

INDIRECTION AS A COMMUNICATIVE SKILL AMONG THE PEOPLE OF ABORA ETSIFI IN THE ABURA ASEBU KWAMANKESE (A.A.K.) DISTRICT OF CENTRAL REGION, GHANA.

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ABSTRACT: *Indirection, a speech form which avoids speaking directly to issues or going straight to the point but rather moves around the main purpose of the interactions to display meanings has been an effective communicative technique that has lived among the people of Abora Etsifi in the A.A.K district in their day to day interactions. This paper discusses the meaning of indirection and its importance in communication within the Abora Etsifi speech community. Using two scenarios and popular behaviours that pertain to the community, the author avails the meaning, types and usages of indirection. The author argues that indirection is an operative communicative technique that should be perpetuated.*

KEYWORDS: Indirection, communicative skills, Abora Etsifi, Akan, technique

INTRODUCTION

The paper is built on four main sections. In the first section, the paper discusses some types of indirection that are common to the Akan and how the people of Abora Etsifi use those types in their day to day communication. The second section examines the strategies which are employed in Indirection. There are some communicative situations (the socio-cultural context) in which indirection is effectively employed. Some indigenous examples are highlighted in the section to bring out the importance of the phenomenon as a communicative skill (among the people of Abora Etsifi). The third section of the paper mentions who should apply indirection in speech, when and why people should use it.

The concluding part of the paper suggests how the skill of indirection in speech be inculcated in children to ensure its maintenance in the area under study in this work.

Indirection is a speech form which avoids speaking directly about things or going straight to the point but rather moves around the main purpose of the interactions; still, with the intention of putting the message across. That is to say, speakers in an interaction try to use some words, which would sound pleasant in their listeners' ears although what is being discussed might not be pleasant.

The concept of indirection in communicative events is used in all spheres of life around the globe. Some scholars have examined indirection in many ways as they see the phenomenon from various perspectives. Obeng (1994,42) sees indirection as 'a communicative strategy in which interactants abstain from directness in order to obviate crises or in order to communicate

‘difficulty’ and thus make their utterances consistent with face saving and politeness’. From this assertion, it is clear that interactants employ indirection in their speech to prevent crises and conflicts. This shows that there are some words and expressions which are provocative that when they are used in some situations, crises and /or conflicts will follow. But in order to save the situations from crises; and yet the message should be put across, interactants resort to the use of indirection in their speeches. According to Obeng in the above definition, indirection ensures face-saving and politeness as well.

Agyekum (2002) posits that ‘the concept of face in communicative events is a universal one but employed in cultural specific ways’. He continues to say that ‘in every discourse, all participants must try as much as possible to respect the face of other(s) as well as their own and also co-operate to maintain the face of each other’. In view of the above, interlocutors must resort to the use of indirection in every discourse so as to save their faces.

Owomoyela (1981:11) says, ‘speech is like an egg when dropped, it shatters.’ That is to say whatever one says, people read meanings into it from various perspectives. Because of this, proper care must be taken during speech since an improper verbalization may lead to serious consequences. Some people do not share this view but would like to go direct or straight to the point. There are some Akan sayings which when followed strictly; we will conclude that indirection should not be used. Some of these sayings are as follow: “kyen enyim wɔ hɔ a wɔmmɔ ne nkyɛn” (we don’t play at the side of a drum; rather, we play at the face) and “pen, pen wosi no pen” (what is expected to be said must be said). These sayings and many others like that do not apply here in our discussions because that is not the focus of our discussions.

Why do we use indirection?

The question one may ask is, ‘why do we use indirection in speeches or what is the need for people, instead of going straight to the point, rather choose to go round and round?’ There are many answers to the question but in our discussion, we will give only five reasons; though there might be more.

We use indirection to show respect and politeness. That is to say, any one who often uses plain words or apply directness in his speeches often loses his face before his listeners. When one often uses indirection, he is described in the Akan community as someone who is polite, cultured and respectful. The Fantes say ‘nyimpa no apɔw’ (that person is cultured).

They see the person to be competent in communication; as they describe such a person as somebody who speaks well. (N’ano nsu yɛ dɛw.)

When one employs indirection, he avoids face threatening for both the speaker and his listeners; he rather saves his face as well as that of his addressees. For example, there are some expressions that children must not utter or use before adults and vice versa. Some of these include some verbal taboos like mentioning directly the private parts of the human body.

We employ indirectness in speech to depict communicative competence in the socio-cultural context. There is an adage in Akan that, ‘sɛ wowu gya wo mpanyin kasa a, inngyaa nnk[ka mbofra kasa (one must use adult language but not that of children). One is said to be very good speaker

when he is able to use indirection perfectly and effectively. That is, he knows when, where and how to use appropriate words and expressions. In the Akan speech community, within which Abora Etsifi is located, if a child is able to use indirection effectively, that child receives praises and commendations from adults.

Here is an example of a situation where indirection was effectively used to depict communicative competence.

Case 1:

Venue: Abora Aboase

Date: 26th June, 2014.

Participants: An eleven year old boy, his father and some by standers.

Background of the Case: On the 26th of June, 2014 at about 4:30pm at Abora Aboase in the A.A.K District in the Central Region, an eleven year old boy was sent by his mother to go and call his father from the street (where people meet to play draught) to come and eat, When the boy got to the place, there were many people around, this is what ensued among the boy, his father and some by-standers:

Boy: Paapa, maame se membɛfrɛ wo ma kɔ.

(Father, you are wanted by mother.)

Father: ɔse ebɛn asɛm a?

(What is the matter?)

Boy: Maame se enya ahɔho ntsi kɔhwɛ hɔn.

(Mother says, you've got some visitors so go and attend to them.)

Father: Nyoo, kã kyere wo maame na ahɔho no dɛ mebɛba seseiara.

(Tell your mother and the visitors that I will be with them very soon.)

One of the by-standers (or spectators) who happened to hear the message that the mother gave to the boy to be conveyed to the father remarked that "Abofra yi nyim nyansa na n'ano so atsew"(This boy is wise and eloquent). Others also praised the boy for not going directly because everybody knew that, the time was ripe for evening meals.

Another reason why we use indirection in speech is to voice out taboo expression. "Taboo is a system of placing prohibitions and restrictions on certain acts and utterances in a society." That is to say, there are some acts and expressions that are unmentionables due to the philosophy and beliefs of the society; yet, people are expected to talk about those unmentionables.

These prohibitions signify that the **acts** or **utterances** in question are not acceptable within the norms and culture of the society, and therefore, must not be practiced or talked about by its members (see Agyekum, 1996). This implies that for every society, there are certain acts and words which the members are not allowed to do or use publicly due to the state of these words and acts in the socio-cultural beliefs of the people. Our concern here is on words, expressions or utterances that people are not allowed to use them under certain identifiable context within a speech community (Agyekum, 1996).

Verbal taboo is an important aspect of the Akan language and culture. Agyekum, (1996) has identified varieties of verbal taboos in Akan. They include ‘**ntam**’ (reminiscential oath), ‘**duabo**’, (imprecation), ‘**nsedie**’ (self-imprecation), ‘**atennie**’ (invectives) and ‘**ammodin**’ (unmentionable). If there is the need for anybody from any part of the Akan speech community (irrespective of his/her social status) to talk about any of the varieties of verbal taboos mentioned above publicly, the one will have to employ indirection (probably using euphemism) to show communicative competence. Failure to use indirection will attract some sanctions either in the form of fine or being scorned. For example, ‘ntam’ (reminiscential oath) which refers to predicaments and disasters that befell a community or state or an individual in the past does not worth mentioning in any part of the Akan Speech Communities for fear of a re-occurrence of similar distasteful episode. If somebody mentions the ‘ntam’ (reminiscential oath) of any Akan community, the person is taken to the ‘**ɔkyeame**’ (the chief’s spokesman) who also reports the one to the chief and his elders. The **ɔkyeame** has no right to repeat what the offender has said, rather, he has to employ indirection by saying: “Nana, wɔdze oguannwoma aba” meaning ‘Nana, they have brought a sheep skin’ (See Peter Brown, (1993:167). This means that the one who mentioned the **ntam** of the people has provoked the anger of the ancestors and the gods; and for that matter he/she has to slaughter sheep (number may be determined by the chief and his elders) according to the type of ‘ntam’ mentioned to calm the ancestors down. Whenever somebody mentions ‘**ɔman ntam**’ (a state reminiscential oath), sheep is/are slaughtered to ‘calm down dust’ before whatever reason that brought up the mentioning of the oath is looked into. In this situation, the **ɔkyeame** should not say it directly because it is a taboo. There are certain words and expressions as well which the Akans consider to be taboo. Other forms of verbal taboo include the private parts of the human body. The original names of such parts of the body like the sex organ, anus and others are not mentioned directly. There are ways to express them; and indirection is one of the ways used to express or voice out these taboo expressions. Eg., ‘**banyin**’ (man) and ‘**basia**’ (woman) for the male and female organs respectively.

Also, a citizen from the Abora Etsifi speech community who is communicative competent talking about faeces will not use the direct word “bin” rather he will call it “**egyanan**” or “**efikyir**” which are indirect forms of ‘bin’ (faeces).

As Obeng (1994:42) points out that we use indirection to ‘obviate crises’ and conflicts. Here, if a speaker perceives that by making certain comments will generate confusion and for that matter lead to crises and conflict and yet he/she has to put his/ her message across, the one chooses to use indirection to make his or her point. For example, a wife met another lady who the former believes she (the latter) is a concubine to her husband. The wife wanted to insult the concubine but she felt if she doesn’t take care, there would be confusion so she employed innuendo which is a form of indirection. Listen to what the wife said: ‘**Ketsew a ɔfam obi ne ban ho, hwewh[wo dze**’ (A lizard

which is on somebody's wall, look for your own.) 'Ketsew' (a lizard) in most times of its life is seen on the wall; it doesn't build or make its own shelter; and the woman who is 'parasiting' is likened to it. This means that, the woman is behaving like a lizard which does not stay or sleep at its own prepared place but likes to sleep or stay on somebody's wall. Here we see that the wife's expression is metaphorical and for that matter, it is a form of indirection. When the concubine heard this, she was hurt but could not do or say anything because the wife did not mention her name. Meanwhile the wife has achieved her aim (of insulting her). Here, indirection has been used as an escape valve.

Finally, the reason why we employ indirection is that, it is a strategy used to control or curb the potency of the power of the spoken word. It is believed especially in the Abora Etsifi speech community that any word (which is in the form of a curse) that comes out of the mouth has power on the addressee. In view of this, most of the Akan communities do not deal kindly to people who curse others. There are cases where people who want to curse others resort to the use of indirection just to escape punishment. The following are some of the expressions use:

Ka hɛn kodu. (Keep on doing that)

Nyame nhyira wo. (God bless you) etc.

One may think that, all these are words of encouragements; they are not, rather they are forms of curse. These expressions, being good wishes or curses depend on when and how they are expressed. Eg., if a child misbehaves towards a parent and the latter takes offence and he/she expresses any of the above to the child, it denotes a serious curse which if the child doesn't apologise or show remorse, may face the consequence in the future.

Types of indirection

The author wants to mention briefly here some types of indirection. Schottman (1993) distinguishes four main types of indirection. These are: that which is formulated indirectly, that which is addressed indirectly, that which has an indirect author and that which is indirect because of its 'key'.

That which is formulated indirectly.

By this, the addressor in order not to put the addressee off, will use words which are far different from the intended message. For example, in requests, a woman of Abora Etsifi who needs some pepper to prepare her soup will tell her friend thus: 'Meserɛ wo ma me muoko ebien bi ma memfa nto mo nkwan mu'. (Please, give me some few (two) pepper to put into my soup.) Truly speaking, she needs more than two sticks of pepper; and the giver is aware of that so she will give her more. It is culturally unaccepted in the Akan speech community including Abora Etsifi, to ask for more items.

That which is addressed indirectly

That is to say that, there are situations where the addressor will put his/her message across through another person before it gets to the real addressee. A very good example in the Akan community is at the chief's palace or at a durbar. When somebody wants to talk to the chief, he/she does that

through the *ɔkyeame* (the chief's spokesman). Here we have the Speaker – Animator – Addressee. The Akans have this to say about this type of indirection: 'Sɛ epɛ asɛm aka akyerɛ Nyankopɔn a nna eka kyerɛ mframa' (one can speak to God through the air). The Akans revere their chiefs to the extent that they (chiefs) are not openly addressed directly. Also the chiefs speak to their people through their spokesmen. Another example of this type of indirection is when someone who had offended another person wants to apologise. Due to the gravity of the offence, the offender may not want to go direct so he will look for a mediator to present his case for him. The example in case 2 below highlights a situation of the sort.

Case 2

Venue: Abora Ansafona
 Date: 10th August, 2013.
 Participants: Two friends

Background of the Case

One of the friends borrowed money from an elderly man and promised to pay back in three months time. It is six and a half months now. The borrower hears the lender is not happy about the situation. This he did not go himself but sent a friend to apologise on his behalf. This is what ensued between them:

Kodwo: Kofi, mɛpɛ dɛ ekɛpa Egya Ntow kyɛw ma me.
 (Kofi, I want you to go and beg EGYA Ntow for me.)

Kofi: Na ebɛn asɛm esi?
 (What has happened?)

Kodwo: Ne sika a mekɛgyee no, munntuae.
 (I haven't paid back the money I collected from him.)

Kofi: Ebɛnadze ntsi na dadaada yi inntuae?
 (Why haven't you paid all this while?)

Kodwo: Minnyaa sika ntsi kɛpa no kyɛw ma me.
 (I haven't got money so go and beg him for me.)

Kofi: Oye, mobɔkɔ akɛpa no kyɛw ama wo.
 (Alright, I will go and plead on your behalf.)

Looking at the above conversation, it is obvious that Kodwo feels Egya Ntow will not treat him (Kodwo) lightly or listen to him if he goes to him (Egya Ntow) personally. So he sends Kofi who was believed to have goodwill before Egya Ntow to apologise on his (Kodwo) behalf.

That which has an indirect author

The type of indirection which has an indirect author is like proverbs, folktales, riddles, puzzles etc. which are authored by the anonymous body of ancestors.

'Abrɔme' (puzzle) is one of the traditional verbal games of the Fantes. Aggrey (1977:55) explains *abrɔme* (puzzle) as a verbal play that involves indirect question which are difficult to answer and also far different from the answer. Its answers have no connection to the questions. The only connection is the rhyming. There are two teenagers who are friends. One of them developed stealing habit so the other friend decided to correct him. One day, the one who is not a thief asked his friend that they engage in puzzles to enjoy themselves. In the process, the initiator of the game presented the following problem to the one who has become a thief, thus: 'Megye wo nkamporkuku'. (I request from you a group of bamboos) the other friend said he doesn't know the response. 'Eye owifo dadaw' (you are an old thief) is the response or the answer the guy gave to his friend. We are told after the game, the thief stopped that bad habit and became a changed person.

The last but not the least type of indirection to touch on in this paper is that which is indirect because of its key – that is to say, the way it is put – that is reproaches and criticisms delivered in jokes, flattery, etc.

In the Abora Etsifi speech community, one cannot criticize or correct a chief or an elderly person openly, but some situations call for these acts. For someone to be able to correct or criticize a chief and go scot-free, he would have to resort to the use of indirection like through songs, folktales, etc. For example, a chief who does not perform as expected of him is criticized by the use of indirection. Here are some ironical statements that are used to criticize such chiefs:

'Nana Osimesi n'amambu so enyi papa o'

(Chief so –so-and so's rule is really satisfactory).

'Nana Osimesi dze mponu aba kurow yi mu'.

(Nana has brought development into this town).

'Hen Ebusuapanyin yi nyim asem dzi papa'

(Our family Head is a very good arbitrator).

Such statements and others, which are said ironically, make those leaders who are affected sit up and do the right thing. It is worth noting here that, no matter how cruel that chief or the leader in question might be, he cannot chide or reprimand the one who criticized him. This is because indirection has a degree of ambiguity and therefore there is a shift from one domain to another. It

is by this nature of indirection that people can use (it) without being committed. That is to say that indirection can be used as an escape valve.

Strategies Used in Indirection

In the Abora Etsifi speech community which indirection is mostly applied in speeches, certain strategies are used in employing indirection in the socio-cultural context. These strategies include evasion, silence, circumlocution, innuendo, euphemism, surrogate language, etc.

The socio-cultural context or situations where indirection is effectively employed also include the chief's palace or traditional court, borrowing, marriage, rivalry, arbitrations conversations and so on.

Evasion

Evasion can simply be explained as an act of dodging or avoiding a situation. Relating this to our discussion, evasion as a strategy used in indirection means when one refuses to comment on an issue which he is supposed to, or say something which is not in line with the question at stake. Bull and Mayer (1988:10), indicate, 'a speaker could only be said to have evaded a question if for example he or she provides a response not located on a positive/negative continuum when asked a yes/no question... these mean that one way of employing indirection is by evasion. This strategy used in indirection is often seen at the chief's palace or the traditional court. When an accused person realizes that he/she is about to lose a case, he/she begins to use the trick mentioned above, i.e. by refusing to answer certain questions or giving long and confusing answers to simple question. Just to pave his/her way through.

Circumlocution:

Chambers Universal Learner's Dictionary explains circumlocution as the 'unnecessary long way of saying something'. Circumlocution as 'a variety of evasive tactics deployed by an interactant to protect himself or herself against face-fall'. These two explanations of circumlocution tell us that people who resort to its use do not go straight to the point so as to save their faces. Among the Akans, an interactant engaged in circumlocution may broach a topic by beginning from the root of the problem and working his way gradually to the circumstances which may have led to the difficult situation in which he finds himself. Such an interactant 'sometimes gives away delicate but irrelevant domestic information to justify his cause'. The person then uses circumlocution as a face-maintenance device. Circumlocution as a strategy used in indirection is often employed when a person is asking for favour or going borrowing. Thus, circumlocution is employed by speakers to demonstrate self-respect and consideration for other interactants. From the Akan socio-cultural point of view, it is not nice for somebody who wants a favour or wants to borrow from another person (especially an elderly person) to go straight to the point. If he/she goes straight to the point, the borrower may be despised. According to Levinson (1984) circumlocution helps to avoid request refusal by drawing from the grounds that would be used by an addressee to reject a request.

Circumlocution as a strategy used in indirection is widely accepted in the Akan culture though it may not be accepted in some cultures.

Silence

Silence is an act of non-verbal communication that brings about meaning based on the cultural interpretation. Silence is a form of indirection. Tannen (1985;97) states that ‘silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness. If indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something’. That is to say that although silence in communication is devoid of words, it gives some kind of meaning to the interactants. In the Akan socio-cultural context, silence as a form of indirection is mostly employed in rivalry and quarrelling. In most cases when one is fed up with her rival’s long talk or quarrel, what she often says is ‘munnkobue m’ano’ (I will not open my mouth), ‘Mennkekā hwee’ (I am not saying anything), ‘Mayε kōmm/dzinn’, (I have kept quiet). All these mean that she will not say anything to bring confusion or conflict. It is clear here that silence as indirection in communication is used as a face saving mechanism and it is also used to avoid face threat.

Innuendo

An innuendo refers to an oblique allusion or an insinuation involving a veiled reflection on an interactant’s character or reputation. Innuendoes often come in the form of compressed metaphors and sometimes as proverbs. In casting an innuendo, an interactant may borrow an image or an idea from real experience; and especially in the Akan culture, from riddles, metaphors, and so on. As mentioned earlier on, a woman who is seen to be parasiting on someone else’s husband is described as ‘Ketsew a ɔfam ban ho’ (A lizard which is on a wall). Obeng (1994) has remarked that innuendoes are goal-oriented and that their implications are quiet obvious to the target. This is to say that the target of the innuendo is obvious. Thus, when anyone who knows the speaker’s situation hears her will know the addressee; that is why the Fantes say that ‘Kasaetwuw biara nyim no wurā’. That is to say that innuendos employed by interactants have their targets and the targets are obvious.

Euphemism

Euphemism can simply be explained as a speech style used to tone down the unpleasantness of a topic or an issue so as to make it pleasant or reduce the shock. In the Abora Etsifi speech community, euphemisms are called ‘kasambirenyi’ (Language cover-ups). These are polished ways of expressing verbal taboos and other serious issues to make them more presentable. Euphemism as a strategy used in indirection, serves as a shield against the offensive nature of taboo expressions, thus affording the speaker a way to save his face and that of his/her listeners and also to show communicative competence.

In the Abora Etsifi speech community, euphemisms are used in so many situations, for example, in announcing death, mentioning taboo words and expressions, and so on. The following are some examples of euphemisms used to announce deaths.

- a) Maame no etwa n’enyi ahwε ban (The woman has turned her face to the wall)
- b) Oegyaa n’atser mu. (he/she has stopped holding his/her spoon)
- c) Nana kɔ ekuraase/ (Nana has gone to the village) (Announcing death of a chief)

d) Odupɔn etutu (a big tree has fallen) – announcing a chief's death.

Examples of euphemisms that are used to express:

- Menstruation: 'Oebu ne nsa' (she has broken her hands),
'ɔakɔ mfikyir' (she has gone to the back of the house)
- Pregnancy: 'Noho adan' (lit. herself has changed)
'Nworaba ewia no' (lit. the stars have stolen her)
- Eating: 'ɔroto ne nsa nsu mu' (she is putting her hand into water)
'ɔrobɔn'ano twɛr'. (he is knocking his mouth)
'Oriyi ne nsa' (she is taking her hand), etc.

Surrogate Language

Surrogate language which is language used in place of verbal language is also used as indirection to criticize and correct chiefs and important personalities in the Akan societies including the area under review. This includes drum language, horn language and so on. Fennegan (1970:497) states that drum language is a medium that can be put to a wide range of uses... it can also be employed to comment on or add to some current activity. Drummers use the talking drums like 'atumpan', 'asafokyen', and others to criticize chiefs at durbar grounds. This act, as a strategy used in communication, makes the affected chiefs to sit up and do well. The chiefs do not accuse drummers who employ this kind of indirection. Note that, it is an offence in the Akan community for someone to translate what a drummer drums, the former can in no way take the drummer on about what he drums. That is why it is very difficult for chiefs and other leaders to accuse or punish drummers on their criticisms.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have shown that indirection is pervasive in the Akan communicative processes, that is to say that, indirection is employed in almost every discourse in the Abora Etsifi speech community. Wherever interlocutors or interactants engage in speech activities, indirection is used in the various forms discussed in the paper. This goes a long way to prevent the faces of interactants and also it prevents conflicts, accusations and punishments.

In the Abora Etsifi speech community, accepting and/or assigning blame publicly or directly in several communicative situations including one in which the interactants are of unequal status, is frowned upon. A subordinate who criticizes an elder publicly for wrongdoing is considered disrespectful. So also, will an elder who accepts blame directly is considered weak. Direct blame assignment and blame acceptance are therefore dangerous face-threatening acts and are hence done indirectly. Indirection, as already been pointed out, is an accepted mode of communication in the Abora Etsifi speech community.

In view of the above stated facts, the use of indirection should be encouraged in children in the Abora Etsifi speech community. To promote the use of indirection in communication, the following suggestions are to be followed;

Indirection should be included in the school curriculum of all levels.

Also, parents should often employ its use in their interaction with children in order for the children to acquire the skill of using indirection. This will promote communicative competence in children who are tomorrow leaders of the society. Chiefs, Akyeame, teachers, the elderly and all opinion leaders should employ indirection in their speeches to the public at their respective functions to ensure that the use of indirection in speech is bequeathed to posterity. These suggestions, if adhered to, will ensure the maintenance of the use of indirection as communicative skill among the people of Abora Etsifi in particular and the Akans in general.

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