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The Role of Euphemisms in Nzema Language and Culture

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of euphemisms in the context of Nzema. It however discusses the Nzema examples alongside Akan, a sister language. Euphemisms can be linked to bone marrow in the sense that they are inseparable from language just as marrow is with bone. That is to say, it is highly impossible for bones not to have marrow as they are already embedded or built into the bones for varying purposes. Inasmuch as a body without breath is lifeless, a language that has no euphemistic expressions can also be said to be inadequate with respect to its functional and stylistic aspects. We use language to communicate and euphemism is a proper language style that people pursue in social communication in order to reach an ideal communication effect. Euphemisms are used in place of some sensitive, unpleasant, disturbing and taboo topics. The Nzema data indicate that in this language (Nzema), these expressions (euphemisms) can be dichotomised into two categories based on the communicative function they hold. In the first place, euphemisms are motivated by issues relating to taboos and are mainly used to avoid affronting both speaker's and the hearer's face. Secondly, they function as a stylistic marker so that their use is not as a response to taboo topics, rather, are subtle means of expressing one's thought which fit in the context of use.

Key words: Euphemism; Dysphemism; Taboo word; Face; Doublespeak

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INTRODUCTION

Language as a tool of communication may not be used all the same in every context due to its many stylistics. One such style is euphemism. Using euphemism is an active pragmatic strategy of speakers in a certain time and a certain situation. In many cultures across the globe where taboos are prevalent, they are subject to varying degrees of constraint and prohibition. It is however impossible to avoid speaking about unpleasant issues altogether. Euphemisms, on the other hand, are better ways of talking about such sensitive topics. They are embedded in the language we speak. That is why people have always felt the urge to find a way to speak about phenomena they feared, disliked, worshipped or considered taboo, while making sure that they do not name them directly. It could therefore be emphasised that the use of euphemisms are as old as our ability to use language.

Keyes (2010) claims that euphemisms are a key indicator of increasing complexity of speech. That is, saying what we mean takes a high order of intelligence. It takes an even higher order to not say what we mean, while, still convey our thought. Therefore, in expounding the essence of euphemisms as far as language and communication are concerned, we base the discussion on the communicative functions of euphemisms and circumstances that call for the use of euphemistic expressions in Nzema.

We collected the data in this paper from two different places; within the Nzema and Akan communities, generally from native Nzema speakers in Evaloe and

Jomoro both in the Western Region, and students pursuing BA. Twi Education at the Ajumako campus in the Central Region respectively. We also collected some examples from texts on Nzema and Akan and from our own intuitive knowledge of Nzema and Akan language and culture.

1. EUPHEMISMS

This section gives the etymology and some definitions of euphemism by some scholars.

Euphemism is usually defined as the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant. The word originates from the Greek word *euphēmismos*, which also stems from *euphēmos* auspicious, sounding good, from *eu-* + *phēmē* speech, from *phanai* to speak (Webster 428). Euphemisms are thus mild, polite, or disguised universally accepted statements used to express something harsh or disagreeable. They are means of clothing ugly news or things in pleasant or beautiful expressions. In other words, they are used to tone down the seriousness, severity or tragedy of situations (Nypson, 2006).

According to Rawson (1981), euphemisms are mild, agreeable, or runabout words used in place of coarse, offensive or painful ones. He adds that, euphemisms are deeply embedded in our language that even those who tend to be outspoken end up using them consciously or unconsciously. As with things dangerous or censored, taboos are somehow tempting and fascinating for us. As Burridge (2004) puts it, “what is taboo is revolting, untouchable, filthy, unmentionable, dangerous, disturbing, thrilling, but above all powerful.” This power of taboo keeps language users from avoiding the forbidden concept and compels them to preserve or violate it. Consequently, they resort respectively either to euphemism (i.e. the semantic or formal process by which the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones) or to dysphemism (i.e. the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself) (Bakhtiar, 2012). Communication is the important means used by human beings to maintain social relationships, and euphemism is a universal phenomenon of human language using process. In communication, in order to avoid language too straightly stated and to avoid doing harm to the other side (the hearer), people use euphemisms. For instance instead of saying *mogya* $\epsilon\text{letu } w\text{}$ ‘you are bleeding’, an Nzema would say *amodinli* $\epsilon\text{letu } w\text{}$ ‘unmentionable is flowing from you’. This is not to say that blood is not mentioned in Nzema, however, in order not to cause a sudden shock or embarrassment and attract other people’s attention to what is happening to the individual, the speaker will have to refine his language by resorting to a euphemism. Therefore, euphemism is a face saving mechanism which emphasizes mutual cooperation in a conversation.

That is to say, people try as much as possible to be more courteous when talking about those unpleasant or embarrassing topics. Enright (1985) thus, emphasises, “a language without euphemisms would be a defective instrument of communication.”

2. COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF EUPHEMISMS IN NZEMA

Euphemisms are primarily used in conversation, therefore, the functions or role of euphemism, taken as its effects, evokes a relationship of reciprocal coordination between the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s reception of this strategy. However, it is the speaker who exercises total control over this coordination, since it is up to him/her to use a euphemism or to decide on a direct designation. In this sense, a specific intention underlies the use of a euphemism, which generally concerns its reception by the hearer (Ren & Yu, 2013). Based on what has been stated so far, euphemizing through some particular linguistic devices, attempts to maintain the face wants of interlocutors and not to violate the depicted cultural boundaries. In doing this, language users acquire sufficient means of censoring their behavior and their tongue by virtue of being aware of taboo as well as permitted cultural domains (Bakhtiar, 2012). In this section we will find out what roles a euphemism is primarily assigned and how it responds to different motivating factors in Nzema communication.

2.1 Euphemism as a Taboo Preventer in Nzema

Taboos are formulated as social constraints on the individual’s behavior where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury (Allan & Burridge, 2006; cited in Bakhtiar, 2012). As a result, some sensitive topics are constrained or completely censored out mainly because they evoke fear, shame or disgust in participants. Taboo language is offensive, dysphemistic and against politeness standards. It is thus condemned and replaced by euphemisms. Deadly diseases, death, and human private parts are three most censored topics cross-culturally as far as taboos are concerned, and which are usually talked about with much care and highly euphemistically. The unknown sources of some diseases (particularly in the past), the lack of an absolute treatment for them and primarily the association of these with death has led to an evasive language to mention them. Applying medical jargons and circumlocutions are common ways of avoiding this taboo topic. To avoid mentioning names of some contagious diseases, Nzema resort to the following euphemistic expressions:

Ewule kenlema ‘beautiful disease’, (smallpox). One may wonder and therefore question why a deadly disease such as smallpox is qualified with beauty. The history behind the coinage *ewule kenlema* is that the people (Nzema) did not at first know the source of the disease

and looking at the rate at which it affected people within a short pace of time, they tried not to describe it at all but rather coin a name that would be understood by everybody. Even when *mgbote* was later used to refer to the disease, for fear of being affected by the disease¹, it was better concealing its devastating power than openly talk about it.

Amodinli 'unmentionable disease', (whitlow). Instead of mentioning *gogokɛ* 'whitlow' *amodinli* is used in place of it. Likewise Akan, *kaka* 'scary' is designated and has become more or less its original name. The Nzema will not mention *gogokɛ* (not because of fear) but *amodinli* because according to them, the disease is very 'cruel' and painful. When one is affected he /she cannot raise the hand (that is, if it affects any of the fingers) nor can he/she puts it down. The hand must therefore be always hanging with a prop. Among the Akan, not only is it 'cruel', but also 'scary' as the name implies. Apart from substituting *amodinli* for *gogokɛ* 'whitlow', there are other diseases which are euphemized with *amodinli* because of their association with taboo body parts and here, fear is not the sole motivating factor. For example, the woman cervix is referred to as *amodinli* 'unmentionable' in Nzema because it involves sexual organ. The disease that affects the cervix is also replaced with *amodinli* which refers indirectly to the cause of the disease rather than naming it. Akan also utilizes some preventive statements before mentioning the name of the disease which double the euphemistic force of the expressions:

Anferewoase yareɛ, 'No respecter of in-laws disease'. Nzema would say *Anzeazebɛla ewule*. Also, to say that somebody *twa*, 'is epileptic', Akan would say *fam yareɛ* 'ground disease' instead.

In the statements above, the expressions *Anferewoase* and *fam* neutralizes the negative effect of naming disgracing diseases that is, dhobi's itch or beriberi and epilepsy respectively. In fact, it would be embarrassing to be called 'the man with hernia' and so to tone down this vulgar language, Nzema would say *ɔvia ɔ ra*, 'he is carrying his baby'. Akan on the other hand designates it with *berema yareɛ*, 'men's sicknesses. Indeed, it is not only men who suffer hernia for women also do suffer umbilical hernia; however, the initial *berema* disambiguates the usage.

Mentioning human private parts (sexual organs) in an 'uncoated' language is highly unacceptable among both Nzema and Akan. Instead of *toɔblɛ* (Nzema) and *ɛtwɛ* or *twɛ* (Akan) 'vagina', Nzema and Akan respectively use *mraale nu* 'inside of woman' and *Akosua kumaa* 'little Akosua'. Furthermore, to say *toale* (Nzema) and *kɔte* or *kɔteɛ* (Akan) 'penis', Nzema and Akan respectively

substitute with *mrenyia nu* 'inside of man' and *berema* 'man'. For the Akan, one of the qualities of a man is connected with his penis. Thus, talking about these sexual organs in plain terms means one is shameless and amoral.

Death is also another area which evokes fear and nervousness. Usually, the language that is used to talk about death is created by virtue of euphemistic metaphors, metonyms and circumlocutions. Expressions with implicature are also widely used to refer to death in the most pleasant and decent way. Below are examples from Nzema and Akan.

Among the Nzema just as in Akan, they have different expressions used to talk about death of ordinary people, kings/chiefs and even people who commit suicide. When a king dies, he is not taken to be dead; actually he has travelled (both Akan and Nzema). Therefore Akan would say *Nana akɔ akuraa* 'the king has gone to the village'. Nzema on the other hand would say *Nana ɛɔ mɛlatɛle nu* 'the king has gone to an enclosed place'. In those days when wars were rampant, it was very dangerous for the death of a king in one community to be heard by members of other neighbouring communities. The king symbolises security and power and so when he dies, that particular community has already lost everything; self control, power and independence. A community whose king dies could easily be invaded and the people taken into captivity. To avert such costly perils, kings were and still are buried in the night. The situation is however not the same today. Today, special announcements are made on both radio and television about the death of a king or chief (probably because there are no more wars).

In the olden days, people who committed suicide were not buried at the community's cemetery; they were either sent to the deep forest or buried exactly where they were found dead. No funerals were held for them because they died a 'shameful death'. To talk about their death was therefore to bring a bad omen and so Nzema and Akan use *Akɔnvo* and *Akɔmfo* respectively to talk about deaths which involve suicide. Furthermore, death is also connected with pain over the loss of a loved one, and trying not to make this pain worse requires a careful choice of words such as those discussed above.

Another instance that would require the use of euphemisms has to do with birth and sex. Among many cultures the world over particularly Nzema and Akan, for fear that a pregnant woman may be hurt spiritually, they do not mention plainly that a woman is pregnant. Among the Nzema, when a child is even born, it is not considered human until it gets to its toddlerhood. The belief is that the child may go (die) at any time and therefore to avoid this from happening, not until the child toddles he/she is not given a name. The question one may ask is: how do Nzema then talk about pregnancy? Because of the reason given above, to say directly that a woman is pregnant, Nzema express it in the following:

¹ It was believed that gods sometimes cause disease outbreak as a means of punishment. Therefore, talking about the disease negatively meant insulting the gods and that could mar the situation completely.

- i. yeva ε kolε (she has taken stomach)
- ii. yevo anwuma (she has climbed up)
- iii. ɔ nwo εhakyi (her body has changed)
- iv. ye fualε εdεla ɔ ti (her menses has passed over her head)

Akan on the other hand, express the same idea this way:

- i. wafa yafunu (she has taken stomach)
- ii. ne ho adane (her body has changed)

The above euphemistic expressions demonstrate that language is indeed productive and speakers will always find the better way of utilizing it. To say simply, εnrenzεε and nyinsεn among the Nzema and Akan respectively, they use the aforementioned (above) as substitutes. Just as the mentioning of pregnancy in a plain language was censored, so was the announcement of a woman who gave birth. It was believed among the Nzema that to announce the birth of a child meant inviting spiritual attack for the child. Therefore the child was not taken out until about two weeks. Some do not even carry their babies out until s/he toddles as already emphasised. Therefore to inform a relative about the birth of a new born, the pregnant woman is spoken of as: yebɔ ε kolε ‘she has broken her stomach’, yedwu aze ‘she has descended’, yezokoε ‘she has rested her load’.

On sex, there are also euphemisms used to talk about the concept. With few exceptions, sex has always been considered a private matter and as such inappropriate to be discussed in public. Even in most western cultures where euphemisms are scarcely used, the mention of sex is however mostly prohibited. Nevertheless, since sex is such an essential part of life, pretending it does not exist by not speaking about it is impossible. Therefore, to talk about sex in a way that would render one not being insolent, Nzema and Akan use jargons such as *nla* and *nna*, ‘to sleep with someone’, εvalε and *wafa* ‘taking/taken somebody’ respectively to replace εlilε (Nzema) and εdie (Akan-Twi) ‘to eat somebody’ (to have sexual intercourse with somebody). Nzema also describe sex euphemistically as having a face-to-face encounter with somebody of the opposite sex. Therefore to say *beledi be nwo* ‘they are having sex’, they rather say *beledi anyezo* ‘they are having a face-to-face affair’.

2.2 Euphemism as a Stylistic Marker in Nzema

As indicated earlier, a large number of euphemisms are not directly linked to taboos, rather they have more positive connotations and seem to be more appropriate in a particular context. Consequently, euphemism interacts with style and each certain style defines the set of euphemisms which are conventional within that style (Allan & Burridge, 2007; cited in Bakhtiar, 2012). These euphemisms therefore come up as a result of the speaker’s stylistic intuition to maintain politeness in the conversation as stylistic euphemisms carry more positive connotations and are aimed at appropriately presenting the denotatum.

For instance, interlocutors who possess unequal status both physically and psychologically usually try as much as possible not to embarrass each other. They do this by picking up an appropriate language or style. For example, instead of *abubura* (Nzema) and *apakye* (Akan) ‘cripple’, *egyakε wulera* and ɔɔ *ne nan mu* ‘difficult to walk’ is used. The fact is, euphemisms do not change reality. If somebody is insane, a euphemism does not correct the person’s insanity. However, in order not to heighten the condition of the person, a euphemism intervenes by ‘clothing’ a vulgar language that may be used. In this regard, a courteous Nzema and Akan speaker would not refer to a mad person as εzεε (Nzema) and *bɔdam* (Akan), rather an Nzema speaker would say ɔnde *kpɔkε*, ‘s/he is ill’. An Akan on the other hand would say ɔwɔ *adwenem haw*, ‘s/he has brain impairment’. In the same vein an Nzema and Akan speaker would talk of a blind person as ɔ *nye le wulera* and ɔyare *n’ani*, ‘s/he is suffering from the eye’ respectively and not *anyezinleravole* (Nzema) and *n’ani afura* (Akan), ‘s/he is blind’.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to examine the communicative role of euphemisms in Nzema. We however discussed the Nzema examples alongside Akan to emphasize the place of euphemisms in these two sister languages and to show that euphemising is a common phenomenon among almost all Ghanaian cultures.

It has been observed from the discussions that Nzema speakers apply euphemisms to meet different communicative purposes. Although some of these euphemistic expressions are utilized to mitigate a fear based taboo like death, most euphemisms are used to avoid face threats but consider the face wants of participants in a conversation where no fear of physical harm is involved but their commitment to politeness is the primary motivating factor for using them. In some other function, euphemisms are used to mark different speech styles from euphemistic to thoroughly dysphemistic. Here, euphemisms do not function as responding to taboo words but are considered words with more pleasant and positive connotations and seek to promote the denotatum of words to fit in a particular context.

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