

The Role of Interjections in Ga

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Abstract

This paper examines the pragmatic role of the interjections 'Oh' and 'Ei' as used in Ga, aKwa language which is spoken in the southern part of Ghana. Our main focus is to give the use of interjections an adequate treatment in the linguistic analysis of the Ga language. Secondly, it is also to show that the use of interjections in Ga is restricted by the socio-cultural rules because an importance is attached to politeness by the speakers in the communicative interaction. Interjections in the socio-cultural community are restricted and their appropriate usage is an indication of the speaker's communicative competence. The study finds out that, despite the strict socio-cultural limitations on the use of negative interjections, there are certain societal norms which make these rules breakable without attracting any sanction. The paper starts with (i) the description of the Ga society and its social organization and relevant aspect of the culture, (ii) The examination of the use of interjections in the socio-cultural system of the society as a speech community. (iii) An analysis of various speech contexts in which the socio-cultural rules can be broken. Finally, the concluding part of the work is based on the study. We adopted descriptive and interpretive approach in analyzing the data.

Introduction:

Interjections, as used in the Ga language, have not been given much attention in the linguistic analysis of the language. So far attempts have been given in the description of interjections in other languages. According to Goddard (1998), Interjections are words or phrases which can constitute an utterance in their own right. He further stated that their meanings are particularly difficult to state and translate, though the fluent use of discourse and particles is part and parcel of semantic competence. Interjections are considered as items which express emotions and so are peripheral to the language. (Cristaller 1875) as stated in Osam (1990). In addition to expressing emotions, Ga interjections are also used to indicate a speaker's attitude to his/her interlocuter(s) or the topic of the conversation; they may be used to express a speaker's cognitive state. In other words, one may also say that they express the personal intentions, attitudes, assumptions, and feelings of the speaker.

Interjections are, by definition, always phonologically independent items, but interestingly, they are not always words, or at least not items which will be recognized as words by ordinary speakers. This is partly because interjections tend to be phonologically or morphologically anomalous.

Another feature of interjections which attention had not been paid to is the socio-cultural aspect of their usage. Our main concern in this paper is to show the roles that 'Oh!' and 'Ei!' play in the Ga language and how they are constrained by socio-cultural rules and how their appropriate usage is an essential indication of a speaker's communicative competence.

Culture has been defined in different ways based on the views of scholars and their disciplines. For example, disciplines like anthropology and sociology have different definitions. In this section, we will try to define culture and show its relationship with language and communication. Culture is defined in the anthropological sense as the total way of life, which includes everything we think (ideas) everything we do (norms and patterns of behaviour) and everything we have (artefacts) as members of society (Eskamp & Swart, 1991)

It is a fact that people have learned that culture must be understood in order to communicate. The link that binds language, communication and culture together is that they complement each other and allow continuity of societies and the experiences of the people. The interface among language, communication and culture is that "language is one of the most enduring artefacts of culture in which people can always have their history traced through their language". It is interesting to note that language is used to express and transmit the culture and learning experiences of the people through oral media like songs, folktale, oral literature, myths and legends, and through non-oral media like drums, plants, water, beads, town criers, informing, educating, entertaining and mobilizing the people. Yankah (1988:25).

We begin with the description of the Ga society, its social set up and other relevant aspects of the culture. This is followed by a brief grammatical feature of the Ga language and data collection methods and related literature. The second section is devoted to an examination of the usage of interjections, the socio-cultural system of the society as a speech community. This is then followed by a discussion of the speech contexts in which the socio-cultural rules can be broken. The final section draws conclusions based on the study.

Related Work on the Study

There had been much work done on interjections. For example, Goddard (1998) worked on interjections. John Heritage (1998) on **Oh** in English, which he titled in his work, '**Oh-prefaced responses to inquiry**'. This describes the particles **Oh**, from the point of view of the respondent. He found out that in responses to English questions, a question is problematic in terms of its relevance, presuppositions, or context. From his research, it

could be pointed out that 'oh'-prefaced responses markedly show that the question to which the response is given has caused a shift in the respondent's attention. Tree and Schorock (1999) also did some work on **Oh** titled 'Discourse Markers in Spontaneous Speech: **Oh!** 'what a difference an **Oh**' makes'. They argue that recognition of words is faster after **oh** than when the 'oh' is either removed or replaced by a pause entirely, but only when the test point is downstream from the 'oh'. From their research, it can be deduced that **Oh** is not only a potential signal to addressees, as has been suggested by copora analyses, but that it is in fact used by addressees to help integrate information in spontaneous talk. Wilkins (1995), worked on interjections as indexicality. Other researchers who have done some work on the study include Aijmer (2002) who did an extensive study on 'Oh' and identified a large number of ways that 'Oh' can be used. Other studies treated **Oh** as back channel response, listeners' response and response tokens (Tolinso, Fox & Tree, 2014; Bavelas & Gerwing 2011; Norricks 2010; 2012; Fraser 2010; Li 2010; Shelly & Gonzalez, 2013). **Oh**, has received much attention than **Ei** in the literature from the point of discourse markers. This study looks at **Oo** and **Ei** as interjections in the Ga language, their pragmatic functions and how the culture of the people restricts their usage.

Social Organisation and Cultural Values

The Ga people have a hierarchical organization regarding the social structure of the society as a speech community. There are two main important categories: status and age. Status is used to refer to one's position in the society/community. Some of the positions regarded as very important include the Wulɔmɔ (chief priest), the chief, the head of the clan, the heads of other traditional institutions in the community and the head of the extended family.

With regard to the category of age, people of comparatively higher age are considered prominent members of the society. Looking at the relationship between the young and the elderly, the society expects the highest form of respect from the younger person to the elderly. Assimeng (1981:4) explained this by writing: "Almost, invariably, whenever children quarrelled with elders, children are adjudged guilty, not because of the substantive nature of the case, but because it is seen to be an insult and uncustomary behaviour for children to challenge their elders in public". The statement made above confirms the prominence of comparative age in Ga society.

The socio-cultural rules which regulate the relationship between the socially superior (ie. those made up of high status or age) and the socially subordinate (low status or age) are also reflected in the rules for communicative interaction between the two groups. For example, in the Ga society, proverbs constitute an important aspect of the language as in many other African societies. A person is considered to be knowledgeable if he/she spices his speech between a socially superior and a socially subordinate person. Thus, it is considered as a mark of disrespect if the subordinate should frequently use proverbs. This is because the use of proverbs is a sign of wisdom whereby it is considered improper for a subordinate person to teach a superior person wisdom.

Another example of the communicative interactional rules is that a younger person should never use what the society considers abusive language in communicating with an elderly person. When these socio-cultural rules of communication are broken, it is regarded as a sign of disrespect for the customs and values of the society. In such instances, the offender is disciplined in various ways, including scolding. The social sanctions which could be imposed could be more severe if the offended person happens to occupy a position which, in the view of the society, is very high. An example is if the assumed offence is purported to have been made against one's own parents, the clan head among others. The guilty person could be made to pay a fine and perform certain pacifying rites. The most common rite is where the guilty person is made to carry a goat or fowl and then holding a drink (Gin) will kneel before the offended person to apologize.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature and it uses descriptive and interpretive approach to analyze the data. The research was carried out by analyzing conversation of students of the University of Education, Winneba at the Ga-Dangme department and other conversations at social gatherings. A number of conversations by the students were recorded. Firstly, casual conversations were recorded. Secondly, all the students worked in pairs during a discussion in class, while the researchers recorded the conversations. After they had finished their conversations, these researchers transcribed and analyzed the students' conversation. Other conversations from social gatherings were also collected and analyzed. The researchers accomplished the task by transcribing the data. After that, the conversational context where the interjections occurred were selected for the analysis. Also, consultations and unstructured interview sessions were held with native speakers to explain some of the meanings of the use of the interjections. We also used our own intuition for the analysis of the data. Finally, the translated speeches from the Ga language into English are ours.

Interjections in Ga.

Interjections which form part of the speech items in the Ga language are governed by various components of the speech situations. In terms of the genre, interjections are mainly used in dialogue, especially in soliloquy, though the topic may also vary. To examine the usage of interjections, we have chosen two of them for explanation and illustrations. There is a group of interjections in Ga used to indicate surprise/shock. Such interjections are **Oo!** and **Ei!**. We examine some conversational contexts on the use of **Oo** and **Ei** as used in the Ga language.

Example 1

- Mr. Z Mɛɛba o yeɔ awerɛho?
Why 2SG eat sorrowful
'Why are you sorrowful?'
- Mr. Y Afominyɛminuulenane
They've amputated my brother's leg.
- Mr. Z Ooh! tɛ eba lɛtɛŋŋ?
question come DET how.
What happened?

This particular interjection stated above has no controlled usage. It is acceptable if both the socially superior and socially subordinate persons use it on each other.

Example 2

- Madam Z: Ei! sane lɛ mii fee mi naakpɛɛ
Ei! case DET AUX do 1SG surprise
Ei! I'm shocked at the matter.
- Madam Y: mɛni saneeba?
- Madam Z: A kɛɛ "Odoie yato e bi kabonai"
3SG say Odoi PERF go 3SG child rape
They said Odoi has raped his child
- Madam Y: Ei! enɛ lɛ musu
Ei! this is INDF abomination.
Ei! this is an abomination.

Ga speakers have interjections used in expressing a speaker's awareness of a situation or an issue. An example is 'Oo'

Oo!'. This interjection is used to show that the speaker has come to the realization of some truth or understanding. The status of the participant imposes some limitations as to who can use it and to whom. In terms of topic of discourse, it has been noted that this is used in cases where for example, one participant Y, in the speech situation, tries to draw the other person, Z's attention to an issue. At the time that Z comes to the realization, the surprise could be expressed by uttering 'Oo!'.

Example 3

- Mr Y: O le yoo lɛ ni a tɛɔ Ofoley lɛ.
2Sg know woman Det Foc Ass call O. Det
- Mr. Z: Dabi
No.
- Mr Y: Mɔnɛsane miwiewɔ lɛ
One this case 1Sg speak Hab DET
- Mr Z; Oh! Mile lɛtɔɔ
I know her very well.

Oo! can be used to confirm what one says. In the conversation below, B used the interjection **Oo!** to confirm what B was asked to do.

Example 4

- A: AwìèààhuníAkwèìáyákpánùùmó é fàí.
Akwei had been implored to apologise to the old man
B: Óòh, é tèèéyánàlè.

The same interjection **Oo** could be used by a speaker who wants to express his/her contempt of what another person has said. For example, A has the impression that B is cheating on him/her by what B has said he/she can react by uttering this interjection. Its usage implies things like;

Example 5

- A: Owula, ohaaami η'shikaa?
Gentleman 2Sg give Neg 1Sg money
Gentleman, won't you give me my money?
B: Mahabo, bo'ε ha mi enumɔofata he.
1Sg give 2Sg 2Sg give 1Sg add five
A: Óò, ole akεη'lu? (contempt)
Oh, 2Sg know that 1Sg fool?
Oh, you think I 'm a fool?

A speaker may again express contempt by using **Ôo** This interjection is said to a person who tries to cheat or assume superiority beyond his/her status. For example, if he/she is generally held in low esteem but comes up claiming higher status for him/herself by his/her actions or pronouncements, B can react to his/her attitude by uttering **Ôo!** to him/her.

Example 6:

- A: Mi ya he shia
1Sg MP buy house
I've bought a house
B: Ôo! Oyε shika niakεhe -ɔ niyenii?
Óh! 2Sg have money to that buy Hab food?
Óh! you have money to buy food?

With the background knowledge that B has, A does not measure up to what she /he claims to have done (that is buying a house) so B's reaction shows his/her contempt of A's intention.

Example 7:

- A: Aku, o bæε biε?
 Aku 2Sg sweep here
 Aku have you swept this place?
- B: Hεε
 Yes
- A: Bεεmɔ lε ejeeε. Yaa bæε
 Sweeping DET wellNEG go sweep
 The place is not well swept go and sweep again
- B: Óo!/hoo

From the conversation above, we could see that Oo! /hoo uttered by B shows some sort of disappointment. The speaker used Oo / hoo to hide his/her disappointment, in order not to expose her frowned face.

Example 8:

- A: A mɔ Kwao
 3SG catch PAST K
 Kwao has been caught.
- B: Meni e fee
 What 3SG did
 What did he do?
- A: Eyaju
 3SG go PAST steal
 He went to steal
- B: Óó! Owulafεεfεonεε?
 Óh! Gentleman nice this
 Óh! This nice gentleman?

In example (8), speaker B expresses her interest in her friend's success. This is confirmed with the remark, 'Thank God!' This shows a strong mark of interest.

Example 9:

- A: MináhègbèkemiiyàUnivésíti.
 I've gained admission into the University.
- B: Óô! nyɔ̄nmɔ̄yiwaladɔ̄ŋ.
 Oh! Thank God.

Example 10:

- Nanaa: Adjo, fɔ̄mamaileajejogban̄ŋ
 Grandma: Adjo, wash the clothes properly.
- Adjo: Hoo! / Óóh! jeeε no ŋf̄éɔ̄?
 Adjo: Óóh! is that not what I'm doing?

The Óó which precedes the answer given by Adjo renders it as a kind of retort and so is

interpreted as an insult in the socio-cultural set up. Secondly, the high tone on the interjection makes it abusive, because it looks as if Adjo is shouting at the grandma.

Awareness can also be indicated by 'Ei!' When someone utters this kind of interjection, it means she/he has come face to face with danger. For example, if some people or even children are up to some mischief and all of a sudden, they realize that they are in danger of being found out, they could say the words written below;

Example 11:

Ei!Amɔwɔ
Intj3Pl(indef) catch 2Pl
We are caught .
Or
Ei!, sane eba.
Ei! case Perf-come
Ei! We are in trouble

Example 12:

Z: E i! sàné lemiiḡéemìnààkpɛɛ
Ei! I'm surprised about the case.
Y: Ménisànèèbà?
What has happened?
Z: Akɛɛ“Odoi é yágbèè - nyɛ
Odoi has killed the mother.
Y: Ei!ei! ei! èné`músú
Ei!ei!ei! this is an abomination. (Shock, emphasis)

The conversation in (11) shows us that Z is creating awareness by saying ' Ei! I'm surprised about the case', since Y does not know anything. Y's repetition of Ei! Ei! Ei! is expressing strong disapproval of the act and shock at the same time.

Example 13:

Housemistress: Girls, in view of the forthcoming 40th anniversary celebrations, there will be no free exeat this week-end.

Student: Ei! nɛgbɛɛ hu jɛ?
Êi! Where from this too? (with a frown)

In the socio-cultural context, this is insulting to the housemistress and shows insubordination at its highest level on the part of the student. As a subordinate, it is not expected for one to comment or ask a question when the headmistress of the school is giving an announcement.

The conversational context below indicates that speaker B pitied herself with the use of Ei which precedes her answer. This could be interpreted as a strong mark of self pity.

Example 14:

- A: Mígbètsɔ̀lɔ̀nitsumɔ̀naa.
I have finished the assignment.
- B: Méèbè o gbènaa?
When did you finish?
- A: Nyɛ̀kɛ ha lɛ.
I submitted it to him yesterday
- B: Ei! Mè̀nìŋ'bafeemɔ̀ yè̀bìé?
Ei! What am I doing here?

The interjection **Ei!** has a controlled usage. It is acceptable if a socially superior person utters it but not the reverse. In example (12) above, the subordinate has violated the rule in the culture by uttering **Ei!!** to a socially superior person in response to the statement made. Therefore, the response is considered to be an insult in the culture of the Ga people.

Looking at the examples illustrated above, we can say that, the interjections have been discussed from three different perspectives: cognitive, vocative and emotive. Again, from the examples earlier given, one can also categorize the interjections in Ga, on the basis of their cultural values, in this case, the positive and the negative. Those with positive values are examples that express sorrow, sympathy, awareness and some amount of surprise. These could be used either way in the vertical relationship between the higher status/age group and the lower status/age group as well as between members of the same social grouping. On the other hand, the negative interjections, for example, those expressing contempt, retort and insubordination are restricted in their usage in the sense that the socio-cultural rules permit their downward use but not the other way around as far as the social groupings are concerned. However, members of the same social groupings can use them among themselves in their conversational interactions.

Suspending the Rules

Despite the strict socio-cultural limitations on the use of negative interjections, there are certain societal norms which make these rules breakable without attracting any sanctions. One of such context is when a person of high status/age behaves in a way that society considers inappropriate with regard to his or her status/age. In such instances, the offender could experience various sanctions. Among the possible sanctions is the suspension of the socio-cultural rules regulating the use of linguistic items by a lower status person against a higher status person. It is in this context that a younger person can utter any of the negative interjections to an elderly person.

The context of certain games in the Ga community also calls for the setting aside of the socio-cultural rules regarding the use of interjections. An example of such a game is **dami** (draught). (This is a kind of board game, played between two people. Each person has twenty checker pieces and it is played on a square board. The idea is to see which

player is capable of capturing all the pieces of the opponent. **Ludu** and **oware** are also other games in which the idea behind is similar to the one described above. In the culture of the Ga people, there is a cultural assumption underlying people's participation in a game. This is that those taking part in the game are considered equals. Here, once an adult person is able to engage in any competition with a younger person, it is regarded that the younger person's ability is equal to that of the former. Considering the explanation given above, we then bear in mind that negative interjections are permissible among equals. It is then not difficult to see why the relationship between participants at a game is enough to set aside the socio-cultural rules of communication. The game ludu, oware and dami could be played by two people of the same or different social group, as Yankah(1988:25) posits that "the game does not thrive on skilful and strategic moves only. A good player is also a master of words, humour, and as well, is a satirist. For besides the on-going non-verbal argument put through the strategy (play handling or movements) of wooden pieces, there is an auxiliary duel of words among players and spectators. It is during this "duel of words" that the social norms of communication could be overlooked, thus making the use of negative interjections acceptable when they are used by a subordinate person to a superior one. Considering the suspension of the socio-cultural rules of communication during games, chiefs and other people occupying important positions in the society are not allowed to take part in such games in public. In addition to the games stated above. During celebrations of festivals, the social norms which regulate communication interaction are suspended. This is seen in 'Kpashim4', celebrated by the people of La and Teshie, 'Kplejoo', by the Nungua people of the Ga community. These festivals are special occasions instituted by our forefathers (ancestors) once in every year to give the people a privilege to air out things which they feel is not going on well or is bad in the community (Asihene 1980). In such instances, every person, irrespective of class or race is given the liberty to criticize publicly the faults, villainies and frauds of other people especially those in authority with the view that they will repent or reform from their acts. This implies that the festival creates a social condition for people of subordinate status to use language forms including the negative value of interjections in addressing people of higher status. From the above explanation given, it is obvious that a speaker's communicative competence (Hymes 1977) regarding the use of interjections in Ga involves not only knowing the interjections as speech items, but also being aware of "what to say, who to say it to, and how and when to say it appropriately in any given situation". It is therefore imperative for anybody in a communicative situation to gain full insight into the cultural values of the Ga society to be able to use these items correctly and appropriately.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study attempted to show the relationship between language and culture by examining the use of interjection *Oh* and *Ei* in Ga. The study showed that a choice on any interjection is determined by certain variables within the speech situation. The most important factor is the relationship between the participants in the speech context, that is their relative status and the topic which is the focus of the interaction. The

study found that, despite the strict socio-cultural limitations on the use of negative interjections, there are certain societal norms which make these rules breakable without attracting any sanction. For someone to be considered to have communicative competence, that person or speaker should be able to know the socio-cultural rules which regulate the use of these interjections. Apart from that, interjections have several pragmatic functions such as creating awareness, mitigating, marking strong interest, showing contempt, signalling confirmation and signaling disappointment, among others.

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