-related symbols	Torch, candle, bulb, lantern	Enlightenment, guidance, change
Sports & games	Trophy, football, athlete	Achievement, teamwork
Fruits	Orange, banana	Fertility, revolution, abundance
Music & sound objects	Drum, trumpet, whistle	Voice, rhythm, mobilization
Furniture & household items	Chair, stool, table	Dialogue, stability, everyday
Geographical features	Compass	Direction, guidance
Currency-related symbols	Dollar	Wealth, economy
Miscellaneous symbols	Key, padlock, anchor, umbrella	Security, new beginnings, protection

### ***KPP Symbols Connotative Meanings***

This section examines associative meaning in KPP symbols. We brought out these meanings using ST, SIT, and Whorfian relativity theories. Langer (1997) opines that a symbol is a sign that stands for something in an arbitrary convention-based way and that symbolic meanings are all established by social meaning,s which are all established by social convention, and thus cannot be figured out directly, e.g., of connotation. Furthermore, Indede (2009) opines that the production and interpretation of such texts (KPP symbols) are social actions. We present KPP names alongside their symbols and symbol meanings.

**Table 3. The Common Connotative Themes in KPP Symbols**

Connotative Theme	Interpretation	Examples of Symbols
Common people's identity	Relating to daily life and familiar objects	Pot, hoe, cup, gourd
Change and transformation	Movement toward a new political direction	Torch, rising sun, spade, bulb
Unity and togetherness	Cooperation and collective identity	Handshake, two doves, two people
Strength and authority	Power, leadership, resilience	Lion, rhino, eagle
Cultural/regional identity	Use of symbols tied to ethnic or location-specific imagery	Coconut tree, shark, camel
Moral and religious values	Purity, sacrifice, righteousness	Lamb, ark, candle
Hope and enlightenment	Light as a metaphor for guidance	Lantern, bulb, candle
Movement and progress	Forward motion, mobility	Bicycle, car, train, airplane

Several linguistic strategies are employed in KPP symbol choice and deployment. These linguistic choices are made easy by borrowing a lot from the CDA theory. Using this lens, it becomes apparent that symbols function as discursive tools that allow political actors to position themselves in particular ways within the social and political landscape. Several patterns in the data illustrate how symbolism is strategically deployed to convey identity, values, and political intentions. For instance, parties often employ symbols that align with ideological orientations, such as agricultural, environmental, or religious themes. These symbols—such as maize cobs, trees, flowers, or doves—serve to associate parties with concepts like productivity, environmental care, purity, or peace, depending on the constituency they intend to appeal to.

## Discussion

### *Linguistic Manipulation in KPP Symbol Design*

The analysis reveals that Kenyan political parties often use symbols in strategic and intentional ways that reflect linguistic choices aligned with political goals. Drawing on insights from Critical Discourse Analysis, the design of political symbols can be understood as a discursive act in which parties construct certain identities, values, or ideological positions, as proposed by some experts (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In this sense, the symbols do not merely function as visual identifiers but as communicative tools meant to influence voter perception and mobilize support. This finding aligns with previous studies on political semiotics which state that visual signs function as persuasive resources rather than neutral representations (Kress & Van

Leeuwen, 2006). Many parties employ imagery that resonates with everyday life, agrarian activities, or cultural associations, allowing them to project values such as productivity, community, unity, or moral integrity. Thus, KPP symbols extend beyond mere visual markers and function as meaningful symbols intended to influence voter perception.

### ***Ideological And Social Positioning Through Symbol Choice***

One prominent pattern is the use of symbols that reflect ideological orientations, such as agricultural prosperity, environmental protection, or religious values. Symbols like maize cobs, flowers, trees, or doves indicate an attempt to align party identity with values such as growth, purity, environmentalism, or peace. This finding has a relation with the theory proposed by Barthes (1972) which states that symbols acquire ideological meaning through cultural association. Similar findings have been reported in studies of party branding, where visual elements are used to project moral authority or ideological consistency (Scammel, 2015). In some cases, symbols are chosen to evoke familiarity with particular social groups, reinforcing the idea that parties are aligned with the needs or experiences of ordinary citizens.

### ***Regional And Cultural Identity***

The data also shows that symbolic choices often reflect regional identities, and this finding aligns with Blommaert (2010), which reveals the regional symbols in emphasizing the role of locality and cultural context in meaning construction. Parties with strong local bases tend to adopt symbols tied to ethnic or geographical contexts, such as coastal imagery (e.g., shark, coconut tree). These symbols help the party resonate with local cultural narratives and strengthen ties with specific communities. Previous research on African political communication suggests that regional symbolism is often employed to mobilize ethnic or local solidarity in electoral politics (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). In this regard, KPP symbols operate as cultural signifiers that strengthen emotional and political ties between parties and regionally defined constituencies. This demonstrates how symbols act as cultural anchors within Kenya's diverse sociopolitical landscape, where regional identity frequently intersects with political affiliation.

### ***Class-Based Symbolism***

Class-related distinctions also emerge. Some symbols signal elite status (e.g., airplanes), while others relate to working-class or everyday life (e.g., hoe, stool, bicycle). These symbols help construct narratives about inclusion, solidarity, or class-based appeal. Similar observations have been made in studies of populist political imagery, where symbols associated with ordinary livelihoods are used to signal proximity to grassroots communities (Moffitt, 2016). By selecting symbols associated with ordinary livelihood, parties can position themselves as aligned with grassroots communities or engaged with socioeconomic concerns.

### ***Onomatopoetic And Name-Related Symbolism***

Another observed strategy is the use of symbols that directly relate to party names. Kress and Leeuwen (2006) also stated about the alignment between party names and symbols that reflects principles of semiotic cohesion and multimodal coherence. Research

on political branding highlights that name symbol correspondence strengthens party recognition and reinforces identity consistency (Lilleker, 2014). This simplifies recognition, especially for voters with limited literacy. Examples include oranges for ODM or the “77” symbol for Saba Saba Asili. These choices demonstrate the functional role of symbols in the voting process while reinforcing party identity through visual - verbal alignment.

### ***Symbols as Tools of Electoral Accessibility***

Beyond ideological communication, symbols serve a practical purpose in Kenya’s electoral context. They help voters—particularly those with limited reading skills—identify parties on ballots. Scholars also argue that visual signs play a crucial role in political participation in multilingual and low-literacy societies (Street, 2001). Objects such as radios, cars, torches, or steering wheels become accessible markers that connect visual recognition with political choice. This highlights the dual communicative role of symbols: ideological messaging and functional accessibility.

### ***Symbol Contests And Identity Negotiation***

Finally, the data shows that symbols can become contested resources. From a CDA perspective, struggles over symbolic ownership reflect broader power relations within political discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Cases such as the ODM vs. ODM-K distinction illustrate how slight variations in symbol design (e.g., using a full orange versus one-and-a-half oranges) can signal internal political disputes or legitimacy struggles. This demonstrates that symbols carry significant weight in defining party identity and thus become part of broader political negotiations and rivalry.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study on the symbols of political parties in Kenya showed that elections and their strategy are not an unstructured process, but rather a semiotic act with deep strategy and ideological concern. Through the frame of Critical Discourse Analysis and semiotic theory, it has been demonstrated that symbols work as a communication tool of politics, conveying identity, value, and social parties’ orientation implicitly. Those symbols are related to the context of culture, social classes, areas, and specific beliefs, so that they can build either emotional closeness or collective identity among the parties and the group of choosers.

Either function as visual markers on the election process, symbols also play a crucial role in bridging the diversity in the literacy level of the voters, ease the process of parties’ identification, or strengthen the political image that they want to build. The choice of symbols related to either the society’s everyday life, working tools, cultural objects, or religious concepts shows how the parties use linguistic and semiotic strategies to shape public perception. In point of fact, the debate and the competition related to the use of specific symbols indicate that symbols have significant political value as identity markers. As a whole, this finding emphasized that the political parties’ symbols in Kenya have a structured meaning that can be manipulated linguistically and politically. Additionally, these symbols become a part of the integral and practice of communication as well as political competition in this country.

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