LEXICAL CREATIVITY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF AKAN TALK RADIO IN GHANA.

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of indigenous Ghanaian languages in the socio-political development of Ghana. In particular, it examines how linguistic creativity in Akan, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Ghana, enhances effective communication in the national socio-political dialogue between the government and the people. Langley (1971) has noted that incomplete understanding of language may lead to sorts of misunderstandings, distortions and cultural confusion, not to mention false values and irritating pretensions. Even though English is the official language in Ghana, many people, especially in rural communities, either have very little or no proficiency in it to engage effectively in national socio-political communication, which hitherto has been by all intents and purposes, English-based. This state of affairs could potentially lead to miscommunication between the government and majority of the governed, e.g. the masses' inability to understand and therefore appreciate government policies.

With the repeal of the criminal libel law in 2001 that lead to the proliferation of private-owned media, especially radio broadcasting stations, radio broadcasting has become the a major institution that sets the agenda for national political discourse in the public domain. This is achieved through radio talk in indigenous Ghanaian languages (even though the newspapers are written in English) by creating a platform for direct communication between the government and the people, i.e. while radio talk allows majority of the people to participate in national political discourse, it also provide opportunity for the government to respond to concerns, explain or correct misinterpreted policies and wrong impressions. The important role language plays in this process cannot be overemphasized - both radio presenters and callers create appropriate vocabulary that expresses their understanding/conceptualization of these socio-political issues. The main source of data for this study is a body of spoken output in the context of radio talk in Akan in Ghana. This study shows that modern governance and government policies are better communicated to the people in the language they understand best. The data from this study sheds light on how a language is able to directly reflect new social institutions and customs through lexical, including metaphoric, innovations. It also shows how the use of indigenous African languages in African socio-political discourse may enhance effective communication between government and the people leading to the achievement of socio-political advancement and national development.

Key words: African languages, lexical creativity, effective communication, national development.

1. Introduction

Before British colonial rule, Africa was divided into several independent states, some highly developed or sophisticated in the area of politics, religion and socio-economic life (Ward 1967). The ancient Ghana and Mali empires may be cited as examples of such pre-colonial kingdoms or empires with highly sophisticated socio-political systems. For instance, the Akwamu, Asante, Bono and Denkyira kingdoms were highly sophisticated socio-political states in pre-colonial times in what has become modern Ghana.

During the British Colonial rule, it was believed that such traditional African states would gradually develop into efficient organs of local governments which would in turn pave the way for the growth of a sense of nationality and the capacity to run national governments. The aim of the British indirect rule then was to educate and guide African leaders (chiefs/kings) to understand the problems of modern governance, and leave it to them to explain modern ideas to their people (Ward 1967). Indeed, colonization in Ghana brought several of these hitherto politically independent kingdoms into a single sovereign state. In other words, modern Ghana is constituted by several of these hitherto highly sophisticated and independent political states.

Thus, we may say on the one hand that the objective of the British indirect rule of build a single nation out of these independent states was achieved. However, it is arguable to say that the second objective of the British indirect rule was achieved, i.e. to educate and guide African leaders to understand modern governance, and leave it to them to explain modern ideas to their people. For a fact, the transition has been chaotic. The first two and a half decades of post independent Ghana, like many post independent African countries (e.g. Liberia, Sierra Leone) were characterized by characterized by

lots of political unrests and instability, i.e. several unlawful military overthrows of democratically elected governments many of which received massive support from the masse. This suggests that the African leaders may have become unpopular because they either failed or were simply unable to explain modern governance to the masses.

In this paper, I wish to suggest that although failed governance in post-colonial Africa may be explained in economic and political terms, for example, that the current political stability in Ghana is attributable largely to democratization, the language with which modern governance was explained to the people may have played a huge role in this misunderstanding/miscommunication between African governments and their people. For instance, majority of the Ghanaian population does not have an appreciable level of English competence to engage in any meaningful/effective communication in it. Yet, English is the official language of the government – it is the language of the executive, legislature and judiciary. In other words, the president addresses the people in English, the language of parliamentary debates is English and laws are formulated and interpreted in English in spite of the fact that many people do not know or understand English. Until recently, it was the main language of the media (print, radio and TV). Thus, in principle, many Ghanaians were cut off from political discourses between the government and the people. Again, it is true that the long periods of severe restrictions of the Ghanaian media (caused by the political instability) may have contributed to the lack of effective communication between governments and the governed. However, the impact of political talk radio (mostly in the Ghanaian languages) on Ghana's democracy cannot be over emphasized. This paper discusses the role of Akan talk radio in the development of Ghana's democracy.

2. Methods

Cruse (1986) submits that any empirical study must rest, at some point, on a body of primary data whose factuality is not questioned. He identifies two principal sources of such data as (1) the productive output, written or spoken, of native speakers of the language, and (2) the intuitive semantic judgments by native speakers of linguistic materials of one kind or another. The main source of data in this paper is a body of primary productive spoken output of Akan speakers in Ghana. The data were extracted from a number of audio recordings of talk radio shows from seven privately-owned in urban Ghana (Accra-Tema and Kumasi) between September 2001 and June 2002. The following radio stations served as the source of the data from the Accra-Tema metropolis: Peace F.M., Radio Univers and Adom F.M. while the data from Kumasi were taken from Fox F.M., Kapital radio, Ash F.M. and Mercury F.M. The analysis is largely based on the researcher's own intuitive knowledge as a native speaker of Akan. However, from time to time the researcher subjected her intuition to test by consulting other native speakers of Akan.

3. Background

There are 79 languages belonging to the Proto Tano, Volta-Congo language groups in Ghana (Lewis 2009). These languages are distributed over an estimated speaker population of 24, 339,838 people(CIA, world fact book 2011) spread over ten geographic/administrative regions. It is important to note, however, that it is not always clear whether language documenters use ethnicity as the basis for classifying these languages or not. A cursory look at the situation may suggest that the 79 languages are ethnic-based, namely that there are as many ethnic groups as there are languages in Ghana. However, a more careful examination shows that what is often classified as a

language group consists of a cluster of ethnically autonomous but linguistically related groups. For example, Akan, the largest indigenous language group in Ghana, consists of a cluster of ethnic groups including Agona, Asante, Akuapim, Akyem, Assin, Bono, Breman, Fante, Gomoa, and Kwahu. Each of these groups has a distinct variety of Akan. Even though all the varieties are largely mutually intelligible, each dialect group considers themselves as a distinct ethnic group from the others. Thus, there seems to be more ethnic groups than language groups in Ghana. Nevertheless, English is the official language in Ghana.

According to the 2000[1] population studies figures (Ghana Statistical Services 2002), the Akan ethnic group alone constitutes 49.1% of the national population; Mole-Dagbani16.5%; Ewe 12.7%; Ga-Adangbe 8%, and Guan 4.4%. These figures which are represented on a chart in fig.1.1 below also roughly correspond to language distribution in Ghana. This is because the census figures do not make a clear distinction between language groups and ethnic groups.
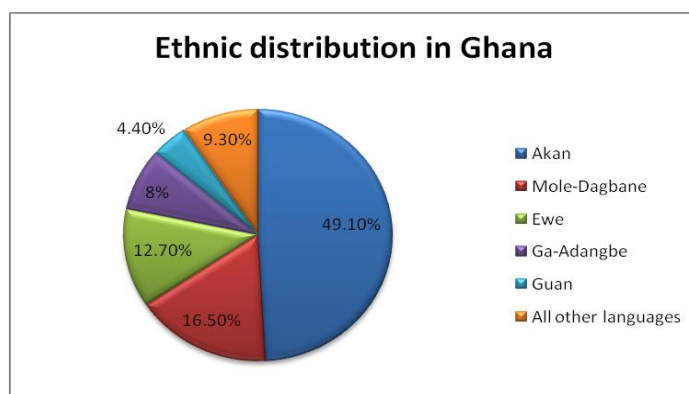

Fig.1.1: Ethnic/ language distribution in Ghana

The chart above shows that Akan is the largest ethnic/language group in Ghana. This implies that about half of Ghana's population potentially speaks Akan as a native

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[1] The details of the 2010 census figures have not been published yet.

language. Even though there is no official legislature on Akan as the national language of Ghana, in practice, it is. In fact, Akan is the most widely spoken indigenous Ghanaian language both in Ghana and outside Ghana (i.e. both in the diaspora and border countries). For instance, the UK 2011 population census questionnaire was accessible / available in Akan. Akan is a well studied language if not the most studied Ghanaian language. There is a lot of published material in/on Akan (Fante, and the two major Twi sub-dialects). Dating back to the pre-colonial missionary period, these publications cover a range of topics, including learning materials (Bellon 1972 [first published in 1911], Rapp 1936), linguistic descriptions (Balmer and Grant 1929, Welmers 1946, Akrofi 1965, Dolphyne 1988), dictionaries: (Christeller 1933, Kani 1953 [first published in 1881]), and readers (Adaye 1948, Asamoah 1975). Currently, the linguistics department of the University of Ghana, Legon, runs undergraduate and post graduate degree programmes in Akan, where theses and dissertation are written in and on Akan.

In addition, it is the fastest growing Ghanaian language in terms of acquiring non-native speakers. As Guerini (2006) reports about 44% of Ghana's population speaks Akan either as a second language (L2) or a vehicular language, i.e. used as a means to an end. That Akan has emerged as the de facto national language of Ghana is not surprising given that about half of the country's population potentially speaks the language as L1 and the fact that much of private economic activity (markets, shops, public transport etc) is dominated by the ethnic majority Akans. For instance, Dolphyne (1988) describes Akan as an important language of trade in the Ga-speaking national capital, Accra and indeed, in other market centres in Ghana, (e.g. Tamale, the Northern regional capital) where Akan is not a native language. Consequently, much of private radio broadcasting across the country, which is a more recent phenomenon in Ghana, is

in Akan (further contributing to the status of Akan as the fastest growing indigenous language in Ghana). This implies that political talk radio (and any benefits that come with it) in Akan is potentially accessible to a large number of Ghana's population.

4. Talk radio and democracy in Ghana

Political theorists (e.g. Thompson 1970) have argued that for democracy to succeed the citizens should be well informed about public affairs. Hofstetter et al (1999) also identify an informed citizenry as one of the theoretical foundations of democracy and argue that while uniformed citizenry may not pose a threat to democracy (they may simply opt out of politics), misinformed citizenry may misdirect not only electoral outcomes but also the direction of public policy more generally. The role/contribution of radio broadcasting, in particular political talk radio, to citizens' knowledge about public affairs has been emphasized in the literature (Barker and Knight 2000, Bennett 2001, Davis and Owen 1998, Hollander 1999).

Barker (1999: 528) has defined *political talk radio* as 'call-in-shows that emphasize discussion of politicians, elections, and public policy issues'. Political talk radio began and was described in the early 1990s in America as a new medium for political communication (Davis and Owen 1998). Bennett (2001) has investigated whether or not political talk radio contributes to citizens' knowledge about public affairs and has concluded that indeed, talk radio could help citizens obtain information to make reasoned political judgment. Typically, talk radio has the following characteristics:

- It has a regular individual as a host;
- The host constitutes a panel with different people to discuss topical issues;

- It features interviews with different individuals;

- It includes listener participation through call-ins, i.e. live broadcasts of conversation between the host and somewhat screened listeners;

- The show is usually segmented with advertisements.

Talk radio is a fairly recent phenomenon in Ghana, starting only in the late 1990s. However, currently, it is the most effective platform for informing and shaping public opinions in Ghana. On the one hand, we may attribute the late start of talk radio in Ghana to the political atmosphere in the past that created long periods of severe restrictions of the Ghanaian media. These restrictions were not merely a matter of political expedience; they were a matter of jurisprudence. For instance, the criminal libel and seditious laws of Ghana were passed by the parliament of Ghana's first republic, (Act 29) of the Criminal Code of the 1960 constitution. These laws had been enforced by various governments in the past to imprison and torture journalist and individuals who were critical of the government. This resulted in a culture of silence at two levels as identified by Anthonissen (2008: 401): (i) an authority imposes censorship in order to obscure information it believes to be harmful either to itself or others (ii) an individual or a group exercising self-censorship by withholding information believed to be harmful to themselves or to others. In other words, the culture of silence in Ghana did not only prohibit media publication of certain kinds of political news. It also inhibited citizens who would otherwise speak out. During that period only the state media (press, TV and radio), which invariably became government even though in principle they were to be independent of government, were active. In addition, the use of English as the main language of the media in Ghana cut off majority of Ghana's population from participating in any meaningful and affective public

political discourse because they did not have the requisite communicative competence to do so in English.

However, in 1992, Ghana returned to democratic rule and the country's airwaves were liberalized. The 1992 constitution guarantees freedom of the press and independent media. It also prohibits censorship. This led to the emergence of several privately owned radio stations and eventually political talk radio. There are several newspapers and TV stations across the country. However, radio is Ghana's most popular medium (BBC News 2011). This is probably because while English remains the main language of both TV and the press (even in privately owned media), most privately owned radio stations broadcast about 98% of their programmes in one indigenous Ghanaian language or another, e.g. Peace FM, Adom FM (Akan), Obonu FM (Ga).

In Ghana, topics for talk radio typically emerge from newspaper reviews. Even though the newspapers are written in English, translated and summarized versions of the selected articles are relayed to listeners. Again, even though the members on the panel may be competent to hold a discussion in English, the reviews are done in one indigenous Ghanaian language or another. At some point in the discussion, listeners are allowed to call in to the programmes to ask questions, make comments or express opinions about any of the topics raised. Thus, talk radio in Ghana allows listeners who may have not read or cannot read the newspapers to comment on the subject matter of the review. It is important to point out that the repeal of the criminal libel law in 2001 emboldened both talk radio presenters and their listeners/callers to broaden not only the scope but also the depth of political discourse in talk radio (See Agyekum 2004). Thus,

talk radio may be said to be a significant vehicle of public opinion in Ghana today as it was in America in the early 1990s.

Since talk radio and democracy are relatively new phenomena in Ghana in any of the indigenous Ghanaian languages may require a specialized vocabulary. In other words, special vocabulary may be needed in order to talk about concepts which are relatively new to a language, both radio presenters who try to explain this new concept through to the masses through translation and the masses who contribute to such radio programmes need to create appropriate vocabulary that express their understanding/conceptualization of democracy as a political system. In the process, the language used to explain or talk about these concepts may shape public opinion and understanding of these concepts and systems over time. In Akan talk radio, both radio presenters and callers resort to lexical creativity through various semantic processes to create an understanding of modern issues and concepts that are relatively exotic to the language and culture but which are essential for modern life. This paper suggests that Akan talk radio is contributing to the development of democracy in Ghana through lexical creativity, i.e. semantic extension and semantic creation including metaphors.

5. The role of language creativity in national development

The lexicon of every language undergoes modification (semantic change) from time to time to communicate and reflect changes as well as the development of new socio-cultural and technology that introduce novel concepts, objects and notions in every linguistic community (Bolinger and Sears 1981). Two major ways by which semantic change occurs in languages are (i) semantic extension arising from the creative use of

language and (ii) coinage. However, semantic extension is believed to be the main vehicle for semantic change (Francis 2000). Semantic extension occurs when already existing lexemes are used with new meanings without changing their forms, and where the new meanings are somehow related to at least one of the existing meanings or senses. Semantic change is possible because many people in a speech community have some common experiences and share many connotations of lexemes. Semantic extension occurs through any of the following processes: metaphor, metonymy, personification, specialization, generalization. However, this paper focuses on semantic change through metaphor.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that we make sense of new experiences or concepts we come into contact with through metaphor and that metaphorical language reflects metaphorical thought. Metaphor has been defined as understanding one experience or concept in terms of another with a directionality of transfer from a basic meaning to a more abstract one (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Metaphor involves making inferences across conceptual boundaries. It is typically referred to in terms of "associative leaps" from one domain to another where the leap is motivated by analogy (Hopper and Traugott 1993:77). Metaphors are creative and capable of giving new meaning to our past, daily activity and what we know and believe. Metaphors also tend to be appropriate and meaningful to members of a generation, experience and culture. The extension of metaphorical meanings to literal lexemes often results in polysemy where a single lexical item has multiple related meanings or senses. In Akan political talk radio this is the most frequently used semantic process in creating appropriate vocabulary to communicate new concepts and ideas in public political discourse. Examples are shown below:

BRIBERY AND CORRUPTION:

These two concepts are relatively new in Akan (and possibly other Ghanaian languages). Until recently, there were no specific lexical items to denote these. However, in recent times the Akan lexemes *prɔɛ* (the rotten), *adanmudeɛ* (a room thing) and kɛtɛasehyɛ (putting under a mat) have emerged to denote these concepts in Akan and in Ghana. The lexeme *prɔɛ* basically refers to fresh, perishable products such as food. In the Akan context, *prɔɛ* implies unusefulness as rotten items are usually disposed of as quickly as possible, for example, because of their tendency to produce offensive smell due to lack of appropriate storage facilities, e.g. refrigeration. However, its basic meaning has been metaphorically extended on the basis of its connotations to include moral rottenness or rottenness of moral character, corruption, in modern political discourse.

The lexical items created to explain bribery are), *adanmudeɛ* (a room thing) and *kɛtɛasehyɛ* (putting under a mat). *Adnmudɛ* literally means 'something that is found or done in the room,' while *kɛtɛasehyɛ* literally means the act of putting something under a mat. Both terms imply 'concealment'. Thus, we may conclude that the metaphorical language used to talk about bribery in Akan suggests that the concept is perceived or understood as an act or practice that one must hide or hide to do. In other words, the idea of concealment implied in the lexicalization of this bribery illustrates how it is conceptually structured in the language. The metaphorical structure of bribery and corruption in Akan resonates Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) assert that metaphorical structure is often coherent with the fundamental values in a given culture. In Akan culture, anything desirable, for example, a new born baby, a new bride, a young adult

who successfully goes through puberty rites, is openly displayed (typically on a mat) for public viewing and admiration. It follows, therefore, that anything that needs concealing - cannot be done or displayed openly for public view or scrutiny must be undesirable.

STATE CABINET:

While the function of a state cabinet may not be entirely new to Akan traditional political system, Akan traditional political system differs significantly from modern democracy. For instance, the Akan traditional political system is monarchical but democratic rule is not. In traditional Akan politics, the functional equivalents of cabinet ministers will be 'agyinatufo', which literally means people who literally move out of or step aside from a public meeting in order to confer. In modern political parlance in Akan, cabinet ministers are called *aban apamfo,* a term which literally means government sewers. Thus, the conceptualization of modern cabinet ministers, people who put more abstract things (e.g. ideas) together to form a government in terms of sewers, people who put pieces of clothing together to make a beautiful unit, is metaphorical. Thus, by this lexical item, Akan speakers in Ghana are left in no doubt what the work of cabinet ministers is. It is important to note that the change in lexical items between Akan traditional cabinet ministers and modern political cabinet emphasizes the shift in the conceptualization of the function of cabinet ministers in the two systems.

STATE MINISTRY:

In recent times, the term used to denote a state ministry is *asoeɛ*, a traditional agricultural term that basically refers to a 'resting place', where carriers of physical load (from the farm) put their load down in order to rest. Through metaphorical extension,

the term has come to also mean some abstract place where a government and the people may put a load, not physical but psychological, in order to get some "rest" in modern political parlance. This is the basis for lexicalizing a state minister as *ɔsoafoɔ,* a carrier of a psychological rather than psychological load.

EDITOR:

Because the topic for political talk radio originates from newspaper reviews of which editorials are a part, 'editor' is a regularly featured word in political talk radio. Even though the concept of editing is relatively new to Akan, the lexical item ɔ*samufoɔ* has emerged in recent times to refer to a newspaper editor. The term literally refers to a person who sorts out tangible things. However, by metaphorical extension, the term now applies to a person who sorts out intangible things such as words and ideas.

NATIONAL RECONCILIATION:

In 2000, the reign of the longest lasting political regime in Ghana since independence, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) came to an end. The NDC metamorphosed from a military regime (PNDC-1979-1991) into a political party (1992-2000). During this regime, there were several reports of abuse and torture that went reported because of the culture of silence. The leading opposition party at the time, New Patriotic Party (NPP), made these alleged abuse torture their chief campaign message. When the NPP assumed power in 2001, they set up a national commission of enquiry, the National Reconciliation Commission, to investigate these allegations of abuse. The lexical item *afisiesie,* which literally means house cleaning, emerged to denote this concept of reconciliation. The connection between the literal meaning of the word and its metaphorical use lies is the relationship between literal house cleaning and the work the

commission has been entrusted to do. Literal house cleaning involves the removal of physical dirt and unwanted materials from a house. Even though the work of the commission does not include physical dirt removal, the removal of pain, resentment etc. from the hearts and minds of people of the 'house of Ghana that is supposed to be achieved at the end of its sitting may metaphorically be compared with the removal of dirt that takes place in literal house cleaning exercise. Thus, through lexical creativity (and spreading it through political talk radio) citizens are adequately informed about the nature of the work of the commission, i.e. to distinguish the commission's work from that of a kangaroo court.

Below are extracts illustrating how these metaphorical creations are used in context. Innovative lexical items are underlined in each extract.

1.   *Asoeɛ a ɛhwɛ mmaa ne mmofra yiedie so de nnawotwe reyɛ nkyerɛkyerɛ afa abɔdeɛmu nyansapɛ (science), nkontabuo (maths) ne   abɛɛfo nimdeɛ (technology) ama mmaayewa a wɔawie J.S.S ne S.S.S....."*

The Ministry of women's affairs is organizing a one-week workshop on science, mathematics and technology for J.S.S. and S.S.S. female graduates.

2.   *Nnora na ɔman yi afisiesie adwuma   badwa (National Reconciliation Commission) hyɛɛ wɔn dwumadie ase…….*

The National Reconciliation Commission sat yesterday to begin their work.....

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that democracy has ensured the liberalization of Ghana's airwaves which has allowed the emergence of political talk radio in Ghana. I have also argued that political talk radio, especially if it is conducted in an indigenous Ghanaian language, is very instrumental in the development of democracy in Ghana. This is because such radio programmes make political discourse and information more accessible to a majority of the citizens. Through lexical creativity in political talk radio in Ghanaian languages, e.g. Akan, both politicians are better able to engage in a meaningful political discourse, i.e. the government is able to explain its policies and governance to the people in a language they truly understand. Once the people have a full understanding of political affairs, they are able to give government feedback (praise or criticism) through talk radio programmes in their own languages.

Political talk radio in Akan has several implications for national development in Ghana. The obvious linguistic implication is the expansion of the Akan vocabulary that allows the language to express all aspects of modern life. In addition, idiomatic expressions, proverbs and archaic expressions that could have been lost as a result of irregular usage are now being reintroduced through semantic creations and semantic extensions. Secondly, there are socio-psychological implications. In the past, most people thought it a dent on one's education to exhibit the same level of proficiency in a Ghanaian language as in English. Because of the low prestige associated with proficiency in Akan, many educated Akans made very little effort, if any, to sound 'local'. In the current dispensation where educated persons (these broadcasters) are seen or heard making conscious effort to sound 'local' the old notion is most likely to be eroded. This is because, these broadcasters, informally, have become models for

most people especially, the young. This may potentially result in many more scholars of Akan. Finally, as Langley (1971) has noted, "incomplete understanding of language may lead to sorts of misunderstandings, distortions and cultural confusion not to mention false values and irritating pretensions. However, with the emergence of talk radio programmes in indigenous Ghanaian languages, modern governance and government policies may be better communicated to the people. It is only through effective communication between government and the people that socio political advancement including advancement in democratic governance is achievable.

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