

Cultural Scripts for Asymmetrical Interactions in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper focuses on expected communicative behaviours during asymmetrical interactional events among Ghanaians, with special reference to Ewes and Akans. Drawing on the ethno-pragmatic techniques of semantic explication and cultural scripts, it demonstrates how Ghanaian concepts of social hierarchy (roughly, the thought that some people are “above” others) influence verbal interaction. Five social categories that are prominent among Ghanaians in terms of age and social status are explicated to ensure a detailed description of individuals in such categories. Four cultural scripts are then posited to capture what is expected when one has to interact with someone thought of as “above” oneself. Some linguistic evidence is provided from Ewe and Akan, as well as from some other Ghanaian languages. The study attempts to show the possibility of describing some Ghanaian communicative norms in simple cross-translatable terms in order to enable non-Ghanaians to understand the viewpoint of cultural insiders.

Keywords: hierarchy, communication, norm, authority, age, social status

Author’s bio

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1 Introduction*

This paper explores some sociocultural expectations and communicative norms regarding asymmetrical interactions in Ghana. It focuses on interactions with people in the Ghanaian society considered to be “people above others”. They include elderly people (people who are advanced in age), high ranking people (people who have or represent authority), and chiefs (traditional rulers). These categories have been chosen because among several ethnic groups in Ghana, individuals belonging to these social categories are recognised as deserving of special respect or deference due to their roles in decision-making processes, the welfare of others, or the development of the communities in which they live (Flamenbaum 2016). Generally, they are held in high regard. If one’s social behaviour demonstrates an act of disrespect towards these individuals, one is likely to incur repercussions either from the target or from “concerned observers” who monitor others to determine the extent to which their behaviour is acceptable.

According to Mosha (2000, 100), one of the basic principles of African indigenous thought is “respect for age and authority (that is, for people older than oneself and those in authority)”. Those who are considered socially lower in terms of age and authority often appreciate it when they are shown respect by those considered socially higher. However, the common expectation is that those who are socially lower will not behave in any way that poses a direct challenge to the system of “age-and-status-graded respect hierarchies” (Flamenbaum 2016, 140). Several studies have shown that Ghana is one of such African societies, where respect is attached to age and social status (e.g. Obeng 1997; Agyekum 2003; Flamenbaum 2016). In Flamenbaum’s (2016, 134) words, there exists, among Ghanaians, “this deeply rooted preference for unquestioning deference to parents, chiefs, elders, and other authority figures” (emphasis added). That is, there is a strong expectation that age, position, wealth, and experience are well regarded and thus that anybody who is considered superior in terms of any of these social variables must be treated with “respect” or “deference” (Salifu 2010, 2014; Flamenbaum 2016; Thompson and Anderson 2019).

Hierarchy and the relative status of a speaker and an addressee can be regarded as social universals in that they should exert an influence on the organisation of speech in any social interaction, no matter in what cultural context they are found (Kirkpatrick 2007). This means that, during a speech event, there should be a link between the relative statuses of the interactants and the interactional flow. Asymmetrical social interactions are rarely engaged in on equal terms because subordinates are expected to yield to higher-status individuals (in many cases, their superiors), and acknowledge the privileges associated with their status. For instance, the higher-status individual or superior should be able to speak for longer periods of time, and often, while the superior is speaking, there is an expectation that the subordinate will not interrupt (Guerrero et al. 1999, 326).

Moreover, a speaker’s linguistic choices during the interaction are highly influenced by the status of the addressee or referent (Hudson 1996; Barbieri 2008). During subordinate-superior speech events, subordinates are required to engage in what Obeng (1997, 52) refers to in Akan as “*kasa pa* [good speech], *ɔpɔ kasa* [polite or civilized speech] or *obuo kasa* [respectful speech]”. They are also expected to manage their non-verbal and paralinguistic choices such

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as silence, body language, gaze, proxemics, and pitch in a socially acceptable manner (Obeng 2003; Thompson and Agyekum 2016). The forms of language used towards people of high social status can be described, as Ide (1989, 225) puts it, as: (i) “a speaker’s use of intentional strategies to allow his or her message to be received favorably by the addressee”, and (ii) “a speaker’s choice of expressions to conform to the expected and/or prescribed norms of speech appropriate to the contextual situation in individual speech communities”. In other words, a subordinate must avoid being offensive and must be able to properly manipulate his/her linguistic (as well as paralinguistic) expressions and actions to suit the communicative event, according to the accepted norms.

In view of the preceding discussion, this paper attempts to answer the question of what some of the accepted norms are that one has to consider when interacting with socially elevated people, using the semantic explication and cultural script methods of the ethnopragmatic approach (Ameka 2006; Goddard 2006; Goddard and Ye 2015).

2 Methods

This study is situated in the ethnopragmatic approach, which relies on the methodological tools based on Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), semantic explications, and cultural scripts. Textual data were obtained from scholarly works and the Corpus of GhanaWeb Comments on Ghana’s Election 2016 (CGCGE16)¹. In formulating the semantic explications and cultural scripts, I drew on some observed speech practices and consulted with ten cultural specialists (recruited by means of snowball sampling) over a period of three months. The native speaker intuitions and insights of these cultural specialists were sought on why people are considered to belong to the social category ‘people above others’, as well as what the social norms and values are that regulate interactive events with people belonging to this category. Key points from the discussions were summarised and later revised to conform to the combinatory syntax of NSM, under the guidance of Professor Cliff Goddard.

Various studies have proven that the NSM methodological tools are able to adequately describe communicative norms from an “insider perspective” in simple cross-translatable terms known as semantic primes, so as to enable cultural outsiders to understand the viewpoint of cultural insiders (e.g. Wierzbicka 1996; Ameka and Breedveld 2004; Wong 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014). Semantic primes involve a set of well-specified vocabulary that can be expressed by linguistic expressions which “surface” in all human languages (see Appendix 1 for a full inventory of primes). Proponents of the ethnopragmatic approach stress that the set of highly constrained vocabulary and its grammar appears to have exact equivalents in all or most languages; this has been widely demonstrated by previous studies on languages such as Finnish, Spanish, French, Polish, Ewe, Malay, Russian, Chinese, Korean, etc.

Apart from semantic primes, there are also “semantic molecules”, which Goddard (2010, 123) defines as “non-primitive meanings that function alongside semantic primes as building blocks in the composition of yet more complex lexical meanings”. This means that these molecules can themselves be explicated separately using the semantic primes. There are about 50 semantic molecules that have been identified as being (nearly) universal. They include *children*, *hands*, and *water*. Both semantic primes and semantic molecules can be used to construct se-

¹ CGCGE16 contains about 2000 reader comments relating to Ghana’s 2016 elections downloaded from www.ghanaweb.com from September 1 to December 6, 2016 (Thompson 2020)

mantic explications and cultural scripts, with semantic molecules usually being indicated with the notation [m] (see Goddard 2016 for more on semantic molecules).

Semantic explications are explanatory paraphrases used to unpack the meanings of “local social categories” or complex culture-specific and culture-related keywords and concepts (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Goddard and Ye 2015). Meaning, by this method, is rigorously formulated with semantic primes from which reductive paraphrases can be constructed in a fashion consistent with well-specified grammatical rules (Wierzbicka 1996, 2010; Goddard 2015). The semantic explication method is intended to provide a universal framework for describing the meaning of language-specific terms, such as the social categories considered in this paper. It helps to circumvent the problems of “obscurity”, “circularity”, “ethnocentrism”, and “excessive abstractness” which hamper other methods of meaning analysis (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014, 12).

A good semantic explication generates appropriate implications and enhances understanding of culture-specific concepts and terms (Goddard and Ye 2015). Among Ghanaians, for instance, some terms have no direct equivalent expressions in European languages. Examples of these (though not of direct concern to this study) are the social category *ɔkyeame* in Akan or *tsiame* in Ewe, often translated as ‘orator’, ‘linguist’ or ‘chief’s spokesperson’, and the insult *kwasea* in Akan or *kɔsia* in Ewe, often translated as ‘fool’ or ‘foolish person’. The translation “equivalents” do not even come close to capturing the full Ghanaian meaning (see Yankah 1995; Thompson 2020 for the full Ghanaian meaning of these terms). Equally, but much less obviously, the terms examined in this study, including *ametsitsi* ‘elderly person’ and *tɔgbui* ‘chief’, may seem to lend themselves to simple translations. This can be misleading because although they appear to be so transparent, such simple glosses may fail to disclose their indigenously meaning. It is in cases of this kind that semantic explications become very necessary, as they are intended to capture the semantic invariants of the terms.

Cultural scripts are “representations of cultural norms which are widely held in a given society and which are reflected in language” (Wierzbicka 2002, 401). Although they are not usually recorded anywhere in writing, they are “conventionalized patterns stored in the long-term memory of language users” (Schneider 2012, 18). Generally, they are learnt during one’s socialisation period and form an integral part of one’s communicative competence. They demonstrate shared understandings and expectations of specific speech communities. For instance, certain communicative behaviours, such as the use of first names to address people who are significantly older and the use of the left hand in a speech event, are regarded as interactional taboos across various speech communities in Africa. However, they are acceptable in some speech communities in other parts of the world (Ameka and Breedveld 2004). This means that the norms that guide the interpretation of communicative practices and serve as the measuring rod for socio-interactional appropriateness in one community cannot adequately deal with similar practices in another community.

Cultural scripts, therefore, guide speech participants in the course of production, interpretation, and understanding of interactions, as they form a kind of interpretive background against which the speakers position their own acts and those of others (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004; Ye 2004; Wong 2006; Wierzbicka 2010). They do not control the pattern of an interaction. Instead, they can influence the form that specific speech events take because they represent commonly held assumptions about how people think about social interactions. Cultural scripts, like semantic explications, can be captured in simple and precise terms while avoiding the pressure of cultural bias (Ameka 2006).

The ethnopragmatic approach requires that an inventory of the equivalents of the English

semantic primes in a particular language(s) be identified in advance in order to ensure that semantic explications and cultural scripts can be expressed in that language(s). This paper does not focus on any specific indigenous Ghanaian language, but in order to fulfil the above-mentioned requirement, Ewe terms are used for illustrative purposes in this paper. Ewe is chosen for this role because, as far as I know, it is the only Ghanaian language that has yet gained scholarly attention in relation to NSM studies and that has an inventory of the equivalents of the English semantic primes (see Appendix 1). Some linguistic evidence is provided from other languages, mainly Akan, the most widely spoken language in Ghana, to demonstrate that the cultural communicative norms identified by means of cultural scripts in this paper are not exclusive to Ewes but are shared across different linguistic communities. Such scripts are identified as “areal cultural scripts” (Ameka and Breedveld 2004, 169).

3 Explications for Ewe social categories

Harkness (2015, 306) notes that “the first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to *know with whom one has to deal*” (emphasis added). This implies that it is important for a speaker to know what kind of person their addressee is in any social discourse. For this reason, this section explicates the lexical semantics of five social categories that are prominent among Ghanaians in terms of age and social status. As explained in the preceding section, Ewe terms for the categories are explicated.

The age-related social categories explicated are:

- i. *ametsitsi* [ame ‘person’ + *tsitsi* ‘old’ = ‘elderly person’]
(a person who is advanced in age)
- ii. *fofo/tɔ² kple dada/nɔ³* [*fofo/tɔ* – ‘father’; *kple* – ‘and’; *dada/nɔ* – ‘mother’ = ‘parents’]
(a person of one’s parents’ age)
- iii. *fo kple daa⁴* [*fo* – ‘elder brother’; *kple* – ‘and’; *daa* – ‘elder sister’ = ‘elder sibling’]
(a slightly older person)

The social status categories explicated are:

- iv. *amegã* [ame – ‘person’ + *gã* – big = ‘high ranking person’]
(a person who has or represents authority)
- v. *tɔgbui* [‘chief’]
(traditional ruler)

The semantic explications [SE] encapsulate key characteristics of these Ewe social categories. Being social categories, all five explications begin with the component “someone of one kind”. For ease of reference, the components of the explications are each given an identifying letter.

² *Etɔ* is a dialectal variant of *fofo* meaning ‘father’.

³ *Enɔ* is a dialectal variant of *dada* meaning ‘mother’.

⁴ Older brother could also be rendered as *fo(fo)vi* and older sister as *dadavi*.

3.1 Age-related categories

Ametsitsi ‘elderly person’

The word *ametsitsi* designates a person who is advanced in age, but the full content of the Ewe word goes well beyond this. Age is a natural marker of asymmetry. Van der Geest had this to say when describing the concept of the elderly person among Ghanaians:

In my own culture, that of The Netherlands, “old” is a mainly negative concept. When the adjective is used for people, it expresses loss of physical strength and social importance, but it is believed that in other cultures a more positive appreciation of “old” exists (van der Geest 1998, 453).

In line with this comment, it is not uncommon in Ghana to find people having big celebrations for 60th, 70th and 80th birthdays to mark a person’s passage into old age. This is because age is valued above other social variables, due to the belief that there is a link between growing old and becoming wise (van der Geest 1998).

It is assumed that when people become old, they exude wisdom and have more knowledge because of their life experiences. The maxim “wisdom comes with the years” attests to this (van der Geest 1998). *Ametsitsi* are regarded among Ghanaians as “the symbol of wisdom” and “society’s memory databank” (Agyekum 2004a, 137). Generally, it is believed that they can make predictions and advise people on how to act in order to attract good fortune and avoid mishaps. They are therefore relied upon to make important decisions that can serve the best interests of their relatives and other people around them, as they are always supposed to know better. Below, [SE1] presents the semantic explication for *ametsitsi* ‘elderly person’.⁵

[SE1] Semantic explication for *ametsitsi* ‘elderly person’

- (a) someone of one kind
- (b) this someone was born [m] a long time ago before many other people were born [m]
- (c) many people don’t know how people can live well, this someone can know it
- (d) these other people can know it if this person says some things to them at some time
often if these other people want to know what is good for them to do at some time
they can know it if this someone says something to them
- (e) because of this, people can think about someone of this kind like this:
“this someone is someone above many people”

As expressed in component (b), *ametsitsi* are defined primarily in terms of their age, with the implication of greater experience. Components (c) and (d) capture the idea that the elderly are expected to transmit their knowledge to the younger members of the family and/or community who seek their counsel. The expression “live well” in (c) is compatible either with being morally upright or with living comfortably (in terms of wealth and luxury), based on the admonitions of an elderly person.

Whenever people have to deal with a challenge or make a decision on a crucial issue, especially in traditional settings, it is often necessary that they consult with an *ametsitsi*. Thus, it is a common practice for them to say something like “You will hear from us after we have seen the old (wo)man”. This understanding is presented in component (d). Component (e) highlights

⁵ I use a different font for the explications and scripts to distinguish between them and the main text.

the idea that being *ametsitsi* attracts prestige and respect.

Fofo kple dada ‘father and mother’

Apart from showing deference to people of advanced age, one is also expected to show deference to people in the same age-range as one’s parents. The people in this social category, although not necessarily as old as *ametsitsi*, are prototypically old enough to be one’s father or mother. That is, *fofo kple dada* refers to anyone who is assumed to be old enough to have given birth to a particularly person, but not necessarily their actual biological parents.

In the examples from CGCGE16 below, for instance, Dan’s use of “your fathers and your mothers” does not mean he is referring to the parents of his co-participants during their interaction on GhanaWeb. Rather, it means that the intended referents of his co-participants can be the contemporaries of their parents. This is made clearer in the comments of Kwame and Sir Levels in examples (2) and (3), respectively.

- (1) You [are] talking to **your fathers and your mother[s]** this way because of politics. (Dan 2016-10-20 15:50)
- (2) U pp [you people] are hear [sic] seriously insulting someone **who is old enough to be your father**. (Kwame 2016-06-30 09:13)
- (3) I personally don’t think the insult on the EC chairperson will declare any of the candidates winner ... **she could be your mom**. (Sir Levels 2016-11-03 18:21)

Two explications are presented below for *fofo kple dada* ‘father and mother’, to indicate that although the category is typically conjoined, it can be split depending on the context, as shown in examples (2) and (3) above. The semantic explication for *fofo* is given in [SE2a] and for *dada* in [SE2b].

[SE2a] Semantic explication for *fofo* ‘father’

- (a) someone of one kind
- (b) this someone can be the father [m] of someone else like me
- (c) because of this, many people can think about someone of this kind like this:
 “this someone is someone above me
 at the same time, this someone is someone above many people like me”

[SE2b] Semantic explication for *dada* ‘mother’

- (a) someone of one kind
- (b) this someone can be the mother [m] of someone else like me
- (c) because of this, many people can think about someone of this kind like this:
 “this someone is someone above me
 at the same time, this someone is someone above many people like me”

As component (b) of [SE2a] and [SE2b] shows, a person of this social category is considered to be of the same generational rank as one’s father or mother. They may even have children who are within the same age range as the person. It can be understood from component (c) that the difference in generation means that such a person can be construed as “above” oneself or others.

*Fo/daa*⁶ ‘elder brother/elder sister’

The Ghanaian culture encourages people to show respect for seniority in age even within one’s own generation. That is, it is socioculturally required that both advanced age and relative age are respected. During social interactions, an age difference of even one year is very significant. Sometimes, in a speech event, people who are just a few months older, or even a few days older, may (jokingly) remind their interlocutors of their higher status and ask that they are shown some respect.

In Ewe, a relatively older person is known as *ɲutsu(vi) tsitsi/nyɔnu(vi) tsitsi*. The expression *tsitsi* ‘old’ in *ametsitsi* ‘elderly person’ is also seen in *ɲutsu(vi)/nyɔnu(vi) tsitsi* ‘older person’ and it often implicates that there is a younger person. That is, while the use of *ametsitsi* denotes advanced age, the use of *ɲutsu/nyɔnu tsitsi* denotes relative age. The diminutive *vi* ‘small’ is added to *ɲutsu* ‘man’ (= *ɲutsuvi* ‘young man’) or *nyɔnu* ‘woman’ (= *nyɔnuvi* ‘young woman’) when the referent is not yet past the age of adolescence. Morphologically, the diminutive *vi* cannot be added to *ame* ‘person’. Therefore, the term *amevitsitsi* [# *ame* – ‘person’ + *vi* – ‘small’ + *tsitsi* – ‘old’] does not exist in the language. As a result, the terms for an older person (i.e. signifying relative age) also clearly mark the difference between male and female. Every *ɲutsu(vi) tsitsi* can be a part of the social category *fo* ‘elder brother’, while every *nyɔnu(vi) tsitsi* can be a part of the social category *daa* ‘elder sister’.

It is noteworthy that some Ghanaian languages, including Akan, do not have lexical equivalents for *fo* and *daa*. Akan, for instance, has filled this gap by borrowing the English words *bra* (from the short form of brother, ‘bro’) and *sista* (from ‘sister’) (Dolphyne 1996). In general, there is very little or no social expectation that people in the social category *fo/daa* will have much more life experience than the relatively younger person. Therefore, the younger person is not obliged to show them deference, as they should in the case of *ametsitsi* ‘elderly person’. Nevertheless, the assumption is that people in this social category are more able to take up leadership roles and responsibilities in their families than a younger person; thus, they are important and should be treated with respect (Ameka 1991).

[SE3] describes one who is part of the social category *fo/daa* ‘elder brother/elder sister’.

- (a) someone of one kind
- (b) this someone was born [m] before me; not a long time before me
- (c) because of this, it is good if I think about this someone like this:
“this someone is someone above me”

In the explication above, component (b) shows that though a *fo/daa* is older than a person, he/she is in the same generation as the person. Therefore, as indicated in component (c), it is appropriate for that person to be mindful of the age difference.

⁶ The term *fo/daa* is polysemous. Apart from being a social category: (1) it can be a title prefixed to a person’s name, as in *Fo Yao* ‘elder brother Yao’ or *Da Adzo* ‘elder sister Adzo’; (2) it can also be an address term for a person whose name a speaker does not know but considers as one with whom they want to relate in a manner that people relate to their elder brothers and sisters.

3.2 Social status-related categories

Amegã ‘high ranking person’

The word *amegã* (literally, big person) refers to an influential person or one who represents authority, either politically, territorially, academically, religiously, economically or socially. People who have not been directly or indirectly impacted by the achievements of the *amegã* may not hold them in such high esteem as those who have benefitted in one way or the other from their achievements or wealth. It is expected that a speaker, especially one who has not achieved the feats of an *amegã*, should concede precedence and accord some form of deference to an *amegã* when addressing any person of this social category in a speech event (Ameka 1991; Yankah 1995; Agyekum 2004b; Salifu 2014).

Consider the use of *amegã* in the bible verses from *Biblica Ewe* below, with their equivalents from the *New American Standard Bible*:

- (4) *Asrafo-wo* *fe* *ame-gã* *la* *gblɔna* *ɖekakpui-a* *be ...*
 soldier-PL POSS person-big DEF say_to young.man-DET that ...
 ‘So the **commander** told the young man that ...’ (Acts 23:22)
- (5) *Zaxeo* *nye* *nu-dzɔ-la-wo* *fe* *ame-gã ...*
 Zacchaeus be thing-collect-AG-PL POSS person-big ...
 ‘Zacchaeus is a **chief tax collector** ...’ (Luke 19:2)

In example (4), the ‘commander’ is translated literally as ‘big person [*amegã*] of soldiers’, while in example (5), ‘chief tax collector’ is ‘big person [*amegã*] of tax collectors’. These examples illustrate that *amegã* refers to a person who is the head of a group of people, or simply ‘a boss’. Other persons of this social category include wealthy people, business owners, professors, medical directors, religious leaders, school principals, and political leaders. The following is an explication for *amegã*.

[SE4] Semantic explication for *amegã* ‘high ranking person’

- (a) someone of one kind
 (b) people can think about someone of this kind like this:
 “few people are like this someone
 this someone can do many good things for many people if this someone wants
 not many other people can do things like this
 (c) because of this, many people can think about someone of this kind like this:
 “this someone is someone above many people”

It is pointed out in the second line of component (b) of [SE4] that the masses in various social sects do not belong to the social category *amegã*. Unlike *ametsitsi*, whose superiority to others is as a result of their advanced age, being an *amegã* is not necessarily based on age but on recognition of a person’s achievements, position, and services to the society on account of special personal abilities, education, and/or wealth. This is reflected in the third and fourth lines of component (b). The high social status of *amegã* is presented in component (c).

Tɔgbui ‘chief’

The second category to be considered with respect to social status is *tɔgbui*. It should be noted that the term *tɔgbui*, as used among Ewes, has other meanings in addition to ‘traditional ruler/ chief’; that is, it is polysemous. It can be used to designate a traditional ruler or as a title for a traditional ruler, as in (6a) and (6b), but also as a kinship term (‘grandfather’) as shown in (7), as a term of address for an ancestor/forefather, as in (8), and for a (respected) old man, as in (9). Note that a speaker can use *tɔgbui* as an address term for any old man, regardless of whether they know him or not. By using this address term, the speaker acknowledges the social distance between them, and is telling the addressee, “I think about you as I think about my grandfather (and I want to relate to you as such)”.

(6) a. *Tɔgbui la le takpekpe me kple e-fe ame-tsi-tsi-wo*
 Chief DEF be_at meeting inside with SG-POSS person-old-old-PL
 ‘The **chief** is in a meeting with his elders.’

b. *Tɔgbui Nyaho Tamakloe nye Whuti fia*
 Chief Nyaho Tamakloe be Whuti chief
 ‘**Tɔgbui** Nyaho Tamakloe is the chief of Whuti.’

(7) *Me kpɔ ga gbogbo ade le tɔgbui-nye fe abati dzi*
 1SG see money plenty INDEF be.at grandfather-1SG:POSS POSS bed top
 ‘I saw a huge sum of money on my **grandfather**’s bed.’

(8) *Ame gede fe dzi-xɔ-se le tɔgbui-wo alo gbɔgbɔ-wo me*
 person many POSS heart-take-hear be_at grandfather-PL or spirit-PL inside
 ‘Many people believe in **ancestors** or spirits.’

(9) *Tɔgbui la trɔ mo de gli*
 old.man DEF turn face to wall
 (Literally: The old man turned his face to the wall)
 ‘The **old man** is dead.’

The meaning of primary concern to this study is the category of ‘chief’ (traditional ruler), as in (6a) and (6b). *Tɔgbui* falls into a different status category when compared to *ametsitsi* and *amegã* because the status of *tɔgbui* is not earned through advanced age or achievements, but is ascribed by the person’s birth into the royal family of the traditional area.

In the Akan proverb in example (10) below, food represents chieftaincy, which is meant only for the rightful heir. That is, anyone who is not a legitimate traditional ruler must not desire that status, even if they have all the qualities required to lead or rule the people.

(10) *Nea adee wɔ no na o-die ɛ-nyɛ nea ɔkom de no*
 one_who thing be_at 3SG:OBJ FOC 3SG-eat 3SG-be one_who hunger want 3SG:OBJ
 (Akan)

Literally: He who owns the food is the one who eats it, not the one who is hungry.)

‘Chieftaincy is for the rightful heir and not for the one who yearns for power.’

In line with this proverb, Act 759 of the Fourth Republic Constitution and the Chieftaincy Act of Ghana (2008) describes a chief as “a person who hails from appropriate family and lineage, who has been validly nominated, elected or selected and enstooled, enskinned or installed as a chief or queen mother in accordance with the relevant customary law and usage” (Asamoah 2012; Owusu-Mensah 2013).

Tɔgbui is also considered as the father of the people in the area. The following statement made by the Paramount Chief of the Lambussie Traditional Area in the Upper West Region of Ghana, Kuoro Salifu Dy-Yaka, as captured by www.graphic.com.gh on September 9, 2016, can attest to this: “As a chief, I am a father, and as you visit the traditional area, I am the father of all.” The people must claim their allegiance to the *tɔgbui* as the father of the traditional area, revere him, and not disobey him on any occasion, lest they face the necessary sociocultural sanctions (see Yankah 1999). The position of a *tɔgbui* among Ghanaians, as noted by Owusu-Mensah (2013, 44), is “a prestigious enterprise because of the social, political and cultural powers they possess”. The *tɔgbui* represents a ‘demigod’ and is supposed to be above reproach of any kind. Consider the explication below.

[SE5] *Semantic explication for tɔgbui* ‘chief’

- (a) someone of one kind
- (b) people in a place can think about someone of this kind like this:
 - “this someone is someone above other people in this place
 - this someone can do many good things for many people in this place if this someone wants
 - at the same time, this someone can do many bad things to many people in this place if this someone wants
- (c) when someone of this kind says to people in this place
 - ‘I want you to do this’, they can’t not do it
 - if at some time, someone doesn’t do it, bad things can happen to this person because of it
- (d) there is one someone of this kind in a place, not more”

The components of “high position” linked to “people in a place”, as expressed components (a) and (b), appear at the top of this explication because they are of primary importance to the concept of *tɔgbui*. *Tɔgbui* represents the main figurehead of the traditional area he governs. As expressed in component (b), he can perform various functions that ensure the welfare of his subjects, including codifying customary laws, settling disputes, organising ceremonies and festivals, assisting individuals to secure their basic social needs, and promoting socio-economic development in the area (Kleist 2011). On the negative side, he can be an authoritarian and a despot. In the explication of *amegã* above, unlike in the explication of *tɔgbui*, component (b) dwells only on the “good things” and not on the “bad things” the person can do. The reason for this distinction lies in the fact that, as already noted, an *amegã* is often held in high esteem by people who benefit either directly or indirectly from his achievements or wealth.

In component (c) of [SE5], it is demonstrated that there is a degree of awe connected to

the traditional power, and one cannot defy the orders or expressed wishes of a *tɔgbui*. Failure to comply with his wishes attracts a possibility of harsh punishment, which in times past included banishment or even execution, in extreme cases. Component (d) depicts the idea that although there could be several wealthy and influential people in a traditional area, none of them possesses as much power as the *tɔgbui*, as they are all his subjects as long as they live within his domain.

4 Ghanaian cultural scripts for interacting with someone considered “above” oneself/others

Section 3, through the Ewe terms *ametsitsi*, *fofo kple dada*, *fo/daa*, *amegã*, and *tɔgbui*, presented a picture of individuals who belong to the Ghanaian social categories ‘elderly person’, ‘parents’, ‘elder brother/elder sister’, ‘high ranking person’, and ‘traditional ruler’. Whenever a person’s interactant belongs to any of these social categories, that person must endeavour to adhere to certain cultural communicative norms and expectations or face certain sanctions. When a person’s communicative behaviour is consistent with the norms, they are regarded as communicatively competent. They are regarded as being among those who can maintain and signal to others (by the way they address the interactant) the elevated social status of their interactant. In contrast, when a person disregards the communicative norms, it is considered socially unacceptable and such behaviour is seen as disrespectful. This can easily trigger an unintended offence and/or a breakdown in the interaction, as a lack of knowledge about communicative norms and expectations could easily imply that, traditionally, one is not “well bred” (Agyekum 2010).

In this section, some of these cultural communicative norms and expectations are drawn out using the cultural scripts method. Four cultural scripts (CS) are proposed for social interactions with people considered as “people above oneself/others” in the Ghanaian context. These scripts indicate that speakers in such interactions should have regard for the feelings of their addressee(s) and should be conscious of their own public image and even that of their family members. Scripts [1–3] show how a person’s way of speaking ought to express a positive attitude to anybody perceived as someone “above” them/others, while script 4 comprises additional components that relate specifically to the special category, *tɔgbui* ‘chief’.

The introductory component (a) of scripts [1–3] models the thoughts of many Ghanaians about an interlocutor who is superior or who is of a higher social status. It is expected that these thoughts will influence how they would normally express and reinforce notable hierarchical differences through their linguistic forms and behaviour. The phrases “someone above me” and “someone above many other people” in component (a) clearly invoke the high status of the social categories described in Section 3 above.

[CS1] Ghanaian cultural script for general behaviour when one is with someone “above” oneself/others

- (a) many people think like this:
 - “when I am with someone, if I think about this someone like this:
 - ‘this someone is someone above me
 - at the same time, this someone is someone above many other people’
- (b) it is good if I think like this at the same time:
- (c) ‘I don’t want this someone to feel something bad because I do something
- (d) I don’t want this someone to think something bad about me”

Components (b) and (c) in [CS1] illustrate the culturally recommended mindset that, when with a superior, one must not displease or offend them with one's speech behaviour or general conduct in any way. This implies that one must be conscious of expectations and patterned behaviours that are understood and observed by all at any social event. The idea that one must behave in a way which meets the expectations of the superior and prevents the superior from forming negative thoughts about one is reflected in component (d).

Script [2] below is specifically about speaking. It is focused on the general notion that one must speak differently to one's superiors or face the prospect of disapproval from them and/or the general public, extending also to one's family. When one's speech deviates from accepted norms, the question often asked is "Whose son [daughter] is he [she] to be so unrefined in speech?" (Yankah 1998, 40, insertion mine). Not only do those who speak decorously at all times avoid causing their relatives embarrassment, but they also help to maintain the dignity, honour, and good reputation of their relations (Agyekum 2004b). Look at how the idea that refusing to speak differently to someone considered "above" oneself can have certain consequences is captured in components (b), (c), and (d).

[CS2] Ghanaian cultural script for speaking with one who is someone "above" oneself/ others

- (a) many people think like this:
 - "when I want to say something to someone, if I think about this someone like this:
 - 'this someone is someone above me
 - at the same time, this someone is someone above many other people'
- (b) I can't speak (=say things) to this someone like I can speak to many other people
- (c) if I speak to this someone like I speak to many other people, it can be like this:
 - this someone can feel something bad, this someone can think something bad about me
 - other people can say something bad about me because of this
 - at the same time, they can say something bad about my family [m]
- (d) I don't want this"

Component (b) of [CS2] draws attention to the fact that one's use of language must be "self-censored" and must reflect the socially sanctioned mode of asymmetrical interaction. For instance, there are call-and-response forms that indicate social relations and status. Among the Ewes, a person can respond to a call from another who is their social equal with only the caller's first name. However, if the caller is higher in terms of age or social status, the person cannot respond with the caller's first name but has to respond with address forms that indicate asymmetry, such as *papa* [papa:] 'daddy' and *efo* 'elder brother' (if the caller is male) or *mami* [mami:] 'mummy' and *daa* 'elder sister' (if the caller is female). In the same vein, among the Dagombas, there are two response forms to a call: *ẽẽ* and *nááp/náá*. The response *ẽẽ* can be used to respond to a call from a person who is seen as one's social equal, while *nááp/náá* must be used to respond to a call from a superior (Salifu 2014).

Component (c) highlights the fact that apart from avoiding the disapproval of the superior and other people, a speaker must avoid causing the superior any form of discomfort or negative feeling. In this regard, the speaker must be more inclined to use language forms that express respect and deference; otherwise, as previously mentioned, the repercussions of their misbehaviour could be directed at their family. This is expressed in the last line of component (c).

Consider the following comment thread from GhanaWeb that exemplifies how one could attract negative consequences if one's language choices fall short of the acceptable norms for interacting with someone considered as a person above others.

Background: During the 2020 West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Ghana, there was a viral video of a candidate repeatedly calling President Akufo-Addo *kwasea* ‘fool’ and using other abusive expressions against him. The reason for this candidate’s behaviour was that, for him, the Integrated Science questions were too difficult. Many people expressed their contempt at his behaviour and the leaders of the Ghana Education Service demanded that he should be dismissed. In a subsequent video, he apologised to the President. This was published on GhanaWeb as a news report with the headline, “Final year WASSCE candidate who insulted Akufo-Addo in viral video apologises” (<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Final-year-WASSCE-candidate-who-insulted-Akufo-Addo-in-viral-video-apologises-1028197?jwsourc=cl> - accessed November 24, 2020). Regardless of the candidate’s apology, some commenters on the news platform continued to express their disapproval of his previous utterances.

- (11) Re: Final year WASSCE candidate who insulted Akufo-Addo in viral video apologises
- (i) Disrespectful and ungrateful bad boy. (Bbb 2016-10-08 13:41)
 - (ii) You are a fool ... an idiotic [person] like you is insulting the president. Nothing good will come out of your education. (Abba 2016-07-08 05:43)
 - (iii) Your mother is a bitch and your father is a monkey. (Kumi 2016-08-08 08:38)
 - (iv) Fuck urself, fuck ur parents and fuck ur entire generation ... Kwasia you are just an idiotic charlatan exposing ur disgusting upbringing, animal like ur type, you were not trained. Only God knows how you and your entire generation will be. Stupid fool. (Odeneho 2016-07-08 05:38)

The WASSCE candidate in the video completely disregarded the expected communicative norm by insulting the president. That is, his utterances violate component (b) of [CS2] above. The negative consequences of this violation, as reflected in component (c) of [CS2], are seen in the replies (11 i–iv) above. Examples (i) and (ii) are attacks only on the candidate, while (iii) is an attack on his mother and father. In (iv), the attack is directed not only at the candidate but at his parents and his entire generation.

The following script is an attempt to zero in on the need for specific “honorific” words and relevant “politeness” markers during asymmetrical interactions. The choice of such expressions is generally determined by the social and psychological distance between the speech participants (Agyekum 2003). When a superior has a title, the speaker must not omit this title when referring to that person (Afful 2006). It is acceptable to refer to people of certain occupations, such as doctors, lawyers, and professors, by their occupational titles alone. Religious titles such as Bishop, Prophet, Reverend, Afa, Alhaji/Hajia, and Sheikh are also used to refer to people who occupy such positions (see Dakubu 2000; Agyekum 2003).

Example (12), from Afful (2006, 281), is an exchange (call and response) between a young priest and a female congregant, who was about 60 years old.

- (12) A: *Maame* *Esi* *Kakraba* *Ghann!*
 Maame Esi Kakraba Ghann!
 ‘Maame Esi Kakraba Ghann!’

B: *Sɔfo, me-pa kyew me-re-ba o* (Akan)
 Reverend 1SG-remove hat 1SG-PROG-come filler
 ‘Reverend, please, I am coming.’

Even though the congregant is older than the priest, she responds to his call with his identity marker, *Sɔfo* ‘Reverend’. The use of the identity marker shows that the congregant acknowledges and values the social status of the priest. In cases where an interlocutor of a higher social status has no known title, the subordinate is expected to choose from a range of appropriate kinship terms, such as *dada* ‘mother’, *mama* ‘grandmother’, *ete* ‘aunt’, *papa* ‘father’, *tɔga* ‘uncle’, or *efo* ‘elder brother’ in Ewe; *nana* ‘grandmother/grandfather’, *agya* ‘father’, *maame* ‘mother’, *sewaa* ‘aunt’, or *wɔfa* ‘uncle’ in Akan; and *ma* ‘mother’, *ba* ‘father’, or *beli* ‘elder brother’ in Dagbani. English titles such as Mister, Sir, Madam, and Mrs. (if the referent is a married woman) can also be used.

Apart from the use of address terms, subordinates are also expected to use, as often as possible, politeness markers, including *mede kuku* (Ewe) or *mepa kyew* (Akan) ‘I doff my hat’ (please) when they want to say something, make a request, or pose a question. Apologetic expressions such as *enyɛ me anisa* (Akan) ‘I don’t mean to be impolite’ or *sebe/taflatse* ‘excuse me’/‘apologies’ can also be used when a speaker needs to say something that could cause offence. Example (13) is an utterance in Akan from a young man who was called before a group of elders to answer questions relating to an accusation laid against him (Sekyi-Baidoo 2016, 130).

(13) *Me-srɛ me-ka me-te hɔ yi sebe me nsa mu yɛ*
 1SG-beg 1SG-say 1SG-live there DET excuse_me 1SG:POSS hand inside good
 ‘I beg to say, in life, I am quite wealthy.’

The use of the apologetic signals *mesrɛ meka* ‘I beg to say’ and *sebe* ‘excuse me’ to precede the statement *me nsa mu yɛ* ‘I am wealthy’ is the speaker’s way of saying ‘I do not mean to be arrogant or prideful before you, but it is necessary I make this point’. These expressions indicate the speaker’s deference to the elders at the gathering.

This discussion leads us to [CS3] below.

[CS3] Ghanaian cultural script for the use of deferential terms in asymmetrical interactions

- (a) many people think like this:
- (b) “when I say something to someone, if I think about this someone like this:
 ‘this someone is someone above me
 at the same time, this someone is someone above many other people’
- (c) I can’t not say some words to this someone (I don’t say these words to many other people)
- (d) I want people to know that I think about this someone like this:
 ‘this someone is someone not like many other people
 I feel something good towards this someone’”

Component (b) of [CS3] indicates that the use of deferential terms as exemplified in the preceding paragraphs is essential in subordinate-superior speech events among Ghanaians. In com-

ponent (c), it is specified that it is obligatory for one to employ the appropriate honorifics and titles for someone considered to be socially higher. Employing such linguistic forms displays the speaker's knowledge of the superior's status, constantly reinforcing the message that the addressee (superior) is worthy of the speaker's honour and respect, as expressed in (d).

It has already been mentioned that the social category *tɔgbui* 'chief' is a special one. Even though one must also be cognisant of CS1, CS2, and CS3 when talking to a *tɔgbui* and observe the norms highlighted therein, there are some expected communicative norms that are peculiar to an interaction with anyone who belongs to that social category. For example, one cannot talk directly to a chief but must talk through an intermediary. According to Agyekum (2004b, 84), messages to a chief are channelled through an intermediary because "his face will become vulnerable if anybody could speak directly to him".

Before presenting [CS4], consider the following speech event in Akan, which involves an interaction with a person who belongs to the social category of *tɔgbui* 'chief'.

(14) Venue: Otumfoɔ's Palace – Kumase

Period: May 1998

Context: A young man KO (aged 28) has offended the traditional ruler and consults an elderly renowned speaker of Akan to intervene on his behalf.

Intervener: *Daasebre Otumfoɔ wei dee mpanimfoɔ se abɔfra*
 Magnanimous Powerful DEM as_for PL-elder-PL say child
gya ne nan gu n'agya nan so
 leave 3SG:POSS leg pour 3SG:POSS-father leg on
a ye-pepa na ye-n-twa n-twene. Wo
 then 1PL-rub and 1PL-NEG-cut NEG-throw_away 2SG
ara w-akoa se w-a-fom wo
 own 2SG:POSS-servant say 3SG-PERF-wrong 2SG:OBJ
Oburu. Fa kyɛ no. Amu Daasebre
 Oburu take give 3SG:OBJ Amu Magnanimous
Oburumuankoma
 Giver_of_full_fresh_animal

'The Magnanimous and Powerful One. It is the elders who have an adage that if the child excretes on the laps of his father it is wiped away, but the lap is not cut off. Your own servant says that he has offended you Oburu. Forgive him Amu. The Magnanimous and the "Giver of Full Fresh Animal".' (Agyekum, 2004b, p. 75)

In this speech event, KO has regretted his actions, but it is socially unacceptable for him to ask for forgiveness from the traditional ruler directly. Therefore, he engages an intermediary to speak to the traditional ruler and intervene on his behalf.

As mentioned earlier, any interlocutor of a traditional ruler must employ CS1, CS2, and CS3 in his speech. In line with these scripts, the intervener embellishes his utterances with traditional honorifics such as *Daasebre* 'The Magnanimous One', *Otumfoɔ* 'Powerful One', and *Oburumuankoma* 'Giver of Full Fresh Animal' to show his honour for the addressee. He also uses an apologetic expression in the form of a maxim, "If the child excretes on the lap of his father it is wiped away, but the lap is not cut off", and further belittles KO, referring to him (KO) as a "servant" to indicate the social distance between KO and the traditional ruler. The intervener employs these strategies to mark the elevated status of the addressee (i.e. the tradi-

tional ruler), as well as to show him deference as demanded by the norms regarding interactions with a chief.

The following is a cultural script posited specifically to capture the peculiarities involved in an interaction with anyone of the social category *tɔgbui*.

[CS4] Ghanaian cultural script for interacting with *tɔgbui* (in English)

- (a) many people think like this:
 “when I want to say something to someone, if I think about this someone like this:
 ‘this someone is someone above me
 at the same time, this someone is someone above many other people’
- (b) I can’t speak (=say things) to this someone like I can speak to many other people
- (c) if I speak to this someone like I speak to many other people, it can be like this:
 this someone can feel something bad, this someone can think something bad about me
 other people can say something bad about me because of this
 at the same time, they can say something bad about my family [m]
- (d) I don’t want this”

In all formal situations, the intermediary (identified as “someone else” in the second and third lines of component (c) above) between the chief and his subjects is often an elderly person who holds the position of *tsiame* (Ewe) or *ɔkyeame* (Akan). Yankah (1995) describes this intermediary as the chief’s ‘mouth’ and ‘ear’. Traditionally, the chief’s words are conveyed to people through this person, and the words of the people reach the chief through him (see Yankah (1995) and Ameka (2004) for details on the role of the *tsiame/ɔkyeame*). The fourth and fifth lines of component (c) show that a person who refuses to adhere to this regulation can be described as one who is uncultured or lacks proper upbringing, or whose family can be described as irresponsible. Apart from giving people negative perceptions about the person or about the family, the person is susceptible to harsh punishments, such as banishment, as mentioned in the discussion of [SE5]. This is expressed in the last line of component (c). Component (d) reflects the idea that people would want to avoid such repercussions.

5 Concluding remarks

This paper dwelt on the notion that Ghana is a hierarchical society and thus that speakers must choose language forms that reflect positively on interlocutors who are considered as socially higher. It articulated in detail some expected norms for communicative behaviours during asymmetrical interactional events among Ghanaians and showed that one’s language choices must be within the limits of the underlying interactional norms and values of the society. By means of the semantic explication method, social categories related to age and social status, including elderly people and traditional rulers, were identified as local social categories that are recognised and deemed as being “above” others in Ghanaian society. The idea that a person who belongs to any of these social categories is “above” others is related to that person’s presumed significance to the society. Normally, the social demands and responsibilities bestowed on them elevate them above others and make them icons of dignity.

The paper explained that, in Ghana, specific emphasis is placed on respect or deference for hierarchical differences in that there is a marked difference between the way a person is expected to communicate with interlocutors of equal social status, and interlocutors of higher social status. This implies that the knowledge that one’s interlocutor belongs to any of the so-

cial categories described in Section 3 should inform one's speech behaviour. Otherwise, one is likely to face some negative consequences. Cultural scripts were posited as descriptions of underlying thought processes that should guide an interaction with people of the social categories presented; that is, they can describe what is expected when one must interact with a person thought of as "someone above oneself/others". Components of all these cultural scripts were carefully phrased and discussed to reflect the shared social understandings of showing respect to these kinds of people during social interactions among Ewes, as well as among other ethnic groups in Ghana. Although there is a wide range of appropriate communicative behaviour among Ghanaians, the cultural scripts discussed in this paper provide basic guidelines and specify some key verbal attitudes expected of interlocutors of lower social status during asymmetrical interactions.

List of Abbreviations

1	first person	INDEF	indefinite marker
2	second person	NEG	negative
3	third person	OBJ	object
DEF	definite marker	PL	plural
DEM	demonstrative marker	POSS	possessive
DET	determiner	PROG	progressive marker
FOC	Focus marker	SG	singular

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Appendix 1

Table: Semantic primes (English and Ewe exponents) grouped into related categories

substantives	NYE~ME-, WÒ~(N)È, AME(ÁDÉ), NÁDÉ~NÁNÉ, AMEWÓ, LAME I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY
relational substantives	TŌGBI, AKPA(ÐE) KINDS, PARTS
determiners	SIA, NENEMAKE, BUBU THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE
quantifiers	ÐEKA, EVE, EDE, KATA~PETEE, GEÐE~GBOGBO, SUE ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
evaluators	NYO, BAÐA~VO GOOD, BAD
descriptors	GA, VI BIG, SMALL
mental predicates	NYÁ, BU TAME, DÍ, GBE, SE, KPŌ, SE KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
speech	GBLŌ~BÉ, NYA, NYATEJE SAY, WORDS, TRUE
actions, events, movement	WO, DZO, UA DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
location, existence, specification	NO (AFIÁDÉ), LI -LEE~NO ANYI, NYE (AMEADE/NADE) BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
possession	TŌNYE (IS) MINE
life and death	NO AGBE, KU LIVE, DIE
time	NE~VEKAYI, FIFIA, HAFI, MEGBE, VEYIYI DIDI AÐE, VEYIYI KPUI AÐE, NA VEYIYI AÐE, ADABAFOFO WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
place	AFIKA~TEJE, AFII, DZI~TAME, GŌME, DIDI, TE ÐE, AKPA, EME, KA ASI WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH

Cultural Scripts for Asymmetrical Interactions in Ghana

Rachel G. A. Thompson

logical concepts	ME...O, ĐOMAHI, TEDU, EYATA~ESIATA, NE NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
intensifier, augmentor	DUTO, GA VERY, MORE
similarity	ALE~ABE LIKE~AS

Note: Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes); exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes; they can be formally complex; they can have combinatorial variants or “allolexes” (indicated with ~); each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties (Ameka and Thompson 2017).