

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH: A STUDY OF THE ISINDEBELE BIBLE (*IBHAYIBHELI ELICWENGILEKO*)

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received: December 2025 Revised: February 2026 Accepted: June 2026 Published: July 2026	<i>The translation of biblical texts into South African indigenous languages was historically undertaken by missionaries who rendered scriptures from Greek and Hebrew into English and subsequently into local languages to facilitate evangelisation. Within this trajectory, isiNdebele remained marginalised and was among the last South African languages to receive a complete Bible translation, making the 2012 publication of IBhayibheli Elicwengileko both linguistically and historically significant. This context underscores the importance of examining how figurative language central to biblical meaning and interpretation is conveyed in an underrepresented African language beyond the missionary translation era. This study aims to identify, categorise, and analyse figurative expressions in relation to their contextual meaning. Employing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the study integrates Perrine's Theory of Figurative Language with Pragmatic Theory to interpret meanings beyond literal sense, while purposive sampling isolates verses containing salient figurative usage. The analysis identified 50 similes, 38 metaphors, 34 instances of personification, 29 cases of hyperbole, 28 examples of irony, and 24 euphemisms. Findings indicate that these expressions largely preserve their connotative force in isiNdebele, demonstrating the translation's effectiveness in maintaining figurative nuance. The study contributes to translation studies by illuminating strategies for conveying figurative meaning in underrepresented African languages, while also highlighting implications for biblical interpretation, language preservation, and the pedagogical use of indigenous-language scriptures. It also supports ongoing efforts in African language documentation, corpus development, and culturally grounded translation scholarship.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

IsiNdebele is one of South Africa's twelve official languages, yet it is both the smallest and the youngest in terms of the officially recognised spoken languages, with only approximately 1.7% of the population identifying it as their first language (Statistics, 2024). Its formal academic recognition occurred relatively late, in 1985 (Mnguni, 2025). This underscores its position as a relatively young language within the South African linguistic and educational landscape. Its late formal recognition is reflected in the limited availability of language resources and the

underdeveloped digital infrastructure for isiNdebele, both of which exemplify broader patterns of linguistic marginalisation (Mlambo & Matfunjwa, 2024; Matfunjwa et al., 2025). A salient illustration of this marginalisation is also evident in the history of Bible translation. IsiNdebele was among the last indigenous South African languages to receive a complete Bible translation, with the *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko* published only in 2012 (Skosana, 2025). This stands in contrast to the missionary era, during which the Bible had been translated into other indigenous languages. The exclusion of isiNdebele during this period was largely due to its classification as a dialect of isiZulu; missionaries often relied on languages already used in translation to communicate their message, given that many Ndebele communities were able to understand those existing translations (Skhosana, 2003). The trajectory of Bible translation into isiNdebele illustrates the incremental and delayed recognition of the language. The first translation effort occurred in 1977 with the Book of Mark, followed by the New Testament and selected Psalms in 1986, and culminating in a complete Bible translation in 2012 (Skosana, 2025; Malele, 2025). This historical lag not only reflects the marginalisation of isiNdebele but also emphasises the challenges of linguistic development, cultural visibility, and resource allocation for smaller South African languages.

Similar to many African languages, the isiNdebele Bible was translated from Hebrew and Greek through English as an intermediary language, a process that inherently introduces complex challenges. Among the most significant of these challenges is the translation of figurative expressions, which are deeply intertwined with cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. Figurative language, including metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, idioms, and other rhetorical devices, extends beyond stylistic ornamentation (Yeibo, 2012). They function as a vehicle for conveying cultural values, ethical principles, and communal wisdom, while enriching discourse with nuance, emotional resonance, and interpretive depth (Mlambo & Maluleke, 2025). The indirect translation process heightens the risk of semantic loss, as subtle cultural and contextual nuances embedded in the source text may not be fully captured in the target language. Lazuardi and Ma'shumah (2025) note that rendering figurative expressions accurately demands meticulous attention to both linguistic precision and cultural fidelity. Failure to achieve this can result in a translation that is semantically flattened, culturally misaligned, and less effective in preserving the richness and authenticity of the original biblical message.

Despite the centrality of figurative language to biblical texts, there remains a significant gap in research examining how such expressions have been rendered in isiNdebele Bible translations. This gap is exacerbated by the limited resources, scholarly attention, and linguistic tools available for isiNdebele, reflecting broader patterns of marginalisation experienced by smaller South African languages. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates figurative expressions in the isiNdebele Bible, *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*, with a specific focus on the Book of Isaiah. Recognised as one of the most rhetorically rich books of the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah is notable for its extensive use of figurative language to convey theological, moral, and socio-political messages (Couey, 2016). This study aims to identify, categorise, and analyse these figurative expressions, situating them within their semantic and contextual meanings in isiNdebele. The novelty of this study lies in its systematic linguistic and semantic analysis of figurative expressions in the isiNdebele Bible within the Book of Isaiah, thereby providing one of the first focused examinations of figurative language translation in isiNdebele biblical scholarship. Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: What types of figurative expressions occur in the isiNdebele translation of the Book of Isaiah? How are these figurative expressions linguistically and semantically rendered in isiNdebele? And To what extent do the translated figurative expressions preserve the cultural, theological, and contextual meanings of the source text?

Literature review

Figurative Language in the Bible

Ate (2019) and Resi and Adrallisman (2021) analysed figurative expressions in the *Book of Psalms*, focusing on the identification and interpretation of various forms. Ate (2019) conducted the analysis using the *New King James Version*, whereas Resi and Adrallisman (2021) based their study on the *King James Version* of the Bible. Both studies purposefully selected the *Book of Psalms* because it was regarded as one of the most accessible, concise, valued, and frequently referenced books in the Old Testament. It was also recognised as particularly rich in figurative language, especially within its prayers, poems, and hymns, which reflected the traditions and religious practices of the Jewish people. The figurative expressions identified and examined included paradox, anaphora, symplechism, epistrophe, simile, idiom, metaphor, personification, polysyndeton, de-personification, tautology, antonomasia, asyndeton, hyperbole, and periphrasis. Ate (2019) found that these figurative expressions carried associative meanings encompassing social, connotative, reflective, collocative, and affective dimensions. Similarly, Resi and Adrallisman (2021) analysed each figurative expression in relation to its meaning. For instance, in their discussion of Psalm 1:3, they highlighted the simile introduced by the comparative marker *like*, which compared a man to a tree planted by the river. This image conveyed that just as a tree nourished by water flourishes, a person who meditates consistently on God develops virtuous character and leads a fruitful life. Both studies found that the figurative expressions in the *Book of Psalms* conveyed profound and multi-layered meanings, thereby enriching the text and deepening its interpretive possibilities.

Silalahi and William (2020) examined figurative expressions in the *Book of Psalms*, with a particular focus on metaphors that conveyed God's attributes. Drawing on the *New International Version* of the Bible, they selected the Psalms for their length, poetic quality, and richness in figurative language, especially within the songs of David. Their study identified twenty-three metaphors in which God was compared to various elements. For example, in Psalm 27:1, God was likened to light, symbolising divine guidance, while in Psalm 32:7 He was described as a hiding place, representing protection from harm. Notably, God was also depicted as a rock in more than twelve verses, an image that, depending on the context, conveyed strength, redemption, refuge, or eternal immutability. These metaphors underscored God's power, holiness, and steadfastness. In a related study, Amung et al. (2023) investigated figurative expressions in the New Testament, concentrating on the parables of Jesus, which they noted were often challenging to interpret. Their analysis identified a range of figurative devices, including similes, irony, metaphors, hyperbole, personification, metonymy, and synecdoche. One example, drawn from Matthew 5:30, was categorised as hyperbole: the instruction to cut off a hand that causes sin was understood metaphorically as a vivid admonition to avoid actions leading to spiritual harm.

Figurative Language in Other Sources and Settings

Mabena and Sobane (2022) investigated the role of Sesotho figurative language in the proceedings of the Leon and Phumaphi Commissions of Enquiry in Lesotho. Their study sought to determine whether the use of figurative expressions in these commissions effectively conveyed the intended meanings. To achieve this, they analysed publicly available audio recordings from these commissions. They used ten recordings from the Leon Commission and sixteen from the Phumaphi Commission. Their analysis revealed frequent use of proverbs, metaphors, euphemisms, irony, and similes. However, the study found that the use of this figurative language often hindered effective communication, particularly due to challenges in interpretation between Sesotho and English. In several instances, interpreters either misinterpreted or failed to fully capture the

semantic depth of figurative expressions, leading to misunderstandings among commissioners and witnesses. For example, in one recording, a witness used the euphemistic expression *Ba ile ba hela likoro tsa batho ka maoto masimong* (they cut people's wheat in the fields with their feet) to imply that the soldiers fled when the SADC forces entered the country. The witness employed this expression to avoid the shame associated with admitting that soldiers had run away. However, the interpreter's literal translation distorted the meaning, leading the commissioner to interpret it as though the soldiers had intentionally destroyed people's wheat.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two theoretical perspectives: Perrine's Theory of Figurative Language and Pragmatic Theory. Perrine's framework, originally developed in his influential work on poetry and literary criticism, provides a systematic method for identifying, classifying, and interpreting diverse forms of figurative expression (Faheem et al., 2022; Riyuda & Oktoviandry, 2024). According to Perrine (1977), figurative language comprises categories such as metaphor, simile, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, hyperbole, irony, allusion, paradox, allegory, apostrophe, and symbol, each fulfilling unique communicative and aesthetic functions. Within biblical discourse, these figures of speech are not simply decorative stylistic devices but essential tools for transmitting divine revelations, moral teachings, and prophetic visions (Al-Ameedi & Mehdi, 2018). Applying Perrine's theory allows this study to identify and categorise figurative expressions in the Book of Isaiah, thereby elucidating their semantic complexity and rhetorical force. This approach promotes a literary-sensitive reading of the text, highlighting the creative strategies employed by biblical writers to engage, challenge, and persuade their audience.

The pragmatic theory complements this literary orientation by foregrounding the function of language within specific communicative contexts. Its philosophical foundations can be traced to the works of Charles Morris, Rudolf Carnap, and Charles Peirce in the 1930s (Bagayang, 2022). Situated within the broader field of pragmatics, the theory extends the analysis of meaning beyond literal interpretation, emphasising interlocutor intention, audience reception, and the socio-cultural conditions under which communication occurs (Verschueren, 2009; Yusrina et al., 2025). In the Book of Isaiah, figurative language functions not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a pragmatic tool to admonish, inspire, comfort, and instruct the people of faith. By employing Pragmatic Theory, this study extends beyond the classification of figurative expressions to analyse their communicative purposes, considering how they operate as speech acts that evoke emotion, sustain cultural values, and shape theological understanding. Therefore, the integration of these theoretical perspectives offers a multidimensional analytical lens for examining figurative language in the Book of Isaiah within the isiNdebele Bible, *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*. This combined framework captures both the textual artistry and the communicative functions of figurative expressions, aligning literary form with pragmatic function.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate figurative expressions in the Book of Isaiah in the isiNdebele Bible, *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*. This approach is relevant for examining phenomena as they exist in their natural context, allowing for detailed observation and interpretation (Lambert & Lambert 2012). It was particularly appropriate for this study concerned with meaning, interpretation, and contextual nuance, because it enables the researchers to examine linguistic phenomena as they occur naturally within texts while preserving their semantic, cultural, and theological depth. This research design also allows for close textual engagement with figurative language, facilitating sensitivity to metaphorical

structure, symbolic resonance, and culturally embedded meaning that may shift across languages. Furthermore, the interpretive orientation of descriptive qualitative inquiry aligns with the study's objective of uncovering how figurative expressions function rhetorically and semantically within isiNdebele biblical translation. Rather than reducing figurative language to quantifiable units, the design supports layered interpretation that considers historical context, intertextual biblical usage, and Nguni linguistic worldview. The researcher's prior familiarity with isiNdebele and biblical discourse, therefore, served not as subjective bias but as an interpretive resource that enabled the recognition of subtle semantic and cultural patterns essential for nuanced analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique that enables the deliberate selection of information-rich textual units capable of illuminating the phenomenon under investigation. As a non-probability method widely used in qualitative research, purposive sampling enables the intentional identification of information-rich units that can offer substantive insight into the phenomenon under examination (Bouncken et al., 2025). In this study, purposive sampling was implemented through three systematically organised stages. First, a comprehensive textual scan of the entire Book of Isaiah in *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko* was undertaken to identify verses containing potential instances of figurative language, including metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, irony, and euphemisms. This was followed by a relevance-screening phase in which the identified verses were assessed against predetermined analytical criteria: the explicit presence of figurative language; theological or rhetorical significance within the passage; alignment with central Isaianic themes such as judgement, restoration, covenant, and divine sovereignty. The final stage involved the selection of representative excerpts that ensured coverage across major thematic divisions of Isaiah and across diverse figurative categories, thereby prioritising thematic representativeness over mere frequency. This structured purposive approach ensured that the selected verses were analytically meaningful rather than arbitrary, ultimately enhancing the depth, balance, and credibility of the dataset.

Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative content analysis to interpret the identified figurative expressions. This method involves identifying, quantifying, and interpreting specific words, themes, or concepts within qualitative data (Kleinheksel et al. 2020). In this study, the analytical process unfolded through a series of systematic and interrelated steps. The first stage involved textual familiarisation, which entailed repeated reading of the selected verses within both their immediate literary setting and the broader canonical context. This was followed by the identification and coding phase, during which figurative expressions were marked and assigned preliminary descriptive codes based on their figurative type, such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, euphemism, personification, and irony. The third stage focused on category development, where related codes were organised into broader thematic and rhetorical groupings that reflected shared semantic or theological functions. Finally, contextual interpretation was undertaken to analyse the meaning of each category in relation to the theological message conveyed within the text. To enhance credibility, dependability, and validity, the study incorporated multiple verification strategies through triangulation. As defined by Donkoh and Mensah (2023), triangulation entails drawing on multiple sources or perspectives to enhance accuracy and reliability. In this study, it was achieved through cross-linguistic comparison with sister Nguni languages such as isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Siswati and consultation of additional biblical translations, ensuring that interpretations were not based on a single textual perspective.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study identified a range of figurative expressions in the Book of Isaiah through the analytical lens of Perrine's Theory of Figurative Language. Out of Perrine's twelve recognised categories, only six were found in the text, namely metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, irony, and euphemism. Table 1 provides an overview of the chapters and verses in which these figurative forms appear within the Book of Isaiah.

Table 1
Figurative Expressions and Relevant Chapters and Verses in the Book of Isaiah

Number	Categories of Figurative Language	Results (Chapter and Verses)
1	Simile	1:8, 1:9, 1:18, 1:30-31, 5:24, 6:5, 7:2, 8:6, 10:14, 10:18, 13:4, 13:14, 14:19, 16:2, 17:6, 17:12-13, 18:4, 24:2, 24:13, 26:17, 28:2, 29:5, 29:8, 30:13, 30:14, 30:28, 31:5, 33:12, 34:4, 35:1, 35:6, 40:6-8, 40:22, 40:31, 41:2, 41:14-15, 42:2, 42:14-15, 53:6-7, 55:10-11, 57:20, 64:6
2	Metaphor	5:7, 6:13, 7:20, 8:14, 9:2, 10:16, 10:33, 11:1, 11:9, 14:4, 14:12, 17:10, 22:14, 24:5, 26:1, 28:16, 29:11, 29:13, 30:22, 30:26, 33:2, 33:20, 36:6, 40:6, 40:11, 42:6, 43:2, 43:14, 44:6, 45:9, 49:2, 51:1, 53:6-7, 55:12, 57:20, 60:1, 64:8
3	Personification	1:2, 1:21, 3:26, 5:14, 8:23, 9:1, 14:7-8, 14:31, 17:9-11, 19:1, 24:4, 24:7, 24:20, 26:19, 30:20-21, 33:9, 34:13, 35:1-2, 40:26, 42:11, 44:23, 45:8, 49:13, 52:9, 55:12, 59:14, 60:1-2, 62:1, 64:1
4	Hyperbole	1:15, 2:19-21, 3:24, 5:25, 8:7-8, 9:18-19, 10:22, 14:7-8, 24:1, 30:25, 30:30, 34:2-4, 40:15, 40:17, 49:19, 53:3-5, 60:5, 60:22, 66:14, 66:24
5	Irony	1:3, 1:21, 2:8-9, 3:1-4, 5:7, 5:20, 10:12-14, 14:13-15, 19:11-13, 28:15, 46:6-7, 47:7-8, 53:3-4, 56:10-11
6	Euphemisms	3:17, 4:1, 5:13, 6:5, 8:3, 8:21, 14:11, 14:18-20, 22:14, 23:16, 28:8, 29:10, 37:3, 40:2-3, 41:14, 47:2-3, 51:3, 51:17, 57:2, 58:7

Table 1 presents chapters and verses of the figurative expressions identified in the Book of Isaiah from *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*. Similes occurred as the most prevalent category, with 50 instances identified, followed by metaphors with 38 occurrences, and personification with 34 occurrences. From each of these dominant categories, three examples were selected for detailed analysis. The less frequent categories were hyperbole, of which 29 instances were identified, and two verses were analysed, and irony, where 28 instances were identified, with two selected for analysis. Euphemisms were the least represented, with 24 occurrences, from which two examples were analysed in this study.

Discussion

This subsection presents the selected examples that were analysed to determine their contextual meanings.

Simile

A simile is a type of figurative expression that explicitly compares two objects using comparison words such as, as and like (Maula, 2013). In isiNdebele, similes are similarly identified through the use of comparison markers to depict imaginative ideas. These markers in isiNdebele include *sa-*, *-njenga-*, *-senga-*, *kwanga-*, *-njenge-*, *kuna-*, *okwe-*, *fana-*, and *ne-*, all of which convey meanings equivalent to, as, or like in English (Mahlangu et al., 2011; 2012). The verses below were selected as representative examples for the simile analysis. They include simile determiners such as *njenge-* (as), *njengo-* (as), and *njengo-* (like), as reflected in the following verse:

- (1) U-Isaya 1:18 *Seningeza-ke, sikhulumisane, kutjho uSomnini, Nanyana izono zenu zitlerebede, zizaba mhlophe njengesithwathwa, nanyana zibomvu be, zizakuba mhlophwe twa.* (You can come, for us to talk, said the Lord, Though your sins are scarlet, they will be white as snow; though they are crimson red, they will be purely white.)

This verse contains a simile, marked by the determiner *njenge-* (as), found in the phrase *Nanyana izono zenu zitlerebede, zizaba mhlophe njengesithwathwa* (Though your sins are scarlet, they will be white as snow). The comparison here is between *izono zenu ezitlerebede* (your sins are scarlet) and *mhlophe njengesithwathwa* (white as snow), illustrating the transformation from deep sinfulness to complete purity. The term *tlerebede* (scarlet) symbolises the gravity and seemingly indelible nature of sin rather than a literal colour. From a pragmatic perspective, the verse communicates far more than a surface-level comparison. It reflects the Lord's intention to reassure and invite the people toward reconciliation, emphasising that even deeply embedded wrongdoing can be forgiven. The promise to make their sins *mhlophe njengesithwathwa* (as white as snow) symbolises total cleansing and the removal of guilt. Marbun and Pane (2023) further highlight this pragmatic meaning, explaining that God's forgiveness is likened to washing a red-stained object until it becomes completely white, which is an image of radical transformation from sin to purity. Another instance of a simile is illustrated in the following verse:

- (2) U-Isaya 31:5 *Njengokuphapha kweenyoni ngehla, ngokunjalo uSomnini uMninimandlawoke uzakuvikela iJerusalema; iye, uzayivikela bekayitjhaphulule, ayibabalele bekayisindise.* (Just as birds flying over, so the Lord Almighty will protect Jerusalem; yes, He will protect and deliver it, preserve and save it.)

The simile in this verse is marked by the determiner *njengo-* (as), found in the phrase *Njengokuphapha kweenyoni ngehla* (Just as birds flying over), which is compared to *ngokunjalo uSomnini uMninimandlawoke uzakuvikela iJerusalema* (so as the Lord Almighty, will protect Jerusalem). The comparison is between birds flying over their nestlings to shield them from danger and the Lord Almighty's protection of Jerusalem. The nuance lies in the imagery that just as birds guard their young with vigilance and care, confronting threats without harming them, so too does God promise to safeguard Jerusalem and its people. The image of the birds conveys attentive and compassionate protection, which are similar qualities that God possesses and is willing to use in safeguarding the people of Jerusalem. Supporting this contextual meaning, Bosworth and Tosatto (2022) noted that the depiction of birds hovering over their nestlings illustrates a protective relationship between the birds and their nestlings, which parallels the relationship God had with the people of Jerusalem, reflected in the protection He promises in this verse. A further example of a simile is evident in the following verse:

- (3) U-Isaya 26:17 *Njengomfazi osidisi osele azokubeletha azibinyabinya, aliliswa ziinhlabi besinjalo-ke nathi ngenca yakho, Somnini.* (Like a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes, crying out in pain we were like that because of you, Lord.)

In this verse, the simile is marked by the determiner *njengo-* (like), appearing in the first word of the phrase *Njengomfazi osidisi osele azokubeletha azibinyabinya, aliliswa ziinhlabi* (Like a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes, crying out in pain), which is then compared to the people of Israel in the continuation of the verse, *besinjalo-ke nathi ngenca yakho, Somnini* (we were like that, because of you, Lord Almighty). Literally, a woman in labour experiences intense and agonising pain, often considered the most severe physical suffering she will endure in her life (Aziato et al., 2017). Figuratively, this simile conveys how the people of Israel felt under God's discipline. Like a pregnant woman, they underwent sudden, unavoidable, and intense suffering as

a consequence of their sinful behaviour (Fischer, 2012). The comparison highlights the profound and overwhelming nature of their distress, mirroring the acute pain of a woman in labour. This simile effectively captures the contextual meaning of Israel's experience under the divine discipline of God.

Metaphor

Unlike a simile, which makes an explicit comparison using determiners, a metaphor is a figurative expression that compares two things implicitly. Rahmadhanti et al. (2022) explain that a metaphor substitutes one object with another that shares similar qualities. In isiNdebele, metaphors function in the same way; two objects are compared without the use of comparison markers, and one object can be replaced by another that has comparable characteristics, illustrated in the following verse.

- (4) *U-Isaya 5:7 Isidiribe sakaSomnini uMninimandlawoke siyindlu ka-Israyeli, nabantu bakwaJuda basitjalo sakhe esikhethekileko. Walindela ubulungiswa, kodwana qala, kwaba kukwephulwa komthetho walindela ukulunga, kodwana qala, kwaba sililo sesizi. (The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are His precious vine. He waited for justice, but look, it was a violation of the law he waited for justice, but look, it was a cry of grief.)*

The *Isidiribe* (vineyard) in this verse is compared to *indlu ka-Israyeli* (the house of Israel), and *abantu bakwaJuda* (the people of Judah) are compared to *isitjalo sakhe esikhethekileko* (His precious vine). This figurative expression qualifies as a metaphor as it compares elements that share similar qualities without using explicit markers such as those found in similes. In normal circumstances, one would expect the owner of a vineyard who has invested in and carefully tended it to see it produce good and healthy vines. Comparatively, the Lord Almighty cared for the people of Israel and Judah, proclaiming them to be special to Him, *basitjalo esikhethekileko* (they are a precious vine) that He planted. Figuratively, the contextual meaning in this verse is that the vineyard produced foul fruit, just as the people committed murder and their victims cried for justice, even though, like a vineyard farmer, the Lord had taken care of them. Eck (2020) further clarified this by asserting that although Israel and Judah were God's chosen people, they did injustice rather than produce the good fruit of justice. This mirrors the metaphor in this verse of a carefully tended vineyard that, rather than yielding good vines, produced foul fruit, symbolising their evil deeds, particularly the murder they committed and the harm they did to their victims. Another example of a metaphor is demonstrated in the following verse:

- (5) *U-Isaya 14:12 Maye, ukuwa kwakho ezulwini wena Khwezi, iye, wena ndodana yamarimarima! Wehliselwe equlwanini, wena owise izizwe! (Woe, to your fall from heaven you Morning Star, yes, you the son of dawn! You were relegated to the ground, you who vanquished the nations!)*

In this verse, *Khwezi* (morning star) is used metaphorically alongside *indodana yamarimarima* (the son of dawn). The contextual meaning of the expression is rooted in the notion that this son is not the ordinary morning star but rather the son of dawn. Reddy (2012) explains that this particular morning star refers to Venus or the crescent moon, which are the celestial lights that are bright and glorious in the night sky but whose light fades before the rising sun. Basilevsky and Head (2003) further note that although Venus shares similarities with Earth, its extreme temperature, dense atmosphere, and lack of a detectable magnetic field render it uninhabitable for humans. This comparison underscores the appropriateness of this metaphor; the son of dawn, like Venus, is a majestic but ultimately vulnerable star, destined to fall before a far greater power. The verse vividly shows the fall of a once-strong ruler or nation. Therefore, the expression of the

indodana yamarimarima (the son of dawn) is compared to *Khwezi* (morning star) to reinforce the understanding that the reference is to a celestial body, which is either Venus or the crescent moon, rather than an angelic being. This metaphor clearly presents the contrast between former glory and inevitable downfall, emphasising that earthly power is temporary in the face of supreme authority. A further instance of a metaphor is evident in the following verse:

- (6) *U-Isaya 64:8 Nokho Somnini ungubabethu. Thina simdaka, wena umbumbi wethu simsebenzi wezandla zakho soke nje. (Nevertheless, the Lord is our Father. We are the clay, you are our potter, we are all the work of your hands.)*

The *Somnini* (Lord) in this verse is implicitly compared to *umbumbi* (potter) in *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*. The metaphor in this case compares the Lord and the potter, which are two elements that share similar qualities. Literally, Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines a potter “as a person who shapes various objects from clay”. In a comparable sense, the Lord is described as having made humankind from clay. In isiNdebele, this metaphor is further developed through the expression *Thina simdaka* (We are clay), which compares people to clay. Niskanen (2006) also emphasised that the contextual meaning of this verse lies in the analogy between God and the potter, just as the potter creates different objects from clay as he sees fit, God created humankind according to His will. Therefore, this metaphor ultimately communicates God’s absolute power over His creation by invoking the culturally familiar image of a potter who holds unquestioned authority over the work of his hands.

Personification

Personification is a figurative expression in which non-living objects, animals, ideas, or even the deceased are attributed with human qualities, enabling them to be understood as if they possess human characteristics (Shahabi, 2015). In isiNdebele, personification is similarly used to endow non-living entities with human traits, making them appear alive or behave like people, as demonstrated in Isaiah 35:1-2.

- (7) *U-Isaya 35:1-2 Irhalawumba nenarha eyomileko kuzakuthaba, ibhudu lihlokome, liqhakaze. Njengamakhwa weTjharoni. 2Izakuphuthumba khulu, lihlokome ngethabo nangokuvuma. Lizakunikelwa idumo leLibhanoni, ubukhosi beKarameli neTjharoni. Abathunjwa bazakubona idumo lakaSomnini nobukhosi bakaZimethu. (1The desert and the dry land will rejoice, the dusty road will shout, blossom. As the Saffron. 2It will blossom a lot, shout in joy and sing. It will be given the glory of Lebanon, the Kingship of Carmel and Sharon. The captives will see the glory of the Lord and the majesty of our God.)*

Personification in this verse is used to attribute human qualities to non-living elements of nature. *Irhalawumba nenarha eyomileko* (The desert and the dry land) and the *ibhudu* (dusty road) are described as *kuzakuthaba* (will rejoice) and *lihlokome* (shout), respectively. To rejoice means to feel or express great happiness, and shouting refers to the act of uttering a loud cry, also expressing strong emotion (Cambridge Dictionary, n.b.). These attributes illustrate the personification in this verse, as deserts and dry, dusty lands cannot literally experience emotions. Further in verse 2, the desert is said to *lihlokome ngethabo nangokuvuma* (shout in joy and sing), also portraying it as capable of human feelings and expressions. These personifications symbolise the restoration of the barren land, reflecting God’s promise of a new era, the end of exile, and the renewal of His people. Musa (2023) affirms that the joy expressed by nature in this passage represents freedom, restoration, and the redistribution of God’s glory, and that the once dry and desolate land points to the suffering and obscured divine presence experienced during the exile, contrasted with the postexilic period marked by renewal, abundance, and joy in God’s glory.

Therefore, this expression conveys that the dry land and desert symbolise the suffering of God's people, but their depiction as experiencing joy now signifies God's restoration. Another example of a personification appears in Isaiah 55:12:

- (8) *U-Isaya 55:12 Ngambala nizakuphuma ngethabo, nihlahlwe ngokuthula. Iintaba nemibundu kuzakuzwakalisa ukuhlokoma phambi kwenu, iye, yoke imithi yommango iwahle izandla zayo. (You will surely go out with joy, be guided by peace. The mountains and hills will burst into singing before you, yes, all the forest trees will clap their hands.)*

In this verse, personification is evident in the expressions *Iintaba nemibundu kuzakuzwakalisa ukuhlokoma* (The mountains and hills will burst into singing) and *imithi yommango iwahle izandla zayo* (the forest trees will clap their hands). Mountains and hills cannot sing, as they do not possess mouths or voices, and trees cannot clap because they do not have hands or the capacity to perform human actions such as clapping. These actions are uniquely associated with people. The meaning conveyed here is that when God's people are released from Babylonian exile, their return will be accompanied by great joy and celebration. The imagery of mountains, hills, and trees singing and clapping symbolises the abundance of joy and the festive atmosphere surrounding their restoration. Bernard and Lioy (2020) affirm that the singing of the mountains and hills and the clapping of the trees should not be understood literally; rather, it symbolises a renewed creation that mirrors the renewal experienced by God's people, suggesting that all of God's creation, both figuratively and literally, will share in the joy and transformation, including the people returning from Babylon. A further illustration of a personification is found in Isaiah 64:1:

- (9) *U-Isaya 64:1 Kwanga bewungavula amazulu, wehlele phasi, iintaba bezizakuthuthumela phambi kwakho. (May you have opened the heavens, descend down, the mountains would shake with fear before you)*

Personification is evident in the part of the verse where it says, *iintaba bezizakuthuthumela phambi kwakho* (the mountains would shake with fear before you). This expression is figurative because mountains do not possess emotions and cannot literally experience fear. The use of personification here emphasises the majesty and awe-inspiring presence of God. By depicting the mountains as trembling, the text conveys the overwhelming power of God over all creation, highlighting His authority and the cosmic significance of His appearance. The meaning here is also embedded in the first part of the prayer, calling on God to tear open the heavens and trembling mountains to stress the intensity and urgency of the plea. The mountains' figurative fear reflects the totality of creation's response to God's presence, reinforcing the idea that God's power affects not only humans but the entire created order (Niskanen, 2006). This personification thus illustrates God's sovereignty and evokes awe in the audience, inviting them to recognise His might and to seek His intervention.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is another figurative device in which meaning is communicated through intentional exaggeration to produce an intensified or dramatic effect (Khasanah, 2015). In isiNdebele, hyperbole functions in a similar way, amplifying situations, emotions, or descriptions to heighten their impact and convey meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretation. This use of exaggeration not only strengthens emphasis but also reflects broader cultural and communicative strategies within isiNdebele discourse, where dramatic expression often serves to underscore attitudes, highlight moral lessons, or evoke strong emotional responses, as reflected in the following verse:

- (10) *U-Isaya 30:25 Kenye nenye intaba ephakemeko nombundu omude kuzakuba nemilanjana egeleza amanzi ngelanga lokurhayilwa okukhulu lokha nakugirika imibhotjhongo. (On every high mountain and long hill there will be streams flowing with water on the day of the great destruction when the towers fall.)*

The exaggeration in this verse lies in the statement *Kenye nenye intaba ephakemeko nombundu omude kuzakuba nemilanjana egeleza amanzi* (On every high mountain and long hill there will be streams flowing with water). What makes this expression hyperbolic is that normally, mountains and hills are high and dry places where streams of water are rarely found. Additionally, the phrase *Kenye nenye* (On every) suggests that all mountains and hills would have streams flowing, possibly implying that every mountain and hill on earth has a stream flowing. However, since this is a figurative expression, it is not to be taken literally that streams will flow from every mountain and hill. Rather, the imagery of flowing water represents the abundance of God's blessings. Love (1996) notes that water is often used in the Bible to symbolise God's blessings, and in this verse, it signifies the restoration, provision, and prosperity that will follow God's judgment on His enemies. Therefore, the hyperbole here functions to paint a vivid picture of the overwhelming abundance of blessings that God's people will experience. Another example of a hyperbole emerge in Isaiah 66:24:

- (11) *U-Isaya 66:24 Bazakuphuma, baqale iindumbu zabangihlubukileko: Iimpethu zabo azizukufa nomlilwabo asoze wacima. Bazakuba sinyenyiso kibo boke abantu. (They will come out, look at the corpses of those who have rebelled against me: Their worms will never die and their fire will never be put out. They will become an abomination to all people.)*

This verse employs hyperbole to emphasise the severity and permanence of God's punishment against those who rebelled, where it states, *Iimpethu zabo azizukufa nomlilwabo asoze wacima* (Their worms will never die and their fire will never be put out). Literally, this is impossible as no creature lives forever, and every fire on earth can eventually be extinguished. Aljadaan (2016) note that this figurative expression is not meant to be taken literally; rather, its meaning differs from the literal sense and is commonly used to exaggerate for emphasis. Hence, it should not be interpreted literally. Instead, it underscores the inescapable and permanent nature of divine judgment. Through this hyperbolic language, the verse vividly communicates the intensity and certainty of the consequences awaiting those who turn against God.

Irony

Regel (2009) describes irony as a figurative expression in which meaning is conveyed through contrast and sarcasm, by saying the opposite of what is intended, or by highlighting the difference between reality and appearance. In isiNdebele, irony functions in the same way, where the expressed words convey a meaning that is contrary to their literal sense and in a sarcastic manner, as illustrated in Isaiah 1:3:

- (12) *U-Isaya 1:3 Ikomo iyamazi umniniyo, nodumbana igebhezi lomnikazalo, kodwana u-Israyeli akazi ilitho, abantu bami abazwisisi. (The cow knows its owner, and the donkey knows where its owner feeds it, but Israel knows nothing, my people do not understand.)*

This verse contains irony, which is evident in the phrase *u-Israyeli akazi ilitho* (Israel knows nothing), as opposed to *Ikomo iyamazi umniniyo, nodumbana igebhezi lomnikazalo* (The cow knows its owner, and the donkey knows where its owner feeds it). In this context, it lies in the fact that animals, the cattle and the donkey, which are often regarded as stubborn, recognise, listen and rely on their master, yet the people of Israel, who should know God, fail to acknowledge or

understand Him. Sarcastically, the verse suggests that these animals are more perceptive and obedient than God's own people. Bosworth and Tosatto (2022) further assert that the nuance of this verse emphasises the contrast between the animals' awareness of and dependence on their master and the rebellion and spiritual ignorance of Israel, who, despite knowing God, do not rely on Him as their master. Another instance of a irony is exemplified in the following verse:

- (13) *U-Isaya 28:15 Ngambala nithe: Senze isivumelwano nokufa, iye, isibopho nendawo yabafileko: Lokha isiwuruwuru esinamandla nasidlulako asizukuza kithi, ngombana senze amanga ubuphaphelo bethu, sabhaca ngekohliso. (Indeed you have said: We have made a treaty with death, yes, we have reached an agreement with the world of the dead: When a severe storm comes through it is not going to come at us, because we have made lies our refuge, and we hid in illusion.)*

The irony in this verse lies in the people of Israel declaring, *Senze isivumelwano nokufa* (We have made a treaty with death) and *isibopho nendawo yabafileko* (we have reached an agreement with the world of the dead) as a means of escaping God's punishment. Ironically, they placed their trust in death and the realm of the dead to secure their safety, which in reality exposed them to even greater danger, since relying on such false assurances is equivalent to depending on nothing. Skosana (2025) explained that irony should not be understood literally, as it often employs sarcasm and conveys the opposite of what is claimed. In this context, the verse does not mean that the people literally made a covenant with death or the underworld; rather, it reveals that they trusted in lies and relied on their own powerless schemes instead of trusting in God. This verse, therefore, highlights how, despite their knowledge of God, the Israelites continued to make foolish and self-destructive decisions.

Euphemism

Abbas (2015) defines euphemism as a figurative expression used to describe and substitute direct or potentially offensive language with more polite, respectful, and socially acceptable terms. It is particularly used when addressing subjects that are regarded as sensitive or taboo in certain cultures and languages. In isiNdebele, euphemism is commonly used when speaking about intimate body parts, embarrassing situations, sexual matters, the behaviour of elders, or issues surrounding death. This figurative expression helps maintain respect and cultural sensitivity, as these subjects are regarded as inappropriate to express in their direct or blunt terms. Isaiah 8:3 presents an example of euphemism in the following manner:

- (14) *U-Isaya 8:3 Yeke ngangena umphorofidikazi, wazithwala wabeletha umsana. USomnini wathi kimi: Mthiye ibizo bona nguMhlangulimsinyana-Mphangingokurhaba. (So I went into the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son. The Lord said to me: Name him Maher-shalal-hash-baz.)*

The first part of the verse contains a euphemism in the expression, *Yeke ngangena umphorofidikazi, wazithwala wabeletha umsana* (So I went into the prophetess, and she conceived and bore a son). The euphemism lies in the use of *ngangena* (went in/entered), which politely conveys the act of sexual intercourse without stating it explicitly. Euphemistic expressions are often employed in contexts involving sexual relations, adultery, or reproductive organs, as such topics are generally considered inappropriate to describe directly in everyday communication (Hakami, 2024). In this verse, a pragmatic perspective shows that the meaning goes beyond the euphemism. It reflects God's use of Isaiah's family life as a prophetic sign to His people during difficult times. Isaiah's children served as signals to the remnant community, communicating both salvation and judgment. The lengthy name given to his son, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil, symbolised judgment and warned that God would soon use the Assyrians as instruments of punishment (Pate, 2016). This also highlights the pragmatic meaning

that extends beyond the name itself, the euphemism, and the role of Isaiah's children. Another example of a euphemism appears in Isaiah 44:14:

- (15) U-Isaya 41:14 Ungesabi, wena pethu, Jakopo, wena Israyeli olidlanzana, ngimi ngokwami okusizako. Utjho njalo uSomnini, umhlengakho ongoCwengileko wakwa-Israyeli. (Do not be afraid, you worm, Jacob, you little Israel, I am the one who personally helps you. Thus says the Lord, your Holy redeemer the One of Israel.)

In this verse, God comforts Israel by assuring them that they have nothing to fear. Instead of directly pointing out their weakness and inability to face their enemies, He uses the phrase *wena Israyeli olidlanzana* (you little Israel). This choice of words functions as a euphemism, softening the reality of their vulnerability. By referring to them as little Israel, rather than explicitly highlighting their powerlessness, God conveys His message with gentleness and reassurance. The euphemistic expression thus emphasises God's protective role, assuring Israel that, despite their smallness, He will protect and save them.

Across the figurative expressions identified in the Book of Isaiah in *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko*, a coherent interpretive pattern emerges in which figurative language functions not merely as stylistic ornamentation but as a central vehicle for theological meaning, moral instruction, and emotional persuasion. Similes and metaphors dominate the discourse, consistently translating abstract spiritual realities such as sin, forgiveness, divine authority, judgment, and restoration into culturally and experientially accessible imagery. Personification and hyperbole intensify this communicative effect by dramatising divine intervention and cosmic response, thereby reinforcing the magnitude of both judgment and hope.

CONCLUSION

The study identified six categories of figurative expression in the Book of Isaiah, including 50 similes, 38 metaphors, 34 personifications, 29 instances of hyperbole, 28 examples of irony, and 24 euphemisms, in which representative examples were contextually analysed using a pragmatic interpretive framework. The sampled similes compared God's actions and attributes to familiar, everyday images to illustrate His transformative power and nurturing protection. Metaphors, on the other hand, offered explicit comparisons that highlighted shared qualities and the deeper contextual meaning. Personification assigned human characteristics to elements like deserts, dry land, and mountains to reveal deeper pragmatic meanings embedded in the verses. Hyperbole emphasised the severity of God's punishment for disobedience, while irony exposed the folly of those who made unwise choices despite knowing God's power. Euphemisms were used to address sensitive matters, including sexual relations and divine protection over the remnant of Israel. These findings confirm that *IBhayibheli Elicwengileko* prioritises the preservation of contextual and connotative meaning over literal rendering, thereby sustaining the theological and literary nuance of the source text while enhancing interpretive accessibility for isiNdebele readers.

Beyond descriptive insight, the study offers practical implications for both translation and pedagogy. For translators, the findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive strategies that retain figurative force within indigenous linguistic and cultural frameworks, suggesting that future translations should privilege semantic resonance, cultural intelligibility, and theological coherence rather than strict formal equivalence. For educators, the categorisation and interpretation of figurative forms provide a foundation for developing teaching materials that support deeper biblical comprehension, literary appreciation, and mother-tongue theological engagement in isiNdebele. More broadly, this research contributes to the expansion of translation studies within African-language contexts by demonstrating the capacity of isiNdebele to convey complex

figurative and theological meaning. It also establishes an analytical model that may be applied to other African biblical translations, thereby advancing scholarship on figurative language, intercultural hermeneutics, and linguistic equity across the continent.

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INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. Before taking part, all participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that all information provided would be used solely for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they were otherwise entitled. By continuing their participation, the participants provided informed consent under the conditions described.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data utilized in this study cannot be made publicly available due to privacy concerns and ethical obligations to protect participant confidentiality. This restriction ensures compliance with ethical research standards and applicable data protection regulations. However, researchers or interested parties requiring access to the dataset for validation or further analysis may submit a reasonable request. Such requests will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Data may only be shared after approval from the appropriate institutional ethics review board to ensure that the proposed use aligns with ethical guidelines and the consent terms agreed to by the participants.

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