

# FOUL LANGUAGE IN THE GHANAIAN ELECTRONIC MEDIA A CASE STUDY OF SOME SELECTED RADIO STATIONS IN KUMASI, GHANA

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## ABSTRACT-

The mass media, which is often described as the fourth estate of the realm, contribute greatly to educate, entertainment and the disseminate information. The radio stations in particular perform these roles to listeners through news reportage and others programmes. In their quest to discharge these vital roles, a great number of radio stations defile the ethics of the journalism profession by going to the extent of showcasing some languages which are considered foul from the perspective of ethnography of communication with a particular reference to Akan (and, indeed, Africa) ethnography. The Akan, an ethnic group in Ghana, frowns on vulgarity and particularly offensive language use including foul, profanity, vulgar and intemperate language, which is used interchangeably in this paper; that is language forms that are socio-culturally looked down on among the Akan people. Accordingly, culprits of offensive language use are considered uncultured. This paper looks at foul language used in some advertisements, political and social shows, interviews and phone-ins. From Akan ethnographic perspective, a selected number of language uses in the various aspects are subjected into analysis as to why they have become so rampant to listeners' ears. That is to say, will strive to account for why some media practitioners feature these offensive forms of the language, even conscientiously, on individual programmes.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Most of the media reportage in the Akan language is inundated with foul languages. Some radio presenters use profane words in their news broadcast. Some marriage programmes are full of profanity which is incongruous with the Akan way of speaking. Some advertisements on our radio and television are very unhealthy to the extent that if you were listening with

your child, you have to turn the radio or television set off. This is because it has the tendency to arouse their sexual passion which can lead to debauched life. It is against this background that this research is conducted to ascertain what foul language is and perhaps suggest how it should be modulated.

## II. PROFANITY FROM THE AKAN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

Profanity is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as '*an offensive language*'. According to the dictionary, it is also called bad language, strong language, curse language, foul language, bad words, vulgar language and lewd language. This use is a subset of a language's lexicon that is generally considered to be very impolite, rude or offensive. Such a language can generate emotion which can lead to strife or antagonism. It can also mar the reputation of a public figure, ridiculing him to public anger and hatred.

The Akan, an ethnic group in Ghana, prohibits the use of intemperate language and perpetrators are considered uncivilised, barbaric and immature. Abeka, P. et al (2014:108) intimate that, '*Profanity, on the other hand has been variously defined as vulgar, obscene or offensive language that demonstrates irreverence or disrespect towards groups of people or something that points to them and they can relate to, often times emotionally, for instance religious beliefs*'. The Ghana News Agency in its July 26, 2013 edition in an interview with Kingsley Owusu-Achau, Managing Director of Top Kings Estate Limited, Mr Owusu-Achau poured his venom on the use of foul languages especially against Public Officials in the media. He said, this

practice is becoming a disturbing trend and needs to be tackled quickly before it gets out of hand. He was of the view that the Practice of denigrating politicians and other Public Officers has gained currency on platform of the print, electronic and mass media and has the tendency to dissuade some qualified persons from occupying such positions. (<http://newsghana.comgh/bechem-united-fcboss-unhappy-about-foul...9/30/2015> 10:44 Am). Sakzeesi, Camillus Maalneriba-Tia, a columnist, has also attributed the use of foul language in the media to the proliferation of Akan Programmes in the media. The Akan abounds in filthy words and expressions that people can easily express as compared to the English Language. According to Maalneriba-Tia, he is particularly disappointed at the management of multi-media who have so much advanced in Broadcast Journalism in this country, to have all of a sudden shed-off the quality of presentation and has taken to the filthy path it is now threading. In his opinion, *'the introduction of Akan Stations have seriously dented Multi-Media's image in the Broadcast Media landscape'*. This is contained in his article *'In the matter of lunatism in multi-media and other media houses'*. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/In-the-m...9/30/2015> 10:47Am) From the Akan ethnographic perspective, private parts are unmentionable and for one to mention them, he has to resort to circumlocution and meander around the word. Yankah, K (1995:51) stipulates that, *'the perceived power of the spoken word among Akans call for the deployment of various strategies of speaking that may obviate crises. These include avoidance or discretionary uses of verbal taboos, apologizing for their use, using euphemism or resorting to indirection'*. An Akan uses *'sebe'*, meaning, I apologize or *'mesre meka'*, I beg to utter or say before a verbal taboo is used. This is done to render the taboo word less offensive. A girl child in her early age of life is taught that her vagina is called; *'n'ase'*—her 'under', so that she is asked to wash her 'under' when bathing. The males also use *'me barima'* --- my manhood for the penis. Elderly people call the vagina *'ahemfie'* --- the chief's palace, *'Akosua Kuma'* --- small/young Akosua (Akosua is the name of a Sunday female born). An Akan child who uses the unmentionable is punished by beating or he is reprimanded. The Akans call the vagina *'etwe'* and the penis, *'k]teε'* but you hardly hear these words

mentioned in public. Some unscrupulous children sometimes insult another as:

'wo maame twe' ----  
Your mother's vagina or  
'wo maame twe mu nsuo' ----  
Your mother's wately vagina

in the heat of provocation or antagonism. This is the highest form of insult that one will not take kindly to. 'Wo papa k]te' --- Your father's penis is also sometimes used to insult. It is remarkable to note that men are fond of using such uncultured words. When such words are uttered, those around rebuke the child for indecency and implicate his/her parents for not bringing him or her up well. Elderly people around can even cane such child. Normally, the feminine sexual organ is mostly used to insult and one becomes offended if his/her mother's sexual organ is used to insult him/her. These words carry undeniably painful, if not sadistic implications. These words are meant to reduce the human organism, especially, the female organism to its nonentity status.

Barbara, L. in Brothers, (1998:p 384) quotes Brothers as saying that *'Dirty words imply a narrow mechanical, master-and-victim concept of sexuality'*. She continues that, Brothers conclude that obscenities mask hidden fears. She argues that much of the *'rich, liberating'* sexual language that is currently fashionable is *'implicitly sadistic or degrading to women'*, intended to reduce women to sex objects.

Sexual intercourse is also unmentionable and for that matter, considered vulgar in Akan. For one to mention it, he has to resort to indirection or render an apology where there is no alternative or substitute for the word. Instead of saying:

I have had sex with her,  
An Akan would say;  
"Me ne no ada". (I have slept with her)

Or  
"}de ne ho aka ]baa no". (He has had body contact with the lady) meaning he has had sex with her.

The plain language, *'wadi me'* literally meaning He has eaten me (he has had sex with me) is scarcely used.

Sexual intercourse can also be expressed as: *'Wafa me'* ---- He has taken me (he has had sex with me).

The anus is another prohibitive organ. It is called *'tunumu'* in the Akan. Instead of using that word, *'me to'* ---- my buttocks is preferable. That area of human organ is

prohibited because it is considered as filthy. It is the area where human beings defecate from. Barbara, L. in Brothers, (1998:p 384) wonders why indeed should one group of words describing human functions and human organs be acceptable in ordinary conversation and another, describing presumably the same organs and functions be tabooed ----- so much so, in fact, that some of these words still cannot appear in print in many parts of the English-Speaking world?

Using euphemistic expressions for the Anus has also been criticized by Keith Allan, Kate Burridge (1987:21). They assert that, *“when you speak of the Anus, you call it by a name that is not its own; why not rather call it by its own? If it is indecent, do not use even the substituted name; if not, you had better call it by its own”*.

Many scholars have criticized why some words and expressions should be tagged as taboo. They are of the view that since some parts of the body are equally the same as the others, they don't understand why they should be tabooed. To Foucault, M. (1978), *“Our thinking about sexuality is largely informed by the ‘repressive hypothesis which claims that the history of sexuality over the past three hundred years has been a history of repression”*. According to Foucault, sex, except for the purposes of reproduction is taboo and the only way to be more open about our sexuality is to talk about sex and to enjoy it.

Brothers, Joyce (1998:379) asserts that, *“prohibiting the use of ‘dirty words’ will not change basic attitudes that give rise to them. They lose their power only when we are able to see sex as neither exploitation nor salvation but a human, often imperfect, activity bringing a man and woman together in a loving way”*.

Abusive language and words are all abhorred by the Akans. Calling someone ‘a beast’ ---- ‘aboa’ or an ‘idiot’ ---- ‘kwasea’ are all distasteful in the Akan culture. The Akans believe that language must be used with circumspection because it has the tendency to cause havoc. There is an Akan proverb that, ‘Ano watiri a esen anamm]n’. ---when the mouth slips it is more than a feet/step. Therefore, language used on the other should be carefully selected.

## **II.I FOUL LANGUAGE IN THE GHANAIAN MEDIA**

In his submission in page 3 of the November

14-20, 2014 edition of the Mirror, with the headline; Halt Illegalities on Radio, Professor Kwame Karikari explained that; due to the lack of clear rules and guidelines governing the operations of radio stations in the country, operators have resorted to all kinds of illegal activities that endanger the health of the people and distort the cultural values and ethics. He was of the view that, the use of offensive language on radio is becoming so rampant that, it should be curbed to avoid an unforeseeable occurrence.

The Article 5 (3) of the Code of Ethics of the Ghana Journalist Association with the headline: Respect for Privacy and Human Dignity states that, *“A journalist should guard against defamation, libel, slander and obscenity”*.

On Monday, 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, Angel FM in Kumasi featured a programme dubbed: The Platform. It was hosted by Karikari Agyeman in Akan, a local language. In this programme, a member of the Communication Team of the ruling government, the National Democratic Congress (NDC), Mr. Robert Owusu was asked to comment on the True State of Nation Address. The President of the Republic, John Dramani Mahama had delivered the State of Nation Address and the Minority in Parliament, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) debunked the President's address and organized a Press Conference to counteract that. This was what Mr. Robert Owusu was asked to comment on.

He described the Press Conference on the True State of the Nation's Address as:

*“Bullshit, bogus, useless and a form of cantata”*.

For him to have described an address from the Minority Group as “Bullshit” was distasteful and for that matter, the host prevailed upon him to retract the statement but all efforts proved futile. This was a derogatory remark from a leader of a ruling government and during Phone-in calls, listeners vented their spleen on him for that unfortunate statement.

On the same platform, Mr. Kennedy Agyapong, a Member of Parliament for Assin North on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2015, poured his venom on the New Patriotic Party (NPP) members (his own party members) for leaking a tape to the ruling government. It was alleged that, Mr. Yaw Osafo Marfo, former Minister of Finance and Economic Planning in Kufour's government met some of his party members and the issues discussed were leaked. Mr. Kennedy Agyapong rebuked his party members as: *“foolish people who do not have an iota of common sense”*. He said;

*Moagyimiyimi --*

*---- you are foolish*

*NPPfo] ye nkwaseafo] ----- NPP members  
are stupid people.*

*Adee a yefre no  
common sense mpo, NPPfo] nni bi ---- NPP  
members do not have what*

*we call common  
sense.*

This was an unfortunate statement from a person of high repute. Akans condemn such an unfortunate statement and frowns at the culprit.

On Tuesday, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2015, Mr. Raymond Archer, the editor of the Daily Searchlight interviewed the Deputy Attorney General, Mr. Dominic Ayine concerning a court ruling the government was contemplating firing an appeal. In the cause of the interview, the Deputy Minister lost his temper and said;

*“You are asking me stupid question and I am not ready to tolerate that nonsense.....my friend, if you misbehave, I will drop the line,”* which he certainly did. This tape was played on Kessben FM in Kumasi.

In another development, a programme on Kessben FM featured another form of foul language. There is a Programme dubbed, “The Breaking News” every Wednesday and Saturday and the host is Ali Baba. On one of the programmes the host interviewed a District Chief Executive of Atwima Nwabiagya, in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, the late Mr. Tony Nyame, and this was what ensued between them:

Ali Baba: Honourable Tony Nyame, we have heard that you sacked our reporter who was dispatched to cover news during the Farmer’s Day Celebration. Is that true?

Hon. Tony Nyame: Yes, it is .....

Ali Baba: Honourable Tony Nyame, should we mandate another person to do the work entrusted to you by the President because you are incapable?

Hon. Tony Nyame: *Wokasa a, hunu sedee wokasa kyere nnipa.*

*When you talk, know  
how to talk to human beings.*

*-Adeñ, wo ba ne me?*

*Why, am I your child?*

*-Woab] dam pa ara.*

*You are a mad man*

*-Wonnim nyansa nti na  
worebisa me saa nkwiseasem yi.*

*You don’t have common  
sense that is why you  
are asking me  
such a foolish question.*

*-Wo nkwiseasem a wode  
te Kessben FM so no.*

*That your stupid  
behaviour on Kessben  
FM. etc.*

It can be observed that, the host, Ali Baba asked the District Chief Executive a provocative question and that caused him to lose his temper. Nevertheless, the Honourable member should have known how to restrain his temper. What is remarkable here is that, the host of the programme defiled the ethics of the Ghana Journalists Association (GJA) and recorded the interview without his consent. This is against the ethics of the profession.

Another form of foul language in recent times that received public condemnation is the one by Afia Schwarzenegger, a host of a T.V programme. The host featured Former President, Jerry Rawlings’ outburst on false prophets who outwit innocent people to satisfy their whims and caprices. Rawlings mentioned Bishop Obinim as one of them and intimated that if it were his time of governance, he would have dealt ruthlessly with such people.

Afia Schwarzenegger featured Rawlings’ utterance in her programme and it is alleged that the Bishop lambasted the host during his church service calling her a prostitute and an illiterate. The lady journalist became embittered and this was her distasteful utterance:

*---Saa s]fo no a ]dii ne s]fo ketewa yere no.*

*That pastor who had sex with his junior  
pastor’s wife.*

*---S]fo no a ]buee n’ano kaa se ne yere twe te  
se manhole no.*

*That pastor who opened his mouth to say  
that his wife’s vagina is like a manhole.*

*---Obinim ee! Yesu na aba na kwasea biara  
ret]n bi.*

*Obinim ee! It is Jesus who has come for any  
foolish person to market him.*

*---S]fo bini, s]fo ta, s]fo abedi mmaa, abetafere  
twe mu.*

*Toilet Pastor, flatuate Pastor, womanizer  
Pastor, Pastor who licks the vagina.*

*---Obinim ee! Mene w’anom woate?*

*Obinim ee! I defecate in your mouth, you  
hear?*

*---Kor]mfo] totob]t]mni, kwasea.*

*Thief, Pick-pocket, foolish.*

This Pastor was alleged to have had sex with his junior Pastor’s wife and the woman recorded what ensued in the sex and it was played on most radio stations. The Pastor was alleged to have told the woman that his wife’s vagina was like a manhole etc.

This unfortunate outburst was broadcast on most of the electronic media in Kumasi and it received criticisms and condemnation. It is ethically wrong for an Akan woman to insult a man as a beast and to use the sexual organ to insult him in public.

Foul languages associated with the sexual organs are mostly used by men than women especially in public. Some University male students sing and chant foul words in public. Some drivers insult their colleagues who flout traffic regulations in public with foul languages associated with the female sexual organ. Some military men are also sometimes heard chanting such foul words especially when they are returning from an operation. Brothers, J. (1998:381) is of the view that; *“obscene language serves as a tension-releaser for men, and men cut off from women-in prison, during wartime, on submarines-are likely to employ an unusual amount of obscenity”*.

Advertisements on some radio and television stations are full of foul languages. Manufacturers of some traditional medicines are allowed to advertise their products on the radio and television stations. They are given some air-time to do that. Some of them use some foul languages without any circumlocution. Some traditional medicine are purported to have the efficacy to make men’s penis big. They embellish their explanations to such an extent that, it becomes difficult to listen with a child. One traditional medical advertisement that has been observed in advertisement is Dorifa A and B Capsule. This is how the advertisement is featured:

Woman: Hɛɛ me wura hɛɛ, ɛnnɛ wobɛkye ama me ayam pa ara.

Sɛɛ wow] mpena. }baa no a wok]faa no no,

Kyere me adekor] a ]w] a menni bi Hɛɛ my husband! Today, you will fry for me to grind

I didn’t know that you have a concubine. Tell me what that woman you went for has that I don’t have.

Man: My dear, adɛn na woreye saa, what are you talking about? }baa bɛn na mak]fa no?

My dear, why are you doing that? What woman have I gone for?

Woman: {deɛn na ɛw] wo pant mu no?

What is it that is in your panties?

Man: Dorefa A and B capsule a mɛfaɛɛ no, ɛno na ayiyi yadɛɛ a ɛw] me ho apue a wohunu w] me pant mu yi.

The Dorefa A and B capsule that I took, that has brought all my hidden diseases into my panties.

Woman: Ooh I am sorry

Man: Shame unto you.

D]kota no mpo se bosome a ɛdi kan no ɛnni sɛ awarefo] no hyia, sɛ w]ntumi ntena nso a ɛw] sɛ w]hyɛ condom.

The doctor even said that couple should not have sex within the month that the medicine will be taken. On the other hand, they can use condom if they think they can’t stay.

The way and manner this advertisement is dramatized makes me uncomfortable when listening with my children. I have to switch the radio set off when the advert is played on the radio. A traditional doctor, Dr. Caesar of M.S. Ventures in Kumasi, Mbrom is given an air-time on Thursday after Naana Hayford’s programme dubbed “Apatakese” in which he seeks to advertise his traditional medicine which he alleges is efficacious for sexual weakness. He uses some expressions like:

Barima a ne k]te aye mmerɛ sɛ Bofurotu

-A man whose penis has become like

Bofurotu

(A fried dough food which is very soft)

Barima a ]de b]] so ara na wagyaɛ mu.

-A man who experiences pre-mature ejaculation.

I consider some of his vocabularies distasteful and classify them as foul because he dives too much into sexual affairs.

Some marriage programmes on our local radio stations cannot be left out when we talk of foul languages. Some of them are featured on Love FM, Fox FM and Angel FM. Mr. Antwi Berko is the host of Monday 10.00pm marriage programme dubbed “Wo Ba Ada Anaa?” Is your child asleep? on Angel FM.

The programme is begun with a jingle on the way some men and women behave when having sex. In that jingle, the woman screams in the cause of the sex and directs the man how he should go about the sex. The man goes to the extent of saying “wo twe ye dɛ”, meaning; “your vagina is sweet”. The programme is saturated with profane expressions and the unspeakables such as: “di ]baa” - have sex with a woman; “ɛtwɛ ba” – the clitoris;

“k]tee” - penis; “etwe” - vagina etc.

without any indirection as enshrined in the Akan culture.

When interviewed, the host, Mr. Antwi Berko admitted profane words and expressions are used in his programme but the programme seeks to achieve a special purpose. It is aimed at arousing marriage couples' sexual passion and to address marital conflicts. He said, Akans are gagged when it comes to sexual related issues and his programme seeks to revolutionize that restriction. He intimated that there has been evidence that the programme has solved many marital problems especially sex in marriage.

### **III. FINDINGS**

It is found out in this paper that some media practitioners use foul languages to spice their reportage and many people commend them and that urges them to perpetuate that practice. This is evident in some radio broadcast on some rape cases and some marriage programmes. Perhaps some people like such languages because of the fact that there has been cultural prohibition on their usages and they consider their usage as a sort of revolution. They hardly hear such words and would have preferred uttering them but for the prohibition on their usage.

Some public figures are intentionally provoked so that they unleash unpleasant languages in order to ridicule them. Some radio presenters ask them provocative questions and that makes them use abusive words. Most of these foul utterances are used as jingles and the motive behind is to entertain the audience. Some of these jingles are used to expose the ignorance, incompetency and the narrow-mindedness of some public figures. After all, Journalism as a profession has the tradition of raising its voice against evil practices in society and crusade against misuse of powers by the government and his officials.

Also local radio stations entertain advertisers, interviewees and other media stakeholders to use foul languages for monetary gains. There are no punitive measures against perpetrators in order not to lose their monetary gains.

In his Feature Article of Thursday, 24 September, 2015 which was featured in multi-media and other media houses, with the banner headline “In the matter of lunatism” in multi-media and other media houses, the columnist: Sakzeesi, Camillus Maalneriba-Tia lamented that, as the unprofessional conduct is allowed to flourish, the statutory National Media Commission (NMC) is conveniently quiet at

these unfortunate developments thereby enabling them to blossom to perfection. He continues that the Ghana Journalist Association and the West Africa Media Foundation have equally been mute, waiting for something to happen before their advocacy voices can be heard. (<http://www.ghanaweb.com/Ghanahomepage/NewsArchive/In-the-matter-of-lunatism.../9/30/2015 10:47 am>)

### **IV. CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have discussed what Akans consider as verbal taboo and for that matter foul languages. It is evident that foul languages abound in the media landscape and users end up losing their esteem from the public. The Akans are of the view that “Tekyerema mporj” --- the tongue is incorruptible and for that matter, whatever is said remains forever for posterity. Also, foul languages should be avoided if we are to sustain our cherished culture and to inculcate moral virtues which are panacea for accelerated development in the country. It is again discussed that, foul languages, especially those pertaining to sexual matters can arouse children's sexual passion and can lure them into sex and for that matter such language should be used with circumspection. Abusive words have the tendency to wreck the peace in the country. They also mar one's reputation. This is evident in the President's recent tour in the Volta Region to canvas vote for his nomination to serve a second term as the president. The president said, *he would not take kindly to useless insults from his opponents*. He himself confessed that his admirers have called him to exercise restraint in the face of provocation. He, therefore, apologised in that respect.

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