Connotation of Profanity in Ewe Place Names

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Abstract

Aim: Toponyms are universal to the world but relevant and specific to cultures across the world. Humans use toponyms in various contexts in society. Toponyms are avoided in a particular speech context, due to its social, linguistic and cultural consequences for the name bearer and users. Toponyms sometimes attract ambiguity in the meaning assigned them. This ambiguity degenerates into connotative meanings. One such connotative practice among the Ewes is profanity. The Ewes frown on the use of profane words and has punitive codes and consequences for its guilt. However, same community beautifully internalizes profane connotation into place names. The paper investigates the morphology of profanity in Ewe toponyms.

Methods: The study used speech act theory and lexical morphology. Data for the qualitative study was collected using a WhatsApp platform for Ewe Teachers and traditional community leaders through snowballing.

Results: The study found that the connotation centred on the human genitalia (penis, scrotum, and vagina) have been the sources of compounding in the crafting of profanity in the place names. The names are used mainly by the youth in teasing and in group joking practices in oral language generally in casual or playful communication. The names usually have roots and stems that take on derivational and inflectional morphemes in the process of forming the profane connotation. Though the Ewes frown upon profanity in official language, the usage in place names is decorous and linguistically acceptable.

Conclusion: The appropriate use of these names in jovial in-group and entertaining utterances demonstrates the linguistic competence of the interlocutors of the speech act.

Recommendation: The study recommends a further research on the syntactic implications of the profane names in the Ewe language.

Keywords: Communication, connotation, Ewe place names, peers, profane.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The language of a speech community is naturally interconnected with their culture and notion. This idea explains that there is a strong interface between a people’s language and their cultural practices. Its main assumption is how language is used as a social and cultural resources in everyday practice. Foley (1997) explains that language has an instrumental function to perform in society; for instance the meaning behind the use of a word in different forms. One can therefore use language as a microscopic lens to view and understand the social practices and day-to-day activities of a society (Agyekum, 2006).

Generally, the name users of a speech community perceive their own name in their socially accepted contexts hence develop a socially accepted attitude toward such names and their users. Hysenaj (2019) observes socio-onomastics as the sociolinguistic study of names. Hysenaj further explained that the lenses of socio-onomastics is usually focused onto how names are used in human interaction. It explains that humans use names in various contexts in society. Some names are avoided in a particular social context due to the social, linguistic and cultural consequences a name can cause for the name bearer and the name users. Similarly, the name users of a speech community perceive their own name in their socially accepted contexts, hence develop a socially accepted attitudes toward such names and their users.

Names serve various functions. Place names are noted as the symbol of cultural identity for people, by relating a person to a particular locality but not the other (Mireku-Gyema & Mensah, 2015; Kyiileyang, 2017). This association of place names to people resolves the challenge of ambiguity in the arbitrariness of names (Helleland et al., 2012; Radding & Western, 2010). As place names sometimes tell the history of a group of people, it is also sometimes seen as the source of conflict, litigation and again sometimes help in resolving land disputes. Every indigenous name in Africa has traditional historical demonstrations about either the socio-cultural, socio-historical and or sometimes socio-economic occurrences of the people. This is particularly observable of indigenous place names and personal names (Mireku-Gyimah & Mensah, 2015). One of such socio-cultural demonstrations is the assignment of meaning to the names. The assignment of meaning to a place name requires some linguistic considerations (including the morphology, syntax and pragmatics). It is usually constructed through naturally authentic native intuitiveness which is the linguistic competence of the name givers (Yekple et al., 2020).

It is observed that the arbitrariness of place names sometimes results in projecting ambiguity in the meaning assigned to it. This ambiguity usually degenerates into connotative meaning to the place names. One such connotative practice among the Ewe speech community is profanity. This practice is generally found in the oral knowledge of the people. It is worth noting that any linguistic production is mostly rule conditioned (Katamba, 1993) and hence explains that linguistic rules are statements of principles responsible for the observed regularities in the speech of a particular language (Kongo & Mends, 2016).

Several words have been used in literature interchangeably for the same concept – profanity, obscenity, cursing, taboo, swearing, foul language, dirty words, four letter words and colorful language (Murphy, 2012). This paper maintain profanity and relate its meaning operationally to sexuality and its sense related lexicon in the Ewe language. Profanity has received scholarly attention but generally focusing on frequency of gender relativity of usage. Profanity has also received attention in political speech and recently the effects of profane language on social
behavior of people. This study takes a deviation to focus its lenses on how profanity has been internalized in Ewe place names. The Ewe speech community frowns on the use of profane words and has punitive codes and consequences for its guilt. However same community beautifully internalizes profane into its place names. The paper considers the external property, the illocutionary force of language regarding how profanity is internalized in Ewe place names leveraging on the linguistic property of polysemy.

1.1 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research objectives; (1) Identifying Ewe place names that have internalized profane connotations (2) Investigate the morphology of profanity in Ewe place names.

2.0 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

Several theoretical positions have been advanced as to how to analyze the meaning of speech in an environment. According to Leech (1983a), evolutionary theory explains how a species always end up more or less well adapted to its environment. Equally, an animal communication system is successful in survival of the species that use it. This biological sense of communication enables human language to function in our daily life. In the views of Leech, language has a formal (internal properties: the constitution of the words) and functional (external properties: the various usage of words) in the language. Generally, each property though usually opposing themselves on their separate levels, has some constituent of honesty in their individual fields. According to Austin (1962), human beings do not use language just anyhow to utter statements. In linguistic philosophy every utterance performs some actions. Austin’s theory assumes that every statement by a speaker has a sense and an illocutionary force. The sense is the intended meaning of the speaker and the illocutionary force is the pragmatics of it (the contextual social effect of the statement on the hearer). Austin's theory projects that things we intend to do when we speak, how we do them may succeed or fail due to the context (Thomas, 1995). It is in the pragmatic statement that the act of profanity in a name manifests.

The theory of Lexical Morphology propounded by Katamba (1986), an upgraded development of Generative grammar is employed for the morphological analysis of the names. The theory denotes that words in a language are broken into functionally meaningful lexical units whose grammatical meanings are assessable. In application, Generative Grammar assumes that the human brain has the linguistic capacity to generate volumes of words in a language. When such words are generated, the linguistic responsibility of Lexical Morphology is to use sets of rules to analyze their form and function. Accordingly, Katamba (1993) explains that any linguistic production is mostly rule conditioned. In arriving at the profane connotation of the place names, we hence used the theory of Lexical Morphology to break the names into their morphemic constituents. The morphemic constituents which guided the determination and conclusion of profanity in the place names are demonstrated.

2.1 Empirical Review

2.1.1 Names as linguistic and cultural phenomenon

As names are identified as linguistic and cultural phenomenon, Hysenaj (2019) observes that no language is yet sufficient with permanent conditions that lead people to name giving hence, there are no limits to how names are used. Hysenaj is of the view that due to direct and indirect contacts
with different cultures, political, commercial, economic, social and sportive relations, the use of names is generally flexible to social and cultural contexts. Based on the linguistic resources and the prevalent culture of a society, names may be used creatively or in a common way to generate a variety of social meanings and build an explicit identity for the bearer or the name referent. The values that are important or useful in the particular linguistic society also permeates the usage of the name. Guasti (2002) concludes the argument that language use is governed by truth conditions called denotative semantics and by felicity conditions described as pragmatics which is the connotation or contextual usage.

2.1.2 Profanity in names

Heins (2007) observes that profanity is very ancient, and that the declaration of a word as profane has been the duty of religious authority dating to biblical age. Profanity is a part of daily life and can cover every aspect of life including names. Defining what constitute profanity is very difficult task according to Gitter (2010). Profanity “serves the emotional needs of the speaker and affects listeners emotionally. It permits a speaker to express strong emotions and/or produce an emotional impact on a listener. The impact can be positive, as in joking and sexual enticement, or it can be negative, as in name calling and sexual harassment” (Jay, 2000).

It is difficult for the legal fraternity classifying a word/statement to be taboo or profane (Heins, 2007). From the theory of sociolinguistics, profanity is a language feature most commonly considered to exhibit differential use of words between males and females. A good volume of research has investigated identity parameters such as gender, age, or social class patterns which affect the use of profanity (Thelwall, 2008; Bamman et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Looking at the difficulty in classifying what constitute the definition of profanity, Coats (2021) suggests a caveat which should consider the pragmatic contexts of the use of profane items. To support Jay and Janschewitz (2007), Coats (2021) advance the argument that many of the lexical items which may be considered profane on the basis of a particular usage which can be translated as derogatory, offensive or vulgar, could equally be used inoffensively in casual communication.

In Jay (2009), it is unclear and doubtful how children learn profane words in the process of language acquisition. However, Jay et al. (2006) argues that children with normal hearing naturally acquire profane lexicon the same way non-profane language is acquired from their early years. Like other aspects of language, this learning process is attributed to parents, care givers and peers as the sources of tuition. Murphy (2012) thinks that the process which sometimes start as mimicry, the reaction of their guardians causes this class of words to gain long-lasting emotional connotations. However, the social interactive nature of language makes it possible that children learn profane words through the act of socialization in speech practices. Jay and Janschewitz, (2008) corroborates this position to say that native speakers of a language in a culture learns who it is appropriate to speak a profane word to and when to say those words to avoid linguistic reprimand.

Rathje (2014) used a survey methodology to investigate attitudes toward the use of profane language in Danish among young people and the elderly. This study found that younger respondents are more likely to consider English-language profanities such as fuck and shit to be strong swear words when used in Danish than are older respondents. Wajnryb (2005) suggests that profanity in language is sometimes used to maintain informal and friendly relationship with the receiver, thus reinforcing social connections between interlocutors. These may include playful
expressions, solidarity markers and some polysemous items having a secondary, inoffensive denotation. Though the discussion above may be valid in the case of place names, Gitter (2010) is of the view that profane language has the possibility of influencing people’s social behavior in unsavory ways even when fleeting. Profane words are usually used by peers to achieve positive interactional outcomes like joke, humour, social commentary, sex talk and in-group slang (Zoglin, 2008; Jay, 2000).

According to Thomas (1983), context and language specifics remain constant in the attempt of definition and declaration of a word to be profane. This indicates that the time, place, interlocutors, purpose and mood of use of a word may determine it to be considered profane. This suggests that a word may be classified profane in one context but may not in another context. To use or not to use a profane word or language depends largely on the intent of conversation between the interlocutors. It is equally basic for both native speakers and non-native speakers to acquire the folk knowledge of profane words. The challenge however is that, it is difficult for non-native speakers to determine when to use same word without being accused of profanity (Thomas, 1983).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The paper employed a qualitative research using a descriptive analysis. Data for the paper was gathered from native speakers of the Ewe language. A WhatsApp platform for Teachers of the Ewe Language was used to collect the names. The profanity feature of each of the names have been discussed on the platform. Through interview, the names have been validated by traditional authorities from the localities in which such names originate. These traditional leaders hold the oral narratives of the origin of the community names and other extensions to their meaning. Access to the traditional authorities was done through the strategy of snowballing. Forty-six names were collected. However, twenty-two names were validated for this study. This was done to prevent self-crafted names by the respondents to influence the study. Out of this, sixteen names have been used in the profane analysis. The other Seven could not get a clear explanation for the purpose of this study. Lexical Morphology was used in doing the profane connotative analysis.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Conceptual Place Names with Property of Profanity

A list of community names has been identified with the linguistic feature of profanity internalized in their composition. It was observed through the interview that the property of profanity has not been a factor of focus for the Ewe people in the process of bestowing names to their communities. However, the polysemous property of lexicon in the Ewe language allows the speakers to connote profane meanings from the various place names. For example, Fume (fu+me - through suffering) is a word summarizing their migration history. In the word, the first syllable receives a low tone (fù) to mean suffering that they have experienced to locate the current settlement. However in the application of the property of polysemy blended with tone the initial morpheme and syllable has been realized as (fú - hair) with a high tone to result in a word (Fú-me –Hair-in: Fúme) hence the name, Fúme. The hair has been considered connotatively as pubic hair hence the profanity (in pubic hair). The morphemic composition of the place names makes such connotations possible from either one or more of the constituent morphemes and syllables. In table 1, the conceptual or socially accepted denotative meaning or gloss of the place names are presented.
Table 1: List of community names and their denotative meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Socially Accepted Denotation</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Socially Accepted Denotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avakpeta</td>
<td>A place where warriors clashed for war</td>
<td>Avate</td>
<td>Under war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vodzā</td>
<td>Red hairy fig (tree)</td>
<td>Avata</td>
<td>Because of war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avaalavi</td>
<td>Little wing</td>
<td>Lūme</td>
<td>Inside hole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogome</td>
<td>Under hairy fig (tree)</td>
<td>Avakome</td>
<td>Warfare/home of wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volo</td>
<td>hairy fig proverb</td>
<td>Vokpo</td>
<td>Short hairy fig tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uma</td>
<td>Inside drum/vehicle/back of the head</td>
<td>Agome</td>
<td>Under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avakome</td>
<td>In front of war</td>
<td>Fume</td>
<td>Through difficulty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uuata</td>
<td>Because of the vehicle/drum</td>
<td>Deme</td>
<td>Lean your back against</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vogā</td>
<td>Big hairy fig (tree)</td>
<td>Vokpo</td>
<td>Short hairy fig tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amédzafe</td>
<td>The origin of man</td>
<td>Avaluime</td>
<td>In the peak of war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vodzākpo</td>
<td>Heap of hairy fig trees</td>
<td>Avasive</td>
<td>A forest into which one seeks refuge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Morphological Analysis of Profanity in Place Names

4.2.1 Compound profane place names

**Noun + noun**

Avata is the only profane place name found to have the composition of two nouns. Awa + ta = Avata (penis + head = penis head/head of penis)

**Noun + postposition**

Some of the place names are composed of a noun and a postposition.

Fúme: Fū + me (hair + in = in hair). Hair on the human body has a generic name qa in Ewe. However, the hair on any other part of the body apart from the head is known as fū. Beard has a separate register gè. For instance, hair in the nostrils, in the armpit, around the anus and in the private part are called ȵôtiméfú, axatomefú, mitomefú and aŋomefú respectively. In the realization of profanity in the place name the speakers reference the female pubic hair. The connotative referent in the name is the hair on the female sex organ kolofu.

Avakpeqome: There are three separate morphological composition of this name depending on the meaning one refers to. The first one is formed from initial two morphemes - Ava + kpe compounding a name Avakpe (penis stalk). Morphologically dome (under)is added Avakpe + dome = Avakpeqome (penis stalk + under = Under penis stalk). In the second sense the composition is observed as Ava + kpe + le + qa + me (penis + meet + prep + vagina + post) Penis had met in the female genitalia.

Vogome, vo + gome (scrotum + under) = Vogome (Under scrotum). This name is used by in-group peers to tease ladies who are observed to take delight and pleasure in sexual activities that. From
the interaction with the traditional leaders, it was evident that though this name is not used usually in formal communication, (it is sometimes done behind the targeted woman), it is effective as a tool for social control and entertainment.

*Koloenu* is morphologically composed of *kolo* + *nu* (female genital + entrance) - Entrance of the female genitalia.

*Gbadzeme* is composed of *gbadze* + *me* (flat + in) glossed ‘In the flat space.’

*Uume* has two free morphemes *vu* + *me* (vehicle/drum+in) glossed. *In a vehicle or drum.*

*Avate* has one free morpheme *ava* and a bound morpheme *te* = *Avate* (penis + under = under penis).

Table 2, demonstrates a list of community names, their socially accepted meaning and the profane connotative meaning. Names that have been analyzed already are not captured in this list.

### Table 2: List of community names and profane connotation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Socially Accepted Denotation</th>
<th>Profane Connotation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Avakpeta</em></td>
<td>Meeting place for war</td>
<td>Male genitals had meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vodzã</em></td>
<td>Red hairy fig</td>
<td>Red scrotum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vogêmé</em></td>
<td>Under hairy fig</td>
<td>Under scrotum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Volo</em></td>
<td>Hairy fig proverb</td>
<td>Big scrotum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Uume</em></td>
<td>Inside drum/vehicle/back of the head</td>
<td>Open up the vagina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vome</em></td>
<td>Unawares/ in hairy fig (tree)</td>
<td>In the scrotum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Uuata</em></td>
<td>Because of the vehicle/drum/ the top of canoe</td>
<td>Open your thighs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vogã</em></td>
<td>Big hairy fig (tree)</td>
<td>Big scrotum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Amedzâfe</em></td>
<td>The origin of man</td>
<td>Vagina/Womb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vodzâkpo</em></td>
<td>A heap of hairy fig trees</td>
<td>Community of red scrotum people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Avasive</em></td>
<td>A forest in which people seek war refuge</td>
<td>A hairy vagina.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Agêmé</em></td>
<td>Under/ inside date palm/ anus</td>
<td>Vagina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Avakâmé</em></td>
<td>Warfare/home of wars</td>
<td>In front of penis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Awâlime</em></td>
<td>In the peak of war</td>
<td>A place where an erected penis enters (vagina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deme</em></td>
<td>Lean your back against</td>
<td>Put it in/visit vagina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Vokpoe</em></td>
<td>Short hairy fig tree</td>
<td>Short scrotum/hill of scrotum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.0 DISCUSSION

The human hair has a generic name da in Ewe. However, the hair on any other part of the body apart from the head is known as fú. For instance, hair in the nostrils, in the armpit, around the anus and in the private part are called ṭọtimefú, axatomefú, mitomefú/meftimefú and aŋmefú respectively using the specific part of the body to describe the hair. In the realization of profanity in the place name Fúme, the speakers refer the pubic hair. However, the speakers do not reference the male pubic hair in this name. The connotative referent in the name is the female sex organ. In a youthful (and sometimes adult) joke talks, one can hear such statements like Eyi Fume. Ege da Fume (He is gone into hair. He has entered hair). In this utterance, the speech participants connotatively refer sexual intercourse. This finding supports Zoglin (2008) and Jay (2000) that profane words are usually used by peers to achieve positive interational outcomes like joke, sex talk and in-group slang.

Avakpedome, Avakpe + dome = Avakpedome is glossed (under war stone) in one of the two senses of the name. In the second sense the composition is observed as ava + kpe + le + ṭọ + me (penis + meet + prep + vagina + post) glossed Penis had met in the female genitalia. Connotatively, native speakers of the Ewe take advantage of the property of polysemy of the language focusing on the morphemes ava (penis) and ṭọ (vagina) to realize the name as profane. This act of connotation is generally observed among the youth as they participate in peer and in-group communication. In few instances, it is reported that adults occasionally use it in loose talk also in their in-group casual communication just to create some form of humour and fun. The name is used teasingly to describe males who are identified to have had sexual relationship with the same woman.

The name Vogome is used by both male and female in group peers to tease ladies who are observed to take delight and pleasure in sexual activities. From the interaction with the traditional leaders and the youth, it was evident that though this name is not used usually in formal communication, (it is sometimes done behind the targeted woman), as an effective tool for social control on sexual promiscuity. This is corroborated by Gitter (2010) who is of the view that profane language has the possibility of influencing people's social behaviour even when fleeting. It was also evident that females seldom use the name in even informal communication. In the data collection activity, females were careful to mention theses names on the Whatsapp platform. The few who did, have to send their interaction to the researchers as a private chart.

The community name Gbadzeme derives its name from the topography of its location. The community is found on a somewhat flat (a plateau-like) land located within mountains. For profanity, these surrounding mountains are considered as the two female thighs while the flat land is observed connotatively as the surface wall of the female genitalia. The name Acate is jokingly used to describe ladies who are cohabiting with their suitors before marriage. It is a kind of negative expression registering societal displeasure against the practice of cohabitation which does not result into marriage for a long time. This finding demonstrates the theory of linguistic philosophy by Austin (1962), human beings do not use language just anyhow to utter statements. Every utterance has a sense and an illocutionary force to perform some actions on the interlocutors.

The use of some connotations to exert social pressure on young male and female who take so much pleasure and delight in sexual activities help to prevent or manage sexual promiscuity and its attendant cultural offences like incense. It is a tool for managing social conflicts that might have occurred through sexual promiscuity like quarrels among young male and female. It also, help in
reducing the contraction of sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV AIDS and others. In effect, the world achieves social cohesion.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study looked at how profanity has been connoted into Ewe place names. It was observed that all the connotative meanings that are derived from the original denotation are centred on the human genitalia. The male sex organs (penis, scrotum) and female sex organs (vagina) have been the sources of compounding in the crafting of profanity in the place names. The connotation has usually been used in oral language generally in casual or playful communication. It has been observed that these names are used mainly by the youth in teasing and in group joking practices. The names usually have roots and stems that take on derivational and inflectional morphemes in the process of forming the profane connotation. Though the Ewes frown upon profanity in official language, their usage in place names is decorous and linguistically acceptable. The appropriate use of these names in jovial in-group and entertaining utterance demonstrates the linguistic competence of the interlocutors of the speech act. Jay and Janschewitz, (2008) corroborates this position to say that native speakers of a language in a culture learns who it is appropriate to speak a profane word to and when to say those words to avoid linguistic reprimand.

It was also evident that females seldom use the profane place names in even informal communication. Females were careful and hesitant to mention these names even in this research. The few who did, have to interact with the researchers in a private chart. The Ewe language has the flexibility of polysemy of words hence the connotation of profanity in some place names but only in casual and informal communication. This paper observes that Ewes have the flexibility of using profane connotations in their place names using the linguistic concept of polysemy hence dodges the possibility of being punished.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends further research into the historical, semantic and sociocultural implications of the place names in the Ewe language.

Conflict of Interest

There has not been any known conflict of interest in the process of the study. The paper has not been submitted to any journal and or is in the process of review.

Ethical Considerations

Respondents in the research have not been coerced in anyway. The intent of the research was explained to the respondents in their own language. Respondents were assured of the flexibility to withdraw from the research at any time they don’t feel comfortable.

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