Semantics and Functionality of Ghanaianisms: A Survey

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Abstract

Ghanaians have expressions that are semantically divergent from Standard English and mostly defile explanations of lexicographers. These expressions are known as Ghanaianisms. It was found out that the semantics of Ghanaianisms is as a result of cultural factors such as taboos, traditions and the purpose of 'we-feeling'. It was realized that different modes are adopted in getting expressions peculiar to Ghana function to carry the weight of their experiences. The use of Ghanaianisms is found to be employed by different categories of professionals; all dictated by the cultural environment of the people and how they view the world through the use of a foreign language. Though it was found out that Ghanaianisms are a way of creating linguistic identity, it equally brings about identity crisis for both learners of English as a second language and teachers of English as a second language.

Keywords: Ghanaianisms, semantics, functionality, survey, semantically divergent

INTRODUCTION

"The meaning of a lexical item is not consistent and any dictionary meaning or semantic/componential analysis of a word may fail in many cultures and contexts" Kempson (1977, p. 80). The culture of Ghana can only be appropriately conveyed by the people of Ghana through the use of language which is not of syntax but semantics. The use of lexical items and how they are used semantically to suit the Ghanaian culture are known as Ghanaianisms. Some of these lexical items (Ghanaianisms) are purely localized expressions whilst others are English lexical items that have been 'bent' to acquire meaning according to the cultures and contexts of the users of the language and not according to the 'supposed' owners of the language. There is supposed to be "the vacillation of meaning from context to context" as indicated by Kempson (1977, p. 80).

In addition, the use of the same language in different cultures does not necessarily reflect the same or similar social function and semantic meaning. This is illustrated by Romane (1994, p. 25) as: "There is no necessary one-to-one relationship between language and society." English used in Britain performs the crucial role of language being used as an agent of change, transmission of culture and maintenance of identity. English used in Ghana and in any other country performs the same roles but differently

due to the dictates of the culture, context and society concerned. The transmission of culture does not basically reside in the syntax but in the vocabulary of the language that serves as an inventory of the items a culture talks about and has categorized in order to make sense of the world as indicated by Romane (1994), and Carter and McCarthy (1998).

The culture of Ghana is unique; the vocabulary of Ghana equally stands out. This is to enable Ghanaians who are nurtured in Ghana and their ideas embedded in their culture to sufficiently and effectively express their culture and identity. Identity is not sufficiently expressed in the vocabulary items alone given but in their meanings. The meanings defile the scope and meaning of the lexicographer and many at times have to be given a semantic tilt. This tilt is not semantically generalized but has to be fashioned in a manner that has to take the shape of the culture in question and in use. The use of Ghanaianisms plays an important role in the identification of Ghanaian English though some scholars, especially Sey (1973), disagree that there is Ghanaian English. They say what exist in the English in Ghana are deviations and can be attributed to and labeled as educated Ghanaian English. These deviations are more of grammatical but not lexical.

The grammar of every language cannot be changed but its lexical items can best be fitted into the matrix due to the open and accommodating nature of the English language and that the New Englishes have opened the flood gates for an influx of vocabulary. This situation is expressed by Carter and McCarthy (1998, p. 19) as: "The vocabulary of a language is in constant flux, old items drop out, new items come in, and as the new replace and augment the old, so the internal relations of the whole set alter." The altering of the 'whole set' is not syntactic but semantic.

As a result of the influx of the new vocabulary items that sometimes present semantic difficulties to outsiders (non-Ghanaians) Dako (2003) has presented a glossary of Ghanaianisms. This is just a compilation but what needs to be pointed out is that every living language is dynamic and therefore moves beyond fixed meaning. Some criteria are necessary for the identification and understanding of the usage and meaning (semantics) of Ghanaianisms.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Ghanaian English which is still in the balance as to whether there is any English to be labeled as such has not received much attention from researchers though few have tried to establish the fact that English in Ghana has acquired certain features and must be acclaimed Ghanaian English. Dako (2003) has compiled some lexical items she says are basically limited to Ghana. This compilation which she calls glossary barely shows the meaning which could be compared to the work of a lexicographer. Kirby (1998) also compiled some lexical items which indicate how they are pronounced by Ghanaians without delving into the semantics based on context. This work tries to contribute to the little literature available on Ghanaianisms but based on context usage and their functionality in conveying meaning.

A NATION WITH A SECOND LANGUAGE CONSIDERED OFFICIAL

> Every nation speaks... according to the way it thinks and thinks according to the way it speaks. Thoughts cannot be transferred from one language to another because every thought depends on the language in which it has been formulated (Wierzbicka, 1992, p. 3).

A nation which is multilingual may use English as its official language due to a wide range of factors such as wider communication, unification of a nation and offering equal opportunities to its citizens. Whichever reason for the consideration of a language outside the inner circle of languages within a nation, the citizens of that nation still formulate their thoughts along the lines of their L1 but not that of the L2. The syntax of the L2 is adhered to but the semantics of the L2 are constructed in the lines of the formulation of their thoughts. Therefore, there is 'separatebility' and separateness of meaning and form. This very idea seems not to depart from other researches. This perfectly fits in what Sapir wrote:

> Language is a guide to social reality. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached (1949, p. 162).

He reiterates the above as: "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (1956, pp. 213-214). Ghanaians, no matter their level of education, formulate their thoughts in the language they are nurtured in. The semantics of the imposed language in a new geographical location, though might be considered an artifact of Ghana, can never be used to substitute the inner circle languages. The second language rather has to acquire meaning according to the culture of the people who use the second language because of its linguistic utility.

The emotions, experiences and life situations of Ghanaians are shaped by their nation and cultural practices. English is just a linguistic tool used for the expressions of these experiences which an English person is not capable of experiencing as indicated by Aidoo(1992) in her novel *Changes*. "Meanings cannot therefore be rigorously described and compared without culture-free semantic metalanguage" (Wierzbicka, 1992). The culture of Ghana cannot be free without peculiar expressions arising from Ghana to transmit its culture to generations unborn and communicate to others who seem to have no knowledge about the culture of Ghana. These ideas are conveyed in syntax of English coupled with other morphological processes which are either totally Ghanaian or partially English; for, the lexical items have been bent to acquire meaning through the process of acculturation, nativisation (Dako, 2004). The phonological aspect is equally Ghanaianised as indicated by Kirby (1998), Koranteng (2005) and Dako(2003). The above linguistic characteristics of English in Ghana looks not far removed from what Wilhem von Humboldt (1999) when he drew a profound semantic difference between languages from different worldviews: "Each language...contains a characteristic around the people to whom it adheres...."

The English language has been with Ghanaians for ages and now an artifact of Ghana as Quoco (1994) pointed out. Meanings of expressions, utterances and propositions in English probably have to acquire meaning according to the thoughts of the nation due to its adherence to the people of Ghana. It therefore becomes apparent to look at semantics of Ghanaianisms and their functionality in relation to social reality, cultural freedom, creative writing and the media - mouthpiece of the people.

These areas are necessary because the identity of a nation depends on its national languages projected in their culture, in their writing. However, it would be unfair to generalize that the use of English language across-cultures is the same. Jaszczolt (2002, p. 330) illustrated this as: "What is illocution in one culture may be perlocution in another, and a particular speech act may require different types of acts as responses in different cultures." Adogpa (2013) posited that what is linguistically appropriate in one geographical area may prove a linguistic casualty in another."Bolinger (1980, p. 68) puts it as follows: "Language is not a neutral instrument. It is a thousand ways biased." The adherence of a language to a people has to be given meaning according to the world view of the people. This is language and the semantics of a language has to vary from country to country in order to serve the cultural needs of the people. "... if any of the signs we use have meaning by themselves … they have the meaning which we or our societies have given to them. …the link between the signifier and the concept which it signifies is arbitrary, governed by more or less a random choice by a community rather than by a law of nature" (Morgan Welton, 1992, p. 76).The people of a nation use a second language as they have been trained by their culture to perceive the world.

THE LANGUAGE SITUATION IN GHANA

The metamorphosis of education in English through the colonial era from the castles to Guggisberg's Sixteen Principles of Education in the then Gold Coast has given English its premier position in Ghana.

The agitation for a medium of instruction began in the days of Gold Coast and has not yet been put to rest. The Government White Paper (2005) on Prof. Anamoah- Mensah Committee Report still carries the language policy of using L1 as the medium of instruction at the lower primary and English as medium of instruction from upper primary onwards. The government endorsed the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction at the lower primary. However, the government and Ghanaians are still worried about the cosmopolitan nature of tribes in the urban areas. The use of Ghanaianisms is a step towards solving the cosmopolitan nature of tribes in the urban areas. Many arguments ensued regarding instructional problems especially that of attitudes. One of such attitudes, Gbedemah (1975, p. 11) points out, is:

> It is important for the second language teacher to sustain his students' pride in their culture. If very little use is made of their local language in school, the students' pride in their languages will be subverted, and this may adversely affect their orientation toward the second language.

This role of the second language teacher puts him as well as his students in a dilemma. The students' attempt to give up their culture and language becomes 'deracines'. Deracines are extreme case of denationalization rendering individuals incapable of functioning effectively within their own cultures. That seems to be the situation of the Ghanaian user of English. His desire to protect, preserve and protect his culture ends in the use of certain words that deviate semantically from Standard English. The desire to also maintain standards in the English language removes the African, Ghanaian writer from his people and culture. He becomes a torn-apart figure.

Besides, the Ghanaian's desire to cling to standards makes him despise other varieties. The attitude of Ghanaians despising other varieties of English can be attributed to the role the missionaries and parents played. The church and the colonial administrator extenuated pidgin when formal education was introduced to train people as translators and administrative assistants. However, pidgin, a commercial language used by the Europeans and the people of Gold Coast, now Ghana, did not survive due to the activities of the missionaries and parents desire for standards. The contact language situation resulted in a new variety of English where the lexical items have undergone semantic changes. These changes bring into being new lexical items whose meanings are exclusively Ghanaian.

On the part of the question of which Ghanaian language to adopt as a national language has played a role in English in Ghana. Many controversies arose when the following was made in parliament in 1971.

> "Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that in view of the importance of the national language as a factor for national unity in Ghana, this house requests the government to set up a national committee of experts to promote and co-ordinate all efforts being made to evolve a common Ghanaian language or lingua franca" Gbedemah (1975, p. 39).

Several hostile reactions arose but prominent of them was a poem sent to parliament when invitations were made from the public.

The tongue

Cursed be the day
When they shall say:
Enough! Enough of
Ewe or Ga or Fante:
Dagbani or Ewe or Fante!
All of Ghana can speak one language,
The Queen's language, like the Queen?
Who must hear the sermon
In NzimahorEwe or Dagbani
Or the radio
In Twi or Ewe or Dagbani?
Or the radio

In Twi or Ewe or Adangbe?
All of Ghana can speak one language,
The Queen's language, like the Queen-
Cursed be the day!
If we lose our tongue,
We lose our soul.
Gbedemah (1975) quoted.

The poem above exposes the dangers involved in the adoption of a Ghanaian language as a national language for a number of reasons. First, such a language will bring about division among tribes and ethnic groups because others will feel rejected whilst the adopted language group will feel superior. Another reason might be the disadvantage position the majority of Ghanaians will be placed. Many have seen English as the only language that can unify the nation, Ghana. Besides its unification ability, Ghanaians will silently and slowly be rejecting their own culture and identity if they wish to demonstrate the same competence just as the Englishman himself. Hence, the last two lines of the poem above bemoan the dangers that beset Ghanaians if the mother tongue is ignored. A former Ghanaian Chief Inspector of Ghana schools had a somewhat embarrassing statement from Canadians on his visit to Canada when they said he spoke English with a British accent. That was the order of the time and he was proud of that.

Sey (1973) on the other hand remarks:

> …hyper- correctness in pronunciation, especially the type that strives too obviously to approximate to RP is frowned upon as distasteful and pedantic. It is generally felt that it should be as close as possible to RP without calling too much attention to oneself in the process.

Though Sey (1973) differs in terms of pronunciation with the former Chief Inspector of Ghana schools, he maintains that Ghanaians love Standard English.

He writes:

> …writers are admired more for the impressive cadence and flow of their English than their weight of substance it is supposed to convey. A single grammatical error in the speech of a public speaker, even if it is immediately corrected, is almost indelible on his public image.

The foregoing indicates the uncompromising stance of the Ghanaian towards deviant English structures. Yet, Sey (1973) is liberal towards pronunciation for want of identity through speech. The most pragmatic approach to establish the Ghanaian identity is through Ghanaianisms. These Ghanaianisms help protect the cultural values of Ghanaians. There is no question that the Ghanaian writer maintains standard syntax.

English, still, is the national language and it will remain so for a very long time. However, many phonological lexical changes have occurred because customs and traditions tend to diverge from one social environment to the next.

Koranteng (2005) has depicted the phonological situation. She clearly indicated the difficulties Ghanaians face in the use of the central vowel /3:/ and the dental consonants. Ghanaian speakers of English are aware of the existence of those sounds yet they are not keen to approximate their pronunciation to RP for they would not strive to draw much attention to themselves. The difference between spelling and pronunciation brings about errors in spelling. The use of Ghanaianisms reflects the socio-cultural situation in Ghana and Ghanaianisms will go a long way to address the problem of spelling.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The Ghanaian use of English as a second language in every sphere of life is not without influence of culture. The culture of Ghana does not permit the breaking of taboos. Word related to sex are highly frowned upon by Ghanaians. Words such as 'penis', 'to have sex' and others are best communicated as 'manhood', ''chop'. It is not strange to hear or see constructions such as:

His manhood is not functioning/working to mean he is impotent.

I chop her.

Illicit sex is termed as stealing a match.

Sentences such as the above are bonded by the culture of Ghana and they are semantically functional in context due to taboos. A Ghanaian in any communicative situation has to semantically and pragmatically manage the English language in order not to cause linguistic casualty as indicated by Adogpa (2013).

Literary works by Ghanaian writers cannot effectively function without Ghanaianisms. Musicians and film actors equally fare well as a result of Ghanaianisms. The role of Ghanaianisms is beautifully captured by Yankah in the preface to Kirby (1998):

Being myself a linguist, and a newspaper columnist well known for the liberal use of Ghanaian use of Ghanaian English, I grown to appreciate its efficacy for satire and humour in literary works, and do wonder how my two columns: Kwatriot and Abonsam Fireman would have fared without splashes of Ghanaian English.

 It was realized that depending on what the artists want their characters to wear, the message they want their characters to deliver, they, creative writers especially, result in a number of ways such as borrowing, transliteration, coinage and proverbs in order to twist the English language to function for them. Literary works are therefore a representation of a brand of English that one can say conveys the identity of Ghanaians. This identity is a semantic functionality dictated by culture.

The examination scripts of Ghanaian students also demonstrate their culture. It is not uncommon to see introductory paragraphs of students' essays of informal letters expressing their concern about everybody through the use of phatic language. The culture of Ghana values greetings so 'Dear friend' as the normal salutation seems

inadequate. Expressions such as 'how is my mother' when the recipient and the writer are only friends and do not share any family relation is quite understandable in the Ghanaian situation. This finding is in line with Ama Ata Aidoo's use of mother to represent aunt and comments that it segregates when a Ghanaian uses aunt to refer to his/her mother's sister. Ghanaians refer to their aunts as their mothers though they clearly know the appropriate lexical item for such relations. This arises as a result of the semantics of Ghanaianisms being functionally depicted when it comes to family relations. The 'we-feeling' within the Ghanaian family system makes the user of English to semantically 'bend' the English language to serve his/her cultural purpose.

The traditional system of governance in Ghana does not admit transparency in language use. The opaqueness results in a system that makes communication by tradition to carry a Ghanaian brand of English. This new brand semantically deviates from Standard English. The language of traditional rulers is always predominantly full of proverbs. These proverbs are usually difficult to translate without them losing their meaning and weight. The normal method that speakers and writers employ is transliteration. The word for word translation brings about a new English understood by Ghanaians. This is a way of maintaining culture, transmitting culture. It portrays cultural identity. However, it must be pointed out that the Ghanaian learner of English as a second language is faced with identity crisis since he is confronted with Standard English as well as the Ghanaian brand of English. The teacher of English in Ghana equally faces profession identity crisis as he is torn between two cultures that view the world differently through the same language with different semantic functions of the same lexical items.

CONCLUSION

Meaning is culture specific. English in Ghana has taken a twist semantically such that a mere look at lexical items may result in ineffective communication. The way by which educated Ghanaians have nativised and acculturated the English language is as a result of making adjustment for their experiences to be carried appropriately and effectively in terms of semantics. Listing lexical items in isolation and classifying them as Ghanaianisms may be helpful but contextual usage of lexical items make them more effective; yet, far removed from a stranger who knows little about the Ghanaian culture and how Ghanaians view the world through the use of a foreign language. Semantic functionality is therefore necessary in the understanding of Ghanaianisms.

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