

## Irony as a Literary Stylistic Device in Amos's Choice of Metaphors: reading from the perspective of the Tigrigna Proto-Semitic Language

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### Abstract

This article investigates irony as a literary stylistic device in the book and analyses the effect of irony on the likely complex metaphor texts read in the perspective of the Tigrigna Proto-Semitic language (see Appendix A). In the introduction, the state of scholarship on literary and rhetorical devices and theories of irony and metaphor have been reviewed. In the two following sections, irony is distinguished as a literary stylistic device in the book; and engaging the language and culture of Eritrea, selected ironic metaphors (4:1–3; 5:1–3; 5:18–20; 7:7–8; 8:1–3) are analysed and interpreted for the possible meanings in the integrated Tigrigna language and culture (TGN) versions. In Eritrea, in Tigrigna ethnic, figures of speech—irony and metaphor are part of their culture and we have chosen to read Amos through Eritrean eyes.

### Keywords

Ironic metaphors; Irony; Figurative languages; Linguistics approach; Prophets' speech; Pro-Semitic languages

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## 1. Introduction

The language of Amos is dominated by figures of speech. Good's (1980) systematic focus on irony in the OT has caused many biblical scholars to work on irony in biblical literature. Recently, a few studies have been done on irony as a figure of speech in the book of Amos.

Irony, ቅኔ (qinie), in the Amharic language is classified into two ሰም (sem) and ወርቅ (werq) where ሰም (sem) reads the sentence literally and (werq, meaning 'gold') compares the meaning of the sentence to mining for gold. Conceptually, irony, ቅኔ (qinie), is understood in Tigrigna the same way as it is in Amharic. Metaphor, in Tigrigna culture, is a figure of speech by which speakers introduce any issue, to draw the attention of the audience as well as to unpack briefly the importance of the package. Moreover, irony, another figure of speech, is introduced when a speaker wants to say something specific, but communicates it in a colourful way of speaking, which we call ቡሕሉል (respectful words) ላዛ ዘለዎ ዘረባ kind words) in Tigrigna. Tigrigna tradition has been much influenced by the Old Testament lifestyle, as in marriage, death, religion, language and so on. The sister Semitic languages, Geez, Amharic and Tigre, could articulate something in common, out of unity in diversity, to minimise the gap in understanding the texts of the Scriptures. The research has identified and defined the well-known figurative languages, which may include metaphor, simile, personification, irony, metonymy, symbol and synecdoche as conceptual thoughts in order to clearly identify irony in the book of Amos. The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine the possibility of interpreting the biblical ironies and ironic metaphors found in the book of Amos in the context of Tigrigna language and culture (TGN) in an integrated reading of the two Tigrigna Bible versions.

## 2. Scholarship on Literary, Rhetorical Devices and Irony in the Book of Amos

### 2.1 Literary and Rhetorical Devices

Some examples of devices, structuring the book as literary, rhetorical strategies and poetic techniques, done by Mays (1969), Andersen and Freedman (1970), Stuart (1987), Hayes (1988), Smith (1989), Noble (1995), Hubbard, Bramer himself, and Limburg (Bramer 1999), Möller (2000) and others portray in the scholarship to understand the message of the book, have contributed a lot in building the small library of the book of Amos.

However, the function of figurative languages in the communication has not been investigated in the techniques and organisational patterns as interpretive strategy to understand the message of the book.

## 2.2 Defining Irony

Unlike other figures of speech, irony is not easily identified, and it is more difficult to comprehend its meaning in the Scriptures. A text with irony makes it more complex for the implied reader to understand the speaker's utterance, than it does for the intended audience, that could at least associate the appropriate irony of their time with its techniques of communication for better interpretation.

According to Duke, irony can be described as 'beautiful, brilliant, inviting, sometimes comic, sometimes cruel, [and] always enigmatic' (1985:8). Stable irony is intended or created deliberately (Booth 1974:5). Duke, considering Booth's stable irony perception, argues that irony is unintended (Duke 1985:19). According to Lee, 'situational irony is the presentation of events in which there are incompatibilities of which at least one person is unaware' (Lee 1988:32). Dramatic irony is the irony of theatre, but it could be abundantly present in any narrative too (Duke 1985:23). Amos (5:19) presents the judgmental oracle in a dramatic way, but the dramatic irony behaves as verbal irony (Duke 1985:23). Verbal irony might be accomplished in numerous ways. Duke defines irony as a literary device which has 'a double-levelled literary phenomenon in which two tiers of meaning stand in some opposition to each other and in which some degree of unawareness is expressed or implied' (1985:7). Colebrook proposes that 'irony—the possibility that what we say might be read for what it means rather than what we say—is the very possibility of meaning' (2000:24, 25).

Patricia S Han observes that verbal irony, in contrast to the approach of psycholinguistics, linguistics anthropology and literary critics, does not exclude a discursive attitude of irony or the use of language (2002:31). These approaches may be distinguished in the level of discourse, sentence and text (2002:31).

Sharp addresses the problem that 'the literature is so vast that reviewing it comprehensively would be impossible ... to cover theories of irony in the discipline of philosophy' (2009:11). According to Christian Burgers, Margot van Mulken and Peter Jan Schellens (2011:187), studies on how verbal irony has been understood in recent years have contributed little information, and no systematic identification of irony has yet been developed.

In this study, however, we focus on verbal irony, based on Duke's definition, as a method, in identifying irony as a literary stylistic device, and a literary interpretive strategy on selected complex texts, ironic metaphors, in the book of Amos

## 2.3 Review of Current Theological Perspectives of Irony in the Book of Amos

**2.3.1 Shelly** (1992) has made a great effort to focus systematically on irony in the book of Amos. Shelly combines the literary approach with the form-critical and traditio-historical methods to identify irony in Amos (1992:7). She is more interested in reading the text as a persuasive tool to prove that irony is part of rhetoric (1992:4). According to Shelly, the social and historical setting which depends upon the author and audience determines irony (1992:26). The ironic art of Amos includes 'the use of conventional speech forms, traditions and other literary conventions like rhetorical questions, metaphors and wordplay' (1992:154). Shelly suggests that 'irony in Amos is shaped by a literary analysis of the text which is sensitive to the rhetorical dimensions of prophetic speech ... as communicative discourse' (1992:62).

**Sharp** (2009) in her study of irony in the Hebrew Bible, sees the textual irony in rhetorical and theological hermeneutics (2009:9). On the rhetorical side, she believes that the spoken ironic is better understood than a 'naïvely realistic reading of their plots and characters and rhetorics'. Sharp, believing her definition is neither static nor substitutional, affirms that the appropriateness, significance, and meanings of irony depend on the reader's understanding of the texts (2009:25).

**Domeris** has recently published an article on 'Shades of irony in the anti-language of Amos' (2016:1).

The language of Amos could be described as 'a wonderful mixture of humour and threat, sarcasm and irony, hyperbole and prediction' (2016:1). According to Domeris anti-language 'is more than an alternative reality; it is language in conscious opposition to a dominant group' (2016:2). Domeris (2016:2), considering the development of the use of the notion of 'anti-language', 'anti-society', 'insider-outsider' and a notion of prophetic 'opposition group' by several scholars, uses 'anti-language' in his articles (1994, 1999) on Jeremiah to illustrate that Jeremiah, like Amos, 'in defence of his position as a member of the Yahweh-only party ... used irony, satire, sarcasm, humour and deliberate distortion to achieve his purpose' (1994:9–14).

The effect of anti-language and the dominance of irony are vital to understanding the book of Amos (Domeris 2016:7). Anti-language allows us to appreciate and see in the book of Amos a unified text and its irony as a means to an end (2016:7). The shades of irony in the book of Amos encourage us theologically to hope with the insiders, and share the promise to the outsiders as well (2016:7).

### 3. Understanding Metaphors in the Book of Amos

Amos was called to declare YHWH's indictments accompanied by judgment against Israel and the surrounding nations. In his style, he uses metaphor as a rhetorical device, which merely concerns the house of Israel. In contrast to metaphors used in the book of Jeremiah and other prophets, metaphors in Amos signify the explicit, implicit and complex nature of biblical metaphors which demonstrate a theological contribution to the book. The author identifies the following metaphors as ironical prefiguring in the book of Amos (4:1–3; 5:1–3; 5:18–20; 7:7–8; 8:1–3). Hermanson (2006:2) has done research evaluating how metaphors in the book of Amos are translated into the recent Zulu Bible translation based on theories concerning the possibility of the translation of metaphor from one language to another.

Metaphor, which was understood as a rhetorical and ornamental device, has embraced a wide area of different theories, approaches and aspects in recent years. The 'theory-substitution view' by Aristotle (384–322 BC), 'interactive theory of metaphor' by Richards (1936:93), 'a system of associated commonplaces' and 'an interaction theory' by Black (1962), 'Cognitive theory of metaphor' by Lakoff and Johnson (1985), and 'Perspectival Theory' by Kittay (1990) have led modern scholarship to focus on the effectiveness of the figure of speech in determining the interpretation of the text.

The function of irony in metaphoric texts is a negation, overstatement or understatement of the concept of the metaphor. Hence, the metaphor should be read opposite to its meaning norm either in a positive or negative aspect of its concept. By positive or negative aspect we mean the way irony exemplified itself in violating the metaphor. Mathematically, irony could be represented in an ironic metaphor statement as a sign of inequalities in front of the metaphor ( $\pm$ ) where (+) indicates an overstatement or understatement and (–) indicates negation. However, the effect of irony in the interpretation still depends on the kind of metaphor on which it acts. Metaphors are expressed, generally, as the opposite of similes.

A metaphor unlike a simile, in its simplest meaning, engages ‘the substitution of one word or phrase (vehicle) instead of another (tenor)’ (Lee 1988:51). However, the substitution may be positively or negatively engaged in the literary art.

#### 4. Irony as a Literary Stylistic Device in the Book of Amos

In our survey, we have discovered at least nine figures of speech; and irony has been used in the book very frequently. This shows that Amos’s discourses were much influenced by the stylistic device of irony. Beyond ironised figures of thought, ironic metaphor, ironic simile, ironic wordplay and irony use of rhetorical, irony has been used in its diverse characteristics as ‘irony of encouragement’ (4:4–5), ‘irony of mockery’ (4:4–5), ‘irony of benediction’ (4:4–5), ‘irony of ambiguity’ (4:6–11), ‘irony of doxology’ (4:13, 5:8–9, 9:5–6) and ‘dramatic or situational irony’ (5:18–20; 6:9–10; 8:4–6; 9:1). Stylistically, one can observe how much the expression of irony has dominated the oracles of Amos. For the sake of our main focus, we have listed only *ironic metaphors*.

We have engaged integrated approaches to analyse the interpretive meaning of each selected text, (4:1–3; 5:1–3; 5:18–20; 7:7–8 and 8:1–3), as *ironic metaphor*. To establish the order of interpreting the two intermingled figures, metaphor and irony, we have applied *metaphor first order* approach based on Popa’s (2010) methodology

##### 4.1. ‘Cows of Bashan’ (Amos 4:1-3)

The passage has been a field of argument in linguistics’ approach in recent scholarship by Terence Kleven (1996), Emmanuel O Nwaoru (2009) and the latest study by Brian Irwin (2012).

In verse 1, ‘the Cows of Bashan’ which are indicted for oppressing the poor, crushing the needy and engaging their lords for drinking, have the restriction of human agents, and human victims. Hence, the verse in itself constitutes a semantic incongruity. The ‘Cows of Bashan’ are associated with the people of Israel in Samaria. In verse 2, the words אֲתָכֶם and עַלְיָכֶם describe the person to whom they are addressed as masculine. In verse 3 the verbs תִּצְאֶנָּה and הִשְׁלַכְתֶּנָּה stand for feminine. In the Tigrigna language, both versions describe the addressee as feminine. The addressees are called masculine and feminine interchangeably in the Hebrew Bible. These addressees will be carried away with hooks, and the last of them with fishing hooks, which by itself looks like another

fresh metaphor; there is no incongruity in the statement for it lacks a vehicle. Reading verses 2 and 3 in the light of verse 1, the sense of the context can be read better. Hence, Amos 4:1–3 is incongruous, since it involves two semantic fields (humans and animals), which is a particularity of a metaphor.

Nevertheless, what makes the text ironic? Is Amos concerned about the Cows of Bashan literally? The text adds a description of who these ‘Cows of Bashan’ are. Looking at the construction of the sentences, we can speculate who the cows are. Firstly, the cows are on the mountain of Samaria. This on its own could lead someone to contemplate literally that the ‘Cows of Bashan’ were taken and placed on the mountain of Samaria. Secondly, the next three clauses, ‘who oppress the poor, who crush the needy and who say to their lords “bring and let us drink,”’ demonstrate, however, that the cows, assuming a human nature, subjugate human beings, the poor and the needy and talk to their chiefs, behaviour which no one expects in animals. Hence, ‘what is said’ is not true, overestimated, pretended, and ‘what is meant’ should be examined to find the truth ironically.

In Tigrigna and sister languages Tigre, Amharic and Ge’ez, the text has been constructed differently, in that Tigrigna, Amharic and Ge’ez address the ‘Cows of Bashan’ directly. In translating the word ማገሻ both Tigrigna versions and Tigre use ስምዓ (hear) in female gender plural. In Amharic ስም (hear) is used for female, male; and for both female and male genders as plural.

However, in Ge’ez, ስምዑ (hear) has been translated faithfully to the Masoretic Text (MT) in number and gender. The Tigrigna old version and Amharic translate the text in feminine gender, but address ‘the Cows of Bashan.’ The Tigre and Tigrigna new version, however, address the women of Samaria who behaved like ‘Cows of Bashan.’ The TGN new version adds a description of ከም ኣሓ ባሳን ዝሰባሕኩን who fattened like Cows of Bashan) beyond the unwanted characteristics the cows demonstrate in the text. The TGN old version has changed the word ማገሻ ስምዑ (hear), masculine and or collective female and male gender, into ስምዓ (hear) in female gender plural to make the text agree grammatically, and remains faithful to the MT in that the addressees are the Cows of Bashan unlike in the TGN new version.

From the integrated TGN versions and the culture of the Tigrigna people in Eritrea, the text reads that Amos is addressing his usual audience in female gender to demean their honour, and describing them as fattened cows to overemphasise their prosperity. In

Tigrigna, Semitic in origin, when someone either male or female addresses another male using the feminine form, it is an intolerable shame for that person. A Tigrigna speaker has no problem to clearly understand Luke 13:32 *τη αλωπεκι ταυτη* | ነዛ ወኸርያ ... ባለቀ 'Go and tell that fox' (Luke 13:32 NIV) where Christ demeans the king by calling him in the feminine gender. Tigrigna sister languages do this in the same manner.

Hence, the interpretive analysis of our study shows, that Amos's stylistic device of irony in the metaphorical complexity of the 'Cows of Bashan,' portrays an alternative addressee of Amos's domain: Israel, the people of Israel, house of Israel, house of Jacob, Isaac, Jacob, and house of Jeroboam—as representative of the kingdom. Amos uses the character of the animal imagery 'Cows of Bashan' to represent the injustice of the prosperous nation. The ironic metaphor, 'Cows of Bashan,' however, disparages the oppressors, addressing them with a female gender before the coming judgment of the Lord.

#### 4.2 The Virgin Israel Ironic Metaphor (Amos 5:1-3)

Many scholarly works consider Amos chapter 5 as a formal lamentation. In Eritrea, the events in Amos 5:1, 16–17 are very typical of Hebrew traditions. All Tigrigna sister languages, Tigre, Ge'ez, Amharic and Tigrigna translate *תְּוִלָּה* as a common word *ድንግል* (virgin). In Tigrigna culture and language, the word *ድንግል* (virgin) designates a unique quality of a faithful girl, who is a symbol of purity and sacredness.

In the TGN culture, a man expects his bride to be *ሰብኣይ ዘይፈለገ ድንግል* (no man had ever known her sexually). In Tigrigna marriage culture *ድንግል* (virgin) shows the identity of a faithful girl morally and the nobility of a family and a community.

*לְאִשׁוֹ תְּוִלָּה*. is an indication of the unadulterated quality of the people of Israel metaphorically. However, calling the corrupted nation *תְּוִלָּה*. is an expression of negation, belittling the nation ironically. Hence, this enabled us to comprehend the text as an *ironic metaphor* that the adulterated Israel had fallen in judgment in her land. Amos's lamentation for 'Israel's virgin' tragedy, contrary to tradition, has also got an expression of *ironic metaphor*. In Tigrigna culture, *መልቀስ* (lamentation) is very typical of the Hebrew tradition up to the present.

#### 4.3 The Day of Darkness and not Light Ironic Metaphor (5:18-20)

The day of the LORD has been treated differently by scholars in the last hundred years. There has been widespread disagreement

among scholars concerning the concept and origin of **הַיְהוָה יוֹם**. The concept of **הַיְהוָה יוֹם** which was considered as a departure text, has not been investigated fully in Amos 5:18–20. The problem revolves around three characteristics of the day: its origin, concept and phrase formula.

Both TGN versions agree in translating the **הַיְהוָה יוֹם** formula as **መዓልተ እግዚአብሔር** (the day of God). Another TGN version, deuterocanonical books in Tigrigna which is called **ሰማንያ አሃዱ** (eighty-one), translates the formula in the same way. The phrase ‘that day or it is for you a *day* of darkness not a *day* of light’ in the Tigrigna new version reading indicates clearly that the day of the LORD is different to other events. The TGN new version approves Amos’s claim that **መዓልተ እግዚአብሔር** (day of the Lord) is **መዓልተ ፍርዲ** (day of Judgment). The word **ወይለኹም** (woe to you) for **יוֹם** is specifically translated to announce judgment, not for lamentation, in Tigrigna Scriptures, instead. The word **ወዮ** (woe) and the phrase **ዋዩ ዋይ** (alas, alas) or (ho, ho) are differently used for judgment and lamentation respectively. The scholarly work of the TGN new version specifies that the reading of the old should be read with the concept of the ‘day of the Lord’ as a coin with two faces, **መዓልተ ጸልማት** (day of darkness) and **መዓልተ ብርሃን** (day of light). Hence, Tigrigna reads the day of the Lord as **ብርሃን** (light) and **ጸልማት** (darkness) from the narrative of Amos, considering that the two parties, Amos and his audience are in conflict about the expectation, not about the concept of the day of the Lord.

Literarily, Amos starts his oracle by condemning the perspective of the people on **הַיְהוָה יוֹם**. Regardless of the condemnation of the longing of the people, Amos, in his stylistic manner of presentation, in dramatic-simile narration, intensifies the complexity of the structure of the text ironically. Semantically, the text could be read as a metaphor. The day of the Lord is represented by darkness, by rhetorical drama that assumes inescapable calamity and by an exaggerated nature of darkness (Exod 10:21). Contextually, the conceptual day in Amos is a specific day of the Lord that will behave figuratively as rhetorical drama of calamity and the darkness nature of the season. Hence, the semantic mapping of metaphor, the exaggerated and the intensified presentation, irony, of the concept of YHWH make the utterance *ironic metaphor*. Therefore, the people were not deceived in their understanding of **הַיְהוָה יוֹם**, but were not qualified for that day to be light in the context of Amos.

#### **4.4 The Plumb line Ironic Metaphor (7:7-9)**

YHWH holding a plumb line in the third vision of Amos serves as a metaphor. In the TGN old version, the meaning of the phrase መለክዒ መንደቕ (measuring a wall) is as obscure as it is in the Hebrew Bible. The new TGN version, however, modifies this into መለክዒ መንደቕ ገመድ (a rope for measuring a wall). This modification could also mean two things, a rope that may be extended horizontally to keep the line of the wall straight or a vertical rope that is kept down by a metal object called በምቦ, 'bembo' a word adopted from the Italian language, meaning 'a plumb'.

Using በምቦ (a plumb) to measure a wall ኣብ ልኩዕ መንደቕ (on a plumbed wall) or ኣብቲ ብመለክዒ ተተኸኺሉ ዝተሠረሐ መንደቕ (on the wall that was built precise for plumbing) in the TGN old and TGN new versions, respectively, confuses Tigriana readers, in that the versions paint the picture of the Lord testing the wall by standing on another erected wall.

Another obscure phrase of the text, ንመለክዒ መንደቕ ኣብ ማእከል ህዝበይ እስራኤል ከንብሮ እየ, (I will put the plumb line in the midst of my people Israel), has been modified to በዚ ገይረ፣ ሕዝበይ መሥመሩ ከም ዝኃደገ መንደቕ ምኽኛም ከርኢ እየ (I will show using this that my people are like a wall that has gone out from its line) which TGN readers understand exactly, that when 'a wall has gone out of its line' the wall should be demolished. Hence, our study confirms that the wall represents the people of Israel (7:8) who were to be destroyed (7:9), but not completely.

The emphatic expression of the vision denotes the ironic effects of the metaphor conceptually, and could only be expressed as an *ironic metaphor*.

#### **4.5. The Basket of Summer Fruit Ironic Metaphor (8:1-3)**

In my native language, ዘንቢል (basket) has been used as a bag for shopping, carrying fruits, trading seeds and specifically carrying በለስ (figs), a summer fruit, in the townships of Eritrea. The Eritrean ኦም በለስ (fig tree) is not like the fig tree of the Hebrew Bible. The Eritrean በለስ is the *Prickly Pear Cactus*. The word በለስ (fig), however, has been translated into TGN versions wherever the fig appears in the Scriptures. Eritrean በለስ (fig) is carried in a very popular container, ዘንቢል 'zenbil' (basket). The basket is mapped to the people of Israel. The summer fruit could be mapped to the concept of 'the end.' The end process of the summer fruit in a basket corresponds to the end time of the people of YHWH. The

basket of summer fruit in Amos, therefore, should be read in the light of ‘a lot of corpses will be thrown everywhere’ (8:3).

The imagery describes ‘bad figs’ but the destruction is limited, ‘a lot of corpses will be thrown everywhere’ (8:3) unlike the destruction in visions one and two which include total destruction. The quantity and quality the container holds is ironic style in speech, unless the intended meaning of the author was revealed in terms of timeline and the scale of the destruction. The innocence or unawareness of Amos and his audience make the elements *ironic*. The emphatic expression of a basket of summer fruit, unless conceptually analysed, remains hidden from the reader’s awareness, and could be asserted as an *ironic metaphor*.

## 5. Conclusion

The investigation proves that irony, as a dominant figure of speech, is demonstrated as a literary stylistic device in each chapter of the book of Amos, and we have used irony as an interpretive strategy to unfold the complexity of texts in the book. We recommend that current studies on prophets give more attention to figurative languages as literary devices in the interpretive strategy. We also recommend that Biblical scholarship consider the biblical text in Tigrigna, a Semitic language, and the cultural expression of both the Eritrean and Israelite peoples.

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