ETHNOGRAPHY OF AKAN SPEECH PLAY

by

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Language is flexible and dynamic and can therefore be manipulated to fulfill various communicative and sociocultural functions. This paper looks at speech play and considers how language can be manipulated like a playing object and used as a game. The paper poses the following research questions: (1) what types of speech plays are predominant in the Akan language?; (2) what are the linguistic processes involved in transforming language into speech play?, (3) what are the social functions of speech play?; and (4) what are the ethnographic situations under which speech play is employed? The paper will seek to answer these questions by looking at riddles, backward and forward invented speech, tongue twisters, puns, rhyme, quasi euphemisms, jokes, and humour. It will consider also the basic linguistic tools used in the manipulation of the language such as insertion, deletion, etc. The paper will briefly touch on the relationship between speech play and gender.

1. Introduction

1.1. Speech Play

Play is considered an activity that is carried out within the boundaries of space and time. Play is marked by the manipulation of objects, by movements and creativity. It refers to a unique type of activity that stands outside normal life.

Speech play is a type of play in which language is the object and the focus of attention (see Apte 1994:4203). It draws attention to slight variations in language. Speech play is a communicative behaviour – mostly verbal, involving the creative disposition and manipulation of language features for social, cultural and communicative purposes.

There is a special area of language use in which language is locally manipulated to create a special variety or style. Speech play is a conscious attempt to manipulate with certain elements of language, in a

special genre, code variety and/or style for various reasons. Manipulation involves selection and a degree of consciousness beyond that of ordinary language use. Speech play occupies a central position in an individual's creative use of major literary forms. Speech play is normally performed by children; however, some types are also performed by adults.

Speech play is a universal concept, but its structure, form, rules and sociocultural contexts vary from culture to culture. As a form of ethnographic genre, each community or culture may have its own definitions, perceptions and functions of speech play, relative to other uses of speech. In the following section, 2, we will look at different types of Akan speech play.

1.2. Methodology

The data for this paper were collected by observing children's moonlight games from villages in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Further data were collected in primary schools during breaks, when the children were playing. Most important were the data collected from kindergarten rhymes. I also did participant observation of ludo and draught games, where jokes and humour were involved. In addition, I took some of the data from Akan textbooks and primers for children. Many of the data come from my own experience as somebody who grew up in a typical Akan village. With regards to the literature, I did some library and internet research on wordplay and speech play.

2. Types of Speech Play

There are several types of speech play including *puns, nursery rhymes, counting out rhymes, backward and forward invented speech, nonsense words, tongue twisters, riddles, ritual insults, verbal duelling contests, mnemonic devices, anagrams, palindromes, spoonerisms, malapropisms, jokes, proverbs,* etc. People around the

world enjoy such speech play and verbal artistry, which form an intrinsic part of their lives.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the kinds of word play that are prevalent among the Akans of Ghana: tongue twisters, linking and association, puns, riddles, backward and forward invented speech, jokes, humour, and quasi-euphemisms.

2.1. Tongue Twisters

A tongue twister is a play on sounds whereby the syllables of a word are subjected to a variety of tonal and other changes to produce different meanings that are meant to create fun. Tongue twisters are a form of speech play that exists in every language. The one who is able to rattle off the words with the greatest speed and accuracy is deemed most competent. A tongue-twister is typically based on the difficulties of articulation when a sentence with several similar sounds (in alliteration or assonance) is uttered rapidly (see Apte 1994:4204). Apte cites the English sentence *She sits and shells, she sells and sits* as a tongue twister: it contains the similar consonants [s] and [Σ] which are brought into juxtaposition. If mistakes in such a performance result in the sentence becoming obscene and/or scatological, it is considered more amusing. English samples are seen in the two popular twisters below.

1. *Peter Piper picked a peck of pickle pepper, a peck of pickle pepper Peter Piper picked, If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickle pepper, where is the pickle pepper Peter Piper picked.*

2. *Betty bought a bit of butter, but she found the butter bitter, so she bought a bit of better butter to make the bitter butter better.*

The tongue twisters above are based on the repetition of the [p] and [b] sounds in different words.

Let us now look at examples of tongue twisters from Akan.

3. **T.T.T.T**. Tikya Tenten Tenkorang te Takorade tete tawa tontɔn.
'A tall Teacher called Tenkorang stays in Takoradi and retails tobacco'.

4. **B.B.B**. Bekwae buroni babarima bi bɔ□ b□□lo b□□ barima bi ba. 'The son of the white man at Bekwae kicked a ball against a man's son'.

In the above examples, the tongue twisting is based on the repetition of [t] and [b].

5. **Akoa Tiawa**

Akoa tiawa faa sekan tiawa.	'A short man took a short cutlass'.
Kɔ□ asutiawa mu.	'Went to the short river'.
Kɔtwaa tonton tiawa.	'To cut short raffia palm'.
De bEyEE nsowa tiawa	'To make a short fish trap'.
De kɔtoo buntiawa mu.	'And set it in a short pool of water'.
Maa Eyii adwene tiawa.	'And it caught a short mud fish'.
Akoa tiawa de adwene tiawa yi.	'The short man took the short mud fish'.
KɔkyEE □hene tiawa.	'And gave it to the short chief'.
□hene tiawa tiaa ne mpaboa tiawa mu.	'The short chief wore his short sandals'.
Kɔdaa Akoa tiawa no ase tiawa.	'And went to thank the short man briefly'.

The tongue twister here is based on the repetition of the word *tiawa* 'short' which is found mostly at the end of each line.

6. **Kwaa Paa**

Agya Kwaa Paa kɔɔ apam.	'Father Kwaa Paa went to clear his farm
Kɔhunuu mampam	And saw a *mampam* "guana"
Gyaee apam kɔpamm mampam	Stopped clearing and chased the *mampam* "guana"
Maa mampam kɔforoo pam.	And went to climb the ɔpam tree.
Kwaa Paa kɔgyinaa ɔpam ase.	Father Kwaa Paa stood under the ɔpam tree
Maa ɔpam tutu bEhwee.	And it fell forcefully
Kwaa Paa apampam sei ara paa.	To hit Kwaa Paa's head "paa"
Kwaa Paa kɔ fie no.	When Kwaa Paa went home
Kwaa Paa papa se Kwaa Paa. bEgye paa	His father asked him to do some job
Kwaa Paa see ne papa sE	Kwaa Paa complained to his father that
Papa me tiri pae me o paa.	Father! I have a severe headache'.

In example 6, the tongue twisting comes about because of the repetition of the syllable *pa* which is found in many different words like *pa* 'very much', *apam* 'clearing of land', *mampam* 'guana reptile', *ɔpam* 'tree', *papa* 'father', and *pae* 'to split, to ache (of one's head)'.

7. **Me Yere Yaa Mansa**

Me yere ne Yaa Mansa	'My wife is called Yaa Mansa
Ɔfiri Nkoransa	She comes from Nkoransa
Aka nnansa ansa na	I am left with three days
Makɔhunu me wɔfa Ansa	To go to see my uncle Ansa.
Na yEakɔma no nsa.	And we will present her with some drinks'.

In example 7, the tongue twisting hinges on the repetition of the syllable *nsa* that is predominant and found in each line in words like *Mansa* 'female name', *Nkoransa* 'a town in Brong Ahafo', *ansa* 'before', and *nsa* 'drinks'.

2.2. Rhyming, Linking and Association

Rhymes are memorized sequential lines that help children generate an extended production, composed of repeated small segments. It teaches children to do counting.

8.

B☐damm☐ baako na si dan mu h☐.	'There is one bottle in the room
SE b☐damm☐ baako na wode koro k☐ka ho a,	If you have one bottle and you add another one,
Na EyE b☐damm☐ mmienu na Esi dan mu h☐.	Then we have two bottles in the room
SE b☐damm☐ mmienu na wode koro k☐ka ho a,	If you have two bottles and you add another one,
Na EyE b☐damm☐ mmiEnsa na Esi dan mu h☐.	Then we have three bottles in the room'.

In the above example of linking and association the interest in the rhythm helps the children to focus on the counting.

9.   ***Dua o Dua*** **'Tail o Tail'**

Dua o dua	*Dua*	Tail o Tail	Tail
Kraman w☐ dua?	*Dua*	Has a dog a tail?	Tail
Odwan w☐ dua?	*Dua*	Has a sheep a tail?	Tail
P☐nk☐ w☐ dua?	*Dua*	Has a horse a tail?	Tail
Akonwwa w☐ dua?	------	Has a chair a tail?	------

In this rhyme of linking and association, children are supposed to say *dua* 'tail' if the item mentioned really has a tail. If it does not have, they should keep quiet. A child who responds *dua* 'tail' for an item that does not have it, is beaten by the others. The characteristics of the objects may vary from head, feathers, fur, eyes, etc. Let us see the one on *nwi* 'fur' below.

10.

Onwi onwi onwi		Fur, fur, fur	
Kraman w□ nwi?	*Onwi*	Has a dog fur?	Fur
Odwan w□ nwi?	*Onwi*	Has a sheep fur?	Fur
P□nk□ w□ nwi?	*Onwi*	Has a horse fur?	Fur
Akok□ w□ nwi?	------	Has a fowl fur?	------

All these plays help children to be very observant and study the characteristics of plants and animals as they move around. The speech plays above illustrate the characteristics of certain domestic animals.

Let us now move into another linking and association (about a bell, a mouse, a cat, and so on), where each item is followed by another; the second is an enemy and obtains direct control over the first.

11.

1. Ed□n no nie	′This is the bell
Ed□n no a	The bell
EsEn h□ no nie.	That is hanging over there′.

2. Akura no ni	′This is the mouse
Akura no a	The mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a	That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.	That is hanging over there′.

3. □kra no nie	′This is the cat
□kra no a	The cat
□kyeree akura no a	That caught the mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a	That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.	That is hanging over there′.

4. □b□fo□ no nie.	′This is the hunter.
□b□fo□ no a	The hunter
□kumm □kra no a	That killed the cat

□kyeree akura no a   That caught the mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a   That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.   That is hanging over there'.

5. □w□ no nie.   'This is the snake.
□w□ no a   The snake
□kumm □b□fo□ no a   That killed the hunter
□kumm □kra no a   That killed the cat
□kyeree akura no a   That caught the mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a   That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.   That is hanging over there.'

6. Abaa no nie.   'This is the stick.
Abaa no a   The stick,
 Ekumm □w□ no a   That killed the snake
□kumm □b□fo□ no a   That killed the hunter
□kumm □kra no a   That killed the cat
□kyeree akura no a   That caught the mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a   That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.   That is hanging over there'.

7. Egya no nie.   'This is the fire.
Egya no a   The fire,
Ehyee abaa no a   That burnt the stick
Ekumm □w□ no a   That killed the snake
□kumm □b□fo□ no a   That killed the hunter
□kumm □kra no a   That killed the cat
□kyeree akura no a   That caught the mouse
□b□□ Ed□n no a   That rang the bell
EsEn h□ no nie.   That is hanging over there'.

8. Nsuo no nie.   'This is the water.
Nsuo no a   The water

Edumm ogya no a	That extinguished the fire
Ehyee abaa no a	That burnt the stick
Ekumm ɔwɔ no a	That killed the snake
Ɔkumm ɔbɔfoɔ no a	That killed the hunter
Ɔkumm ɔkra no a	That killed the cat
Ɔkyeree akura no a	That caught the mouse
Ɔbɔɔ Edɔn no a	That rang the bell
EsEn hɔ no nie	That is hanging over there'.

9. Awia no nie.	'This is the sun.
Awia no a	The sun
Ewee nsuo no a,	The sun that dried up the water
Edumm ogya no a	That extinguished the fire
Ehyee abaa no a	That burnt the stick
Ekumm ɔwɔ no a	That killed the snake
Ɔkumm ɔbɔfoɔ no a	That killed the hunter
Ɔkumm ɔkra no a	That killed the cat
Ɔkyeree akura no a	That caught the mouse
Ɔbɔɔ Edɔn no a	That rang the bell
EsEn hɔ no nie	That is hanging over there'.

In the above linking and association examples, every verse is expanded by one line to indicate an extension of the episode. In the process, there is a repetition of the previous lines. The new actor is repeated in line 2 and is supported by the relative marker *a* 'who/that/which', introducing the action or the activity performed by the actor in line 3. The children become aware of some environmental and zoological issues about animals (such as cats, dogs, mice and reptiles and their behaviour) and the enmity between certain natural things.

There is another linking and association type speech play game in Akan folktales where the character Ananse invites some birds and mammals, along with certain objects, to his farm. Those invited were *aburoo* 'corn', *akokɔ* 'fowl', *akorɔma* 'hawk', *ɔbɔfoɔ* 'hunter', *ɔwɔ* 'snake', *abaa* 'stick', *ogya* 'fire', *nsuo* 'water', and *owia* 'sun'. When Ananse entered

the house of any of them, the invitee would ask whether its closest enemy was also invited. Ananse, the crafty creature, would always say no. Then the invitee would accept the invitation. For example, the following dialogue ensued between the maize and Ananse

> *Maize: Would the fowl come?*
> *Ananse: No.*
> *Maize: Then I will come.*

Eventually, all of the invited agreed to come. As soon as they started working at the farm grounds on the appointed day, the fowl complained that the maize was insulting it and so swallowed the maize. In the subsequent conflicts, the hawk caught the fowl, the hunter shot the hawk, the snake bit the hunter, the stick hit the snake, the fire burnt the stick, the water extinguished the fire, and the sun dried the water. Each one complained of an offence created by his/its victim. When *Kotokurodu* 'black wasp' appeared, it hit its stomach and shouted *Ao! atanmma pa ara na ahye dwerEbee sei*? 'Ao! how could the sons of men get burnt like that?', thus suggesting the origin of the flat belly of the black wasp.

Performers of oral literature do not work with prepared scripts when they perform before an audience; they depend on their memory and imagination for a successful job. One way of ensuring the success of their performance is by organising the text material in convenient groups or patterns of speech play that will make it possible to keep the sequence or the logic of the texts intact. Very much like repetition and parallelism, linking and association provide artists with patterns of pleasure as well as of convenience (see Agyekum (2007) for other examples of association to be found in English).[1]

Linking and association can take the form of an **anadiplosis.** This is a kind of repetition in which the last word or phrase of one sentence or line is repeated at the beginning of the next. Let us look at example 12 below.

12.   **Amena Two Nil**

Amena Two Nil
Matematenga to power Power!
Power black - Black
Black Head
Head, headmaster
Master- Master Poku   Master Poku
Poku- Poku Ware
Ware- Awaresɛ   Marry- good marriage
Sɔ- Sɔfo   Pastor
Fo- Foriwa   Foriwaa
Wa- Waakye   Red rice with spices
Kye- kyenam   fried fish
Nam- Nampa   good meat
Pa- Paanoo   bread
Noo-Noma
Ma-mango   Mango
Go-go way you
You- you two
Amena Two Nil
HwE wo mma yie oo   Cater for your children
Ton   Get that straight.

The last word or syllable of each line rhymes with the first in the subsequent line and children keep on linking and adding words that share certain sung-like features. Some of the words in this excerpt are personal names like Poku (male), Ware (male), Foriwaa (female), and Amena (female). Other words are just nonsense words brought in to create fun and also to maintain the harmony in the rhythm like *matematenga*. One common feature of this linking and association is that the first syllable is used before the full word is mentioned, examples are *ware-awaresɛ* 'good marriage', *sɔ-sɔfo* 'pastor', *wa- waakye* 'brown rice', and *kye-kyenam* 'fried fish'.

2.3. Punning

A pun is a humorous use of a word that has two meanings, or of different words that sound the same. A pun may be a word which sounds one way but is capable of having more than one meaning or interpretation; puns are based on semantics. Punning speech play is created by exploiting the relationship between form and meaning. A word or phrase is used in a discourse in such a way that the primary or literal meaning gives way to a metaphorical or secondary meaning, as in 'she told the child to *try* not to be so *trying*'. According to Lloyd (2007:20), 'punning revolves around double meanings and a proper /improper binary is at the core of this kind of word play'. Puns may be used by either children or adults. Sherzer (1985:213) defines puns as follows: 'a pun is a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings'. A pun may be implored either intentionally or unintentionally. Compare:

> 13. *SE gyaasaayE annyae saa yE a, gyae ma no nka nso nnyae mma no nka.*
> 'If the person who has been advised to stop committing certain confusion does not stop the afflicted person who wants to retaliate will also not stop revenging when advised to do so.'

The pun stems from the constant use and modification of the expressions *gyae* 'stop'.

The pun in example 13 is used in an Akan proverb which forewarns people about bad behaviours that are punishable either by the state, or by the groups or individuals that have been offended. This notion of pun in proverbs tallies with Sacks' (1974), who also notes that puns often occur in proverbial or metaphorical expressions; these are related to the presentation of narrative material in conversation in that they often serve to conclude or sum up as well as to display understanding (cited in Sherzer 1985:214).

The pun below is based on the word *kor□* 'going', and the repetition of consonants and vowels is part of the proverbial aspects of Akan drum language (see Nketia 1974:101)

14. *Kor□ akyirikyirikyiri ne*	'He who went very very far and
Kor□ dadadadadadada ne	He who went very very early and
Kor□e-ansa-na obi-aba,	He who went before any other person came.
□panin ne hwan?	Who is the eldest?'

Apart from the use of the word *kor□,* there is the reduplication of the word *dadadada* to show the temporal remoteness of the event.

In the pun below there is a repetition of the syllable *ka* to form various homophonous words with different meanings.

15. *Kaka ne ka ne ayafunu keka, emu deE Ew□ hene na EyE ya pa ara*
'Whitlow, debt and stomach-ache, which one of these is more painful'?.

In one of the songs by Nana Ampadu (the renowned highlife singer), there is alliteration on the sound [k] as in

16. <u>*Kukurukukuru*</u> *no gyae a* <u>*kekEkekE*</u> *no nso bEgyae.*
'If *kukurukukuru* stops, then *kekEkekE* will also stop'.

This was a play on ideophonic sounds to advise people on causes and reactions, implying that if the criminals stop their malicious activities, then the security agents will stop pouncing on them.

It can be seen from the puns given above that puns can be used in narratives, in proverbs, in surrogate language on drums, or in songs. Puns may be used as forms of indirection to comment on and tone down the unpleasantness of direct reference to delicate issues or verbal taboo topics. Apart from these functions, pun as a speech game is

employed to create humour and entertainment. It is employed successfully in this way in Akan adverts on radio and TV.

According to Sherzer (1985:215), 'In the English speaking world, there have been periods when puns were considered to be high art and quite appropriate for serious topics. Today they are most often considered to be humorous in intention, inappropriate for serious discourse but highly appropriate for advertising'. This tendency also operates among the Akan, except that there are certain serious genres (like appellation and drum language at the chiefs' courts) where orators and oral artists still employ pun for serious effect.

2.4. Backward and Forward Invented Speech

This is a type of speech play which involves the inventing of utterances that sound the same when recited forward and backward. Talking backward consists of taking the first syllable of a word and placing it at the end of the word. This can be formulated in the following rule

$$\#S_1\ S_2\ S_3 \ldots\ldots\ldots Sn\ ----\rightarrow\ S_2\ S_3\ldots\ldots\ldots Sn\ S_1\#$$

In this rule S represents a syllable and # indicates a word boundary.

Most speech play involves the alteration of the phonological structure of words by changing some of the rules that normally operate on certain phonological and phonetic input. The changes the order or nature of the sounds so as to produce new output, as shown below (see also Sherzer 1976:30).

17a. *Kofi ---- fiko fiko fiko.*

17b. *s☐re--res☐res☐ res☐ res☐ res☐ s☐re*--'get up' becomes *res☐* 'is switching it on'.

17c. *res☐* 'is catching' becomes *res☐res☐res☐res☐* and changes into *s☐res☐re* 'get up'.

17d. *di-da* 'eat and sleep'----- becomes *dadi dadi dadi,* 'sleep and eat'.

The most commonly employed phonological processes for speech play are *addition, insertion, deletion, reversal* and *substitution.* Most of the types of speech play are done by children, who string together sounds of their language in an arbitrary way. Creating nonsense words, they can converse at length and fluently with other children. The phonological processes involved are restricted to these play games and do not occur in everyday language. The overall intention is to conceal the meaning from non-speakers of the play-game language. Most speech play games are unintelligible to persons who do not know the language, even if they are native speakers of the source language.[2]

2.5. Pig Latin

The best known secret language is the Pig Latin used by English-speaking children. Utterances are created by phonological transfer-moving the first phoneme of each word to the end and then tacking on the vowel glide [ey]. Let us look at the English sentence in 18 below.

18. *He does not know it* becomes *ehay oesday otnay owknay tiay.*

Among the Akan, there is a Pig Latin language called *mekeseke.* Here, the vowel in each syllable is repeated accompanied by the insertion of a velar plosive [k, g] in between the first vowel and the one which is repeated to form a new syllable.

$$V \dashrightarrow V \begin{Bmatrix} g \\ k \end{Bmatrix} V$$

Example 19a can be transformed into examples 19b and 19c by using the rule above.

> 19 a. *Me   se   me   te   Kumase*
>   I   say   I   stay at Kumase

> 19b. *Mese mete Kumase* becomes *mekeseke meketeke Kukumakaseke* 'I say I live in Kumase'.

> 19c. *Mese mete Kumase* becomes *megesege megetege Kugumagasege* 'I say I live in Kumase'.

The speakers can even make the language more complex by combining the voiceless alveolar fricative [s] with any of the two velar plosives to get [ks] or [gs], as found in examples 20a and 20b.

> 20a. *Mese mete Kumase* becomes *meksesekse meksetekse Kuksumaksasekse* 'I say I live in Kumase'.

> 20b. *Mese mete Kumase* becomes *megesegse megsetegse Kugsumagsasegse* 'I say I live in Kumase'.

Also in other languages (such as Cuna), children can create words by combining words in strange and unusual manners.[3]

2.6. Riddles and Tone Riddles

The word for 'riddle' in Akan is *abisae* (made up of *a- bisa* 'to ask'). A riddle basically involves questions and answers; it is a word game in which the elements of intellectual exercise and verbal skills are combined. In this verbal puzzle, a statement is posed as a challenge and another statement is offered in response to either the hidden meaning or the form of the challenge. Riddles are part of verbal duelling

involving a victor and a vanquished; each wants to declare his/her superiority and academic capabilities over the contestant.

Riddles include every sphere of natural and human life and thus vary according to the preoccupations and customs of the society in which they are told. An understanding of riddles depends on one's knowledge of the particular society.

In riddling, the basic principle is that the things one describes run counter to one's natural expectations. Most riddles are paradoxes that defeat the norms of behaviour by the use of various distractors to confuse the contestants.

To solve a riddle, one may need a double process. The analogy in the initial statement may not be immediately obvious; the 'solver' will have to consider and select salient features of the object or situation mentioned and proceed to identify a similar object that can match the question with the answer. The riddle contains a descriptive element in the question, together with a literal or metaphorical interpretation; a more common feature of the object is added. Examples of riddles include:

21. *Apɔnkɔ fitaa akuo mmienu a wɔgyinagyina esi kɔkɔɔ so. (ɛse)*
'Two rows of white horses on a red hill'. (Teeth)

22. *Dua bɛn na yɛwo no a, ɔfura ntoma, na ɔyini a, na wato aguɔ? mpampuro*
'Which tree is clothed at birth but becomes nude as it grows up?' (Bamboo).

We can also distract people's attention by substituting the real object with something very remote, as in the example below.

23. *Agya apolisifoɔ mpensa, wɔn nyinaa bɔ bɛlte koro. ɛne deɛn. praɛ*
'My old man has three thousand policemen but they all wear a single belt. What is it?' (A broom).

In this riddle, the broom strands with their single binding rope are compared respectively to three thousand police men and one belt. To unravel this riddle, we have to depersonalise the policemen and their belts.

24. *Agya maa me asutareE kɛseɛ bi a nwura afu atwa ho ahyia, ɛne deɛn: aniwa.*
'Father gave me a big lake surrounded by bushes. What is this?' (An eye ball).

The lake refers to the eye ball and the watery substance around it and the bushes are the eye lashes.

25. *Agya rekɔ no ɔgyaa me nku bi, sɛ ɛsi hɔ a, na anane na sɛ ɛka ogya pɛ na ada, ɛyɛ deɛn?: kosua.*
'When my father was leaving he left me a shea butter lotion, if it is left alone it melts but the moment it is heated it solidifies. What is this?' (Answer: an egg).

Raw egg is not solidified: if it breaks it shatters and the liquid disperses; but any time it is heated or cooked it becomes solid. On the other hand, shea butter is solid in its normal stage; however, if it comes into contact with heat or fire it melts. We therefore see a sharp contrast between egg and shea butter. It is such a contrast and the violation of a natural phenomenon that distracts the mind of the listener and makes the answer difficult.

26. *Agya rekɔ no ɔgyaa me ɔdan bi, na berɛ a ɛdan no firi soro reba fam no, na obi adi kan aka ɛdan no mu akaadoo dada. ɛyɛ ɔdan bɛn? : kube.*
'When my father was leaving, he left behind a room, when the room was conjured from heavens on to the earth it was already painted white. What is this?' (Answer: a coconut).

The semantic relation between the riddle and its answer is that the edible part of the coconut is white: that represents the white paint, while the outer shell is the room. In another analogy, the room is already painted, so one can easily use it; likewise the coconut is ready to be eaten without any form of cooking.

2.6.2. Translational Riddles

I am using the term translational riddles to refer to a type of speech play among the Akans where a colleague gives a literal translation of an Akan word in English and asks the friend to give the Akan equivalent. Examples are

27a. corn back → *aburokyire* 'overseas', from *aburo* 'corn' and *akyire* 'back'.

27b. go go dance back → *k☐k☐sakyi* 'vulture', from *k☐* 'go', *k☐* 'go', *sa* 'dance', *kyi* 'back'.

27c. fight go sugar cane → *kok☐hwedeE* 'partridge', from *ko* 'fight', *k☐* 'go', *hwedeE* 'sugar cane'.

27d. bell lost → *d☐nhwere* 'hour', from *d☐n* 'bell', *hwere* 'to lose'.

27e. skin pain → *aho☐yaw* 'jealousy', from *aho* 'body/skin', *yaw* 'pain'.

In this speech game, competitors try as much to outwit others as possible by presenting more and more difficult questions. When a competitor is stuck for a couple of minutes then the turn goes back to the other who can pose further questions.

2.6.3. Tone Riddles

Tone riddles are referred to as *aborɔme,* meaning 'bore a hole in me', that is to dig out things about my personality or family. Tone riddles occur in languages where tonality is a significant feature. The questions and answers are marked by identical or similar tonal patterns. Among the Ibibio, tone riddles are characterized by their erotic content or allusions. Practically they all make reference to the vagina, clitoris etc. (big ships, big clitoris).

In Akan, there are Fante tone riddles that are full of insults, however, the competitors are not supposed to get angry. They should rather respond with more insulting replies in order to outwit their colleagues. The characteristic form of riddles in Africa is an analogy somewhere between question and answer, most frequently an analogy of meaning and sound.

There is no logical relationship between the call and their responses, one has to learn them and understand what they imply so that in competing, one can come out with a more insulting call.

2.7. Joking Strategies and Humour

Joking and humour are part of speech play; here, utterances are not taken seriously but are meant as games between participants. Jokes and humour normally create laughter and entertainment. Joking and humour can be employed as forms of indirection to communicate implicit meanings and also to comment on delicate and taboo topics without causing a face threat to addressees. Jokes and humour are therefore linguistic tools used to minimise face threats and conflicts. According to Kotthoff (2006:9), 'Every invitation to laugh is an invitation to withdraw focal attention from the ongoing discussion and to direct it to non-instrumental pleasure'. She continues to say that because of this refocusing and distraction of attention to something

else, women and subordinates find it difficult to create jokes and humour in formal discussions; they would be perceived as momentarily taking control of the situation and thus usurping the power from the authorities.

Some tribes in Ghana use joking language to insult other tribes; none of the participants is supposed to get angry. Sherzer (1985:217) refers to such jokes as 'interethnic or interracial jokes' and mentions that they involve the social boundaries that operate within society. These jokes are meant to make fun of some stereotypic features or conduct of a particular society or ethnic groups. The insults in these jokes are considered as games for entertainment. A participant who gets angry is frowned upon. Such invective games occur among the Asantes and Nzemas of Ghana. An Asante citizen in Nzema land can even insult the Nzema king. A lot of teasing goes on among speakers of these two groups.

A similar phenomenon occurs between the Gonjas and the Kasenas and the Dagaares and Frafras, where joking terms prevail among affinal kinsmen. Among the Akans, sisters in-law play games with each other, using words of abuse and flattering.[4] These interethnic jokes are meant to foster the intimate relations and affiliations between these groups.

In discussing interethnic jokes among Mexicans, Limón (1986:11) tells of popular word-games or battles in Mexico City that are full of obscene allusions and double meanings. In this verbal duel, each of the speakers tries to humiliate his adversary with verbal traps and ingenious linguistic combinations. If an opponent cannot think of a comeback and has to swallow his opponent's jibes, he becomes the loser. These jibes are full of aggressive sexual allusions. The winner rejoices and the spectators laugh and sneer at the loser. To some extent, these word games are very close to the Fante tone riddles mentioned above because of their obscene nature

Joking terms are language and culture specific; they can only be interpreted in the context of the people who share the jokes. Jokes in one particular language and culture may be meaningless to outsiders. For instance, an outsider who is not familiar with the joking terms

between the Asantes and the Nzemas will be baffled to see an Asante labourer insulting a Nzema professor at the University of Ghana, Legon. As a rule, none of them should get angry; neither should it degenerate into a fight. It is the one who is quick to anger that is accused of being unsociable. One needs to retaliate with expressions that are able to outdo the opponent's. These jocular invectives act as escape valves and relief mechanisms for feelings that might otherwise be more dangerous with their normal connotation. They may also be used in certain situations as counter-balances, and also as mechanisms of restraints in much of social life and interpersonal relations (see Montagu 1967:13).[5]

The overall function of jokes is to create fun and help people to release tension and have some form of mental relationship. Sherzer (1985:219) therefore posits that 'jokes are both speech play and verbal art'. As such they can be viewed as enjoyable and pleasurable to both tellers and listeners. They are a form of verbal relaxation, time off and time out from the more real literal, serious, and informational uses of language. We must, however, be cautious about the use of jokes (especially the interethnic ones) and have to make sure that the addressee is aware of the joke being an interethnic one; otherwise, one can easily become offended. When the playing ground for jokes is not levelled, jokes may turn into face threats, with aggressive language, and thus lose their core function of entertainment.

2.7.2. Quasi Euphemisms

Quasi-euphemisms in Akan may be encountered when playing games such as *dame* 'draught', *ntEtoᴐ* 'playing with marbles', *ludo*, and *oware* (an Akan game).[6] In these games, insults may be hurled at a participant without an insult being meant. The insults are meant to provoke and divert the attention of the opponent so that he loses concentration and thus is bested the game. It is with this in mind that chiefs in Akan are

not allowed to play such games, lest they may be freely insulted. This whole class of invectives which are not considered offensive might be categorized as 'devituperation' or 'upside-down' use of abuse (see Agyekum 1996:134-135). Some devituperation in *dame* and *oware* include:

28a. *wonnim sᴐre kᴐdwonsᴐ* 'you do not even know how to get up to urinate'.

28b. *kwasea to* 'damn fool'.

28c. *tin tin to* 'fool'. This expression is used when a winner is able to win three marbles at a time.

28d. *Wonto a, sᴐre.* 'If you wont play just get up and go' (in *dame* 'draught').

28e. *wopE wo to anaa wopE wo ba?* 'Do you like your buttocks or your child?'

The expression in 28e is used in *oware* where an opponent has set two traps and no matter where you move one of them will be affected. The question, even though profane, is allowed; it simply means: Do you want to be punished yourself or do you want to sacrifice your child?

In other instances, peer group members may manipulate innocent words that have same phonological relations with taboo words and push their colleagues to inadvertently answer these questions, so they may be accused of using profane language, as in the examples below.

29. *SE worekᴐ kuro bi a yEfrE hᴐ Te asᴐre na obi hyia wo kwan mu na ᴐbisa wo sE worekᴐ hene a, wobEka sEn?*
'If you were attending church at a village called Te and someone meets you on the way and asks: "where are you going?" What will you say?'

Answer: *Merekɔ te asɔre*. The expression *kɔte asɔre* is a taboo expression that means 'my penis is erected'.

30. *SE obi kɔn dɔ ankaa na sE ankaa bi si wo papa afikyire na wopE sE ɔnya bi die a, sEn na wobEka akyerE no.*
'If somebody is longing for oranges and there is an orange tree behind your father's house, how will you instruct him to go for some?'
A: *MEka sE kɔte ankaa bEdi*. 'I will say, go and pluck oranges and come to eat'.

The expression *kɔte ankaa bEdi* corresponds phonetically to *kɔte* 'penis', *anka* 'would have', *a* 'if', *wo* 'you', *bEdi* 'will have sex'. This will then mean that if the orange had been penis, you would have enjoyed it. A colleague who gives such an answer is considered a bad person.

In the words of Lloyd (2007:19):

Any word that has both sexual and non-sexual meaning (e.g. erect) invites obvious sexual innuendo, hence there are many loaded words that need to be used very delicately, if at all, in proper communicative interaction.

By capitalizing on the delicacy of terms that relate to the sex organs and sexual activities and by mentioning certain scatological fluids, peer groups want to push their colleagues to dealing with such (quasi-)taboo expressions; if they are not able to handle this kind of intralingual verbal taboo well, their communicative competence will be at stake (see Agyekum 1996:11).

Akan youth try to ridicule their friends by intentionally mispronouncing their names, but the bearers of such names should not take offence. Such ridiculing slips of the tongue are referred to as *anofom* (lit.) 'mouth errors'. They are not as profound as the spoonerism and malapropism recorded in the literature on speech play.[7]

3. Speech Play and Gender

Various genres of ethnographic activities are either female- or male-oriented or both. A study of many forms of speech play in the literature reveals that most of them (for instance, joking terms and humorous styles) are male-oriented. For women to perform humour and crack jokes on a public stage seemed odd, even though they could sometimes do the same in private circles among family members or peer group members (see Kotthoff 2006:7). It is for similar reasons that among the Akans, about 95% of comedians are males; there are very few women comedians either on TV or radio. In the 1960s, the performers and actors of Akan drama were solely men who had to put on female costume and dress like females.

As for gender and humour, it has been observed by the psychoanalyst Grotjahn as early as 1957 that women seldom tell jokes, because any show of aggression, open or disguised, is taken by every man in our competitive culture as a challenge to which he has to arise. The human male of our time is supposed to resent such aggression as humiliating and unbecoming of his dignity (Grotjahn, as cited by Coser 1960:86; cf. Kotthoff 2006:9). Even though the situation has changed in many societies, with women's equality and empowerment, women as compared to men crack fewer jokes, especially in cross-gender interaction.

When I grew up in the 1960s, I realised that most of the type of speech play discussed in this paper were the unique preserve of boys, who used their creativity to create new versions. Our female counterparts were more interested in moonlight games and other songs. Situations where boys included the girls were those of the quasi-euphemisms: we wanted them to unintentionally mention taboo words that had phonetic resemblance with non-taboo expressions. Humour and jokes can be considered as aggressive ways of duelling verbally. They are considered the preserve of men because in a traditional society

like the Akan, men use their masculinity to subdue women and this is reflected in the performance of speech play.

Notwithstanding this dominance of speech play by males, women may crack jokes, tease each other, and employ humour when communicating among themselves. Naturally, people tease those they are very familiar with, knowing for sure that they will not take their words seriously. In the view of Holmes (2000), when people make fun of others, it presupposes that they have close and fair relationships; the jokes affirm and concretise this intimacy.

4. Process in Speech Play

Speech play is not a new language altogether. The everyday language in the community is used as its base (or input), and certain systematic transformational rules are applied towards the output. The participants create specialized linguistic codes, based on everyday language, using definable linguistic rules. The questions to be asked are:

1. What are the inherent properties of speech play?

2. What are the kinds of linguistic rules involved in the generation of play languages?

Since speech play is an aspect of language, all the structures and domains of language including spelling, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and literature can be employed.

1. Speech play may take the form of puns, rhymes, and speech metaphors as repetition of a word in a different sense. Letters or syllables may be removed from their places. Pig Latin, the secret language used by children, reshuffles letters in words and adds a vocalic 'affix'.

2. Substitution of words: Peer groups and colleagues in Akan may choose to use certain words that are privy to them alone. Akan teachers can say *nsuo atɔ* 'it has rained' to mean 'salaries have been paid'. Again, university students may use the term 'second world war' to refer to a re-sit of an university examination. In English the expressions 'brown-nose', 'boot licker', or 'suck up' refer to a person who flatters influential people to gain their favour.

3. Special linguistic codes are used for social purposes. These codes include adult-baby talk, ritual or religious language such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia), sacred language (e.g. the Latin earlier used in the Catholic Mass), and street language (as used by street gangs) etc.

5. *Functions of Speech Play*

Speech play performs major roles in the lives of children towards their upbringing, their social and mental development. The questions to be answered in this section include the following:

(a) What is the relevance of play languages to particular languages and to linguistics as a whole? (see Sherzer 1976:20)
(b) What does play language reveal about the ethnography of speaking and the sociolinguistic patterns of a community?

Let us attempt to answer these questions.

Socially and culturally, speech play provides a social bonding among communicative participants. It fosters and reinforces group identity and brings about social cohesion and good interpersonal relationships among people. To demonstrate that one is a member of a special group, one should know and be able to speak the play language fluently. Knowledge of a particular speech play enhances

communicative secretiveness and allows people to disguise themselves from other people.

Speech play is also a **secret code** meant to obscure meaning to outsiders and to preclude them from understanding participants in specific communicative encounters. The speech play becomes a special metalanguage tapped from the object, or national, language. According to Sherzer (1976:34), 'A common function of play languages is concealment and a corresponding delineation of social groups and subgroups'. In view of this function, some scholars refer to speech play as speech disguise, secret language, secret code, etc.

Speech play may be used as a form of religious language in cults at shrines. At Akan local traditional shrines, the traditional priest speaks to his *Ɔkyeame* 'chief spokesperson' in a certain language that only the privy members of the shrine can understand. Normally they use unrefined Akan, as usually spoken by the Mosis from Burkina Faso. In Christian groups, the use of glossolalia can be considered as an aspect of speech play.

Speech play games train children's language and **artistic** creativity and verbal art. It is a striking case of creativity in language use, where users display their artistry and aesthetic language capabilities and competence through the processes of insertion, deletion, metathesis and others to create a special language.

Speech play is employed to generate competition within a group. We see this in proverbs, verbal duels, ritual insults, and Akan tone riddle competitions. There are proverb competitions on Peace FM and Garden City Radio in Kumase.

Speech play is a form of **entertainment.** It is used for fun by exploiting language for pleasure, amusement, and entertainment. For comical speech plays, performers have to rehearse and practice, as we see it in comedies on radio and TV.

Speech play interacts socially, culturally, psychologically and linguistically with the common language and culture. It is relevant for anthropological and linguistic theory and practice, as well as for folklore studies and literary criticism. Speech play thus becomes an

interdisciplinary area of study, linking sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature and linguistics.

Speech play is often indicative of people's deepest values and world views; some of it relates to the ecology, the flora and fauna. It is a significant site of intersection among language, culture, society, and individual expression. Speech plays like riddles and proverbs facilitate **concept formation** in children, their cognitive abilities and environmental development. It helps them to master and understand the things and the world around them.

Speech play is used as a form of socialization and enculturation. It is one significant medium where children learn to master the structure of their language and its appropriate use. It gives insight into the language of their community, and this further helps them to know their culture.

Speech play also contributes to children's **social development** through their participation in group activities, which contributes to their social development. It helps them to gain experiences, to plan strategies, and how to put on public performances. Play language gives insight into the general patterns and themes of speech used and the role of speaking in the community.

One of the major functions of speech play is **tolerance and emotional development.** It trains the children on how to deal with interrogations, ambiguities, and humiliation. In effect, it helps to teach children to be tolerant. Some aspects of tone riddles in Fante may be insulting, but participants need to continue the game and counteract aggressive acts by using more serious repartees against their opponents.

6. Ethnographic Situations for the Performance of Akan Speech Play

Speech plays are employed in certain socio-cultural contexts within each community. The context of a speech play may depend on the type of speech play. According to Apte (1994:4203), 'Although speech play is generally a leisure-time activity, existing ethnographic evidence

suggests that well-established genres of speech play in some cultures take place in very specific environments'.

Sometimes speech play is considered an artistic creation and people who can perform them are accorded prestige and status. In many cultures, speech plays are used in competition. The most styled and organized forms of speech play are *ritual insults* and *verbal duels*, as they occur among Afro-American boys and girls, Turkish boys, Samoan children, children and adults among the Chamula Indians in Mexico, and among the Fante Akans with their tone riddles.

Sometimes speech play is part of religious rituals; clear examples are glossolalia and the type of language used by the *akyeame* at the shrines of our African traditional religion. At these shrines, the priests and the *akyeame* communicate in a type of language that involves certain manipulations meant to stave off their audience and worshippers. There may be changes in the phonological structures of words in utterances; or changes in some of the words, through addition, subtraction, or reversal and substitution of words and sounds. In some instances they will be speaking 'broken Twi' as is done by non-native speakers from the northern parts of Ghana, especially Mossi.

In Ghanaian theatre, comedians like NkɔmmɔdE, Bob Okala, Agya Koo, Ice Cream and others use speech play a lot. The most outstanding forms are riddles; these will start with *monnim,* 'do you know', or use ideophones, as in *Enna ɔhurii no sei ara bam na ɔbEhwee hɔ sei ara tum* 'and he jumped with a bang and fell down forcefully'. The audience watching the comedians is highly entertained by their humour, jokes, insults etc. Most Ghanaian children learn these jokes and humorous expressions and commonly use them when they go to school. As the children copy these veteran comedians, they also learn the rules of the verbal game and eventually try to create some on their own. These games therefore promote both innovative and creative abilities.

Speech play, including the use of humour, punning and riddles, is used in Akan commercial adverts on radio and TV. Examples are:

31. *Agyaaku na hwan na ɔyii woɔ yi EnnE deE wokyEn Akyem polisi.* 'Agyaaku, may I know who barbered you? As for today you are more handsome than the weaver bird called Akyem Polisi'. [Mascaponi Barbering Shop]

In this excerpt, the (female) complimenter compliments the addressee by referring to the agent who has made him so handsome. The complimenter is amazed by the sudden change in the appearance of the addressee, and uses the focus marker *deE* 'as for' to imply that until today the man was not as handsome as he appears. His handsome nature is compared to the weaverbird that is most beautiful among birds. The similarity between a person and a weaverbird is brought in to create fun and the addressee should not be offended.

Akan speech play is also used during certain aspects of festivals that are earmarked for open insults without any sanctions. During these periods, the bond on formality and politeness is lifted and people can even hurl insults at chiefs and traditional administrators of the state. Such speech games of humour, jokes, and reversal invectives reduce social and status asymmetry and thus level status differences (see Sollitt-Morris 1997; Holmes 2000). Examples of such insults are found in the Apoɔ Festivals of Brong Ahafo – Techiman, Nkoranza, etc. (cf. Warren and Brempong 1977), and also the Kundum festival of the Nzemas. Yankah (1983:168) records that among the people of Elmina, an Akan speaking community, a day is set aside during their annual festival for a rite known as *nsEe* 'perverse behaviour'. During all these periods, anybody can hurl insults at the King or a chief without any sanctions. It is believed that these are times when the attention of the rulers can be drawn to some of the faults of their administration, so that they can start to take corrective measures to rectify the shortcomings in the society after the festival. These insults, which function as socio-political checks are regarded as part of the norms of the festivals. Apte (1985:152-153) remarks that 'even those who normally avoid taboo words in their routine use of language are given

to using them on special occasions such as specific festivals and rituals [. ....]. Such occasions have been labelled as Rites of Reversals'.

7. *Conclusion*

Language has various ways of sending messages to achieve its various functions. One of these ways is to manipulate and use speech as an object or a tool for playing. This is done by tapping into some elements of the target language, modifying it in various forms to achieve various goals.

We have seen in this paper that speech play involves the creative disposition and manipulation of features of language for social, cultural, and communicative purposes. It draws attention to slight variations in language. It is a conscious attempt to create a special variety or style or manipulate certain elements of language for a variety of reasons. Speech play is part of everyday interaction in all societies; however, each community or culture may have its own definition of speech play, relative to other uses of speech.

We have discussed types of speech play including tongue twisters, rhyming, linking and association, riddles and tone riddles, puzzles, punning, quasi-euphemisms, Pig Latin, backward and forward invented speech.

We realised that the linguistic processes involved in speech play include deletion or elision, substitution, metathesis, insertion of sounds and syllables, and so on.

Speech play has various functions: in religion, for entertainment, in concept formation, in the development of children's intellect, and for use as a secret code. It also plays greater roles in social and emotional development; in promoting sociocultural knowledge and unity among members, group solidarity, artistic creativity, etc. These roles are employed in various ethnographic situations among the Akans. Speech is thus functional even when it is put into play.

It is unfortunate that most of these speech play forms are dying off because of urbanisation and the fact that children now prefer to watch TV or video, and also to play computer and video games. There is thus a need to record some of these speech plays for future generations.

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Notes

1. | | |
   |---|---|
   | Are you the guy | No I am not the guy |
   | That told the guy | That told the guy |
   | That I'm the guy | That you are the guy |
   | That gave the guy | That gave the guy |
   | The black eye | The black eye |

2. According to Sherzer (1976:31) 'One major linguistic task of play game is to produce distinct and hard-to-recognize forms by means of one or two relatively simple rules. This is done most efficiently by making use of the rule structure or rule format of ordinary language and at the same time filling in this structure or format with possibilities not exploited in the ordinary language'.

3. In Cuna one finds similar examples, such as the insertion of a sound sequence made up of *r* plus the vowel of the previous syllable. The rule is thus

   me-r-ki 'North American'   ------→   *mere-r kiri*

   pe 'you'   ------→   *pere*

   pia 'where'   ------→   *piriara.*

   In another Cuna play game, every vowel in a word becomes *i.*
   Examples: *pe* 'you' ---→ *pi*, *pia* 'where'---→ *pii*, *nuka* 'name'---→ *niki.*

4. Among the Zinacantan of the Chiapas highlands in Mexico, age mates can use similar joking terms in turn taking among verbal duellers. According to

Bricker (1976:57), the person who initiates the interaction suggests that he and his joking partner become brothers-in-law so that he will be entitled to sexual privileges with his opponent's sister.

5. We are not going to discuss Akan joking terms here since one must be born or raised up as an Akan before s/he can understand Akan jokes. I am mentioning this here because jokes are part of the manipulation of a language for comic purposes.

6. An African game, popular among the Akan, consisting of twelve holes, six on each side, constructed either on the ground or in a piece of wood. Each hole takes four marbles. It may be played by two, three, four or six people.

7. Spoonerisms are labelled after the late Rev. William Spooner, who used to transpose linguistic units such as phonemes, syllables, morphemes, words, or phrases to form an utterance which is different from the one originally intended by the speaker. The most popular spoonerism are
A well-boiled icicle --- a well oiled bicycle,
A scoop of Boy Trouts --- a troop of Boys Scouts
To gap the bridge --- to bridge the gap
A malapropism is defined as a ridiculous misuse of a similar-sounding word substituting for the intended one. This is a characteristic of the fictional Mrs. Malaprop who produced such error such as *pineapple* for *'pinnacle': he is the very pineapple of politeness, if I reprehend anything in this world*…. In some use of malapropism the speaker is not aware that s/he has committed an error.

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