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## 6 “I sh.t in your mouth”: Areal invectives in the Lower Volta Basin (West Africa)

**Abstract:** Languages in the Lower Volta Basin belong to different subgroups of the Kwa family: Gbe, Ga-Dangme, Ghana-Togo Mountain, and Tano, which includes Akanic and Guang languages. These languages share several features, but it is not always easy to detect which features are inherited and which are diffused from one language to the other (Ameka 2006a; Ellis 1984). Taking a cue from earlier studies (e.g. Ameka 1994), where some widespread interactional routines are either inherited, such as *agoo* ‘attention getter’, or diffused from one language, such as *ayikoo* ‘well done, continue’ which seems to have spread to the other languages from Ga, I investigate some shared maledicta and taboo expressions in the area. I focus on the performance, perlocutionary effect and uptake as well as the cultural scripts that govern the use of two invective multi-modal embodied utterances in the area. One is an emblematic gesture involving a pointed thumb and its accompanying verbal representations. A common expression that accompanies it comes from Ga “obscene insults” *sɔ̀ɔ̀mli* ‘inside female genitalia’, *onyɛ sɔ̀ɔ̀ mli* ‘inside your mother’s genitalia’ whose equivalents are also used in the other languages. The Ewe-based accompanying verbal expression is literally: ‘I defecate in your mouth’. A second form is the one commonly called “suck teeth”, which is spread beyond the Lower Volta Basin to the Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund (Muysken and Smith 2015, van den Berg et al. 2015). Drawing on the representation and categorisation of how the enactment of these linguistic practices are reported, I demonstrate that they are viewed as insults or ways of “swearing at” other people because of something bad they may have done to the speaker. I call into question the universality of “swearing” and argue that crosslinguistic studies of “swearing”, “cursing” or “cussing” and such phenomena should extricate themselves from the English language labels and attend to the “insider” and indigenous ways of understanding acts of saying bad words to another (cf. Wierzbicka 2014a; Haugh 2016).

*Contrary to the norms in the West, swearing is not universal.* (Hughes 2006: xxi)

## 6.1 Introduction

Despite admonitions of the kind given by Hughes in the epigraph of this chapter, much of the work on swearing in the literature assumes the complex Anglo<sup>1</sup> concept of swearing as the analytical category. In a majority of cases, the concept is left undefined, and assumed to be universal. Ljung (2011) opens his chapter on defining swearing with the following sentence, admitting that it is an English term and yet that it will do for a crosslinguistic concept:

Although *swearing* is an English term denoting a particular type of linguistic behaviour, it is often used in studies of other languages to denote a linguistic resource whose functions and realisations across languages are remarkably similar and seem to emanate from a common pool of emotive utterance types. (Ljung 2011:1, italics in original)

In many cases, swearing is equated with “bad language” or “taboo language”. As McGarrity (2017: e372) notes in a review of Bergen (2016), the book is about taboo language “alternatively called swearing, profanity, cursing, obscenity in the literature”. It should be clear to the casual reader that these English terms mean different things and are not alternatives. Moreover, these terms are neither transparent nor do they have obvious equivalents across languages. Besides, the terms in English have various relations with one another; for instance, cursing is sometimes presented as being included in swearing or as a synonym of it. Yet some researchers boldly state that “[S]wearing, a linguistic universal, is used to express intense emotions (fear, joy, anger, excitement)” (Finn 2017: 18). This universalist perspective is further reinforced by claims that speakers of languages have an idea that certain words can evoke in others a feeling or an attitude, and that those words can evoke bad feelings because they are profane or are thought of as dirty or offensive. And since “swear words” have this function, swearing is universal. The picture is further complicated by the fact that swearing in some contexts is viewed as “rude” or “impolite”. In the literature on impoliteness, there is a debate as to whether there is a distinction between rudeness and impoliteness or not. Culpeper (2011), for instance, distinguishes them in terms of style, while Terkourafi (2008: 61–62) differentiates between them in terms of whether the linguistic act is considered an intentional face-threat, for rudeness, or if it is unintentional, for impoliteness (see Watters 2012 for a discussion of “rudeness”

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<sup>1</sup> The term Anglo is meant to represent the languages and cultures associated with the traditional bases of English which Kachru (e.g. 2006) describes as the inner circle of Englishes, i.e. British, American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand.

in Australian English as a key ethno-descriptor in the domain of English impoliteness). Like swearing, these terms are based on the English concepts and do not easily translate cross-linguistically (see Haugh 2016 and also Wierzbicka 2014a on the problem of using English as a default scientific metalanguage). As Jay and Janschewitz (2008: 269) have identified: “A common problem for impoliteness, rudeness and swearing research is that all three phenomena are impossible to define universally because all are culturally and personally determined”. This observation is in part reflected in a Facebook post by Christopher Collins of New York University.<sup>2</sup> In the post, Collins reported a dinner conversation he had with James Essegbey, an Ewe native speaker linguist, and other Ghanaians, including some native speakers of Ewe. To get a flavour of the complicated nature of thinking about swearing across languages and cultures, I reproduce part of the post from June 23, 2018 below:

One of our many topics of conversation was whether there are swear words in Ewe. As usual, James [Essegbey] and I took opposite positions. But it really made me think about what a swear word is. And it was also surprising to see how cross-linguistics comparison (English/Ewe) even in this domain is complicated and interesting. I brought up the possibility that “sucking teeth” is a kind of swear word (*tséduḍu*) in Ewe. One issue that came up is the domain of use of swear words. In English, a person talking to himself can use one to express frustration (e.g., after hitting his finger with a hammer): “S---”, or “F---”. But we can also use them in other contexts, as when insulting somebody or expressing anger (“F\_\_\_ you”). What do other speakers of African languages think? Does your language have swear words?<sup>3</sup>

It is true that one can suck one’s teeth (*ḍu tsé* ‘bite inside one’s cheek’ in Ewe) out of frustration at oneself, and do the same to express contempt of another person (cf. Thompson 2019). But does this make sucking teeth a form of swearing? What understanding of swear words is being employed here, given that even across dialects of English there are slightly different understandings of “swear words” (see Goddard 2015; Watters 2012)? In my response to Collins I pointed out that swearing is a complicated notion in English and we need to deconstruct it before we can answer the question of whether there are swear words in African languages.

Hughes (2006) provides a helpful starting point. He distinguishes two types of swearing, formal vs. informal swearing, according to context (cf. Stapleton 2010):

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Collins is a linguist who is a fluent speaker of Ewe, having conducted fieldwork on one of its dialects, and who continues to carry out linguistic research on the language (see e.g. Collins 1993).

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=chris%20collins%20swearing%20in%20ewe&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=chris%20collins%20swearing%20in%20ewe&epa=SEARCH_BOX)

Formal swearing is a ritual of social compliance and obligation: in marriage, in court, for high office, and as allegiance to the state. On the other hand, informal swearing constitutes a transgression of social codes ranging from the merely impolite to the criminal.

(Hughes 2006: xv)

This distinction is sometimes referred to in terms of “oath-taking” and “profane swearing”. This corresponds to the two senses of the verb *swear* in English. English is in the minority even among European languages in colexifying these two senses in the same word. As Ljung (2011: 1) reports, it is only French and Swedish in his corpus that have comparable words. Thus, if we pose the question, “Are there swear words in your language?”, we need to say in what sense we are using the word *swear*.

The two senses of the English word have syntactic correlates, as Hughes further pointed out:

In terms of mode, *we swear by* some higher force or somebody; *we swear that* something is so; *we swear to* do something; *we swear at* something or somebody; and *we swear* simply *out of* anger, disappointment, or frustration. (Hughes 2006: xxi, emphasis added)

Thus, the syntactic patterns of *swear by* . . . , *swear that* . . . , and *swear to* relate to one meaning and those of *swear at someone/something* and just *swear* relate to the other (see Wierzbicka 1987: 210, 252–253 for paraphrases of the illocutionary semantics of the two senses). Table 6.1 shows how even the two senses in English itself are carved out by other more specific terms, and when compared to other languages such as Ewe, even particular readings from an English point of view have specific linguistic expressions. This is one of the reasons why the question of whether a language like Ewe has swearing is difficult, even though it feels like “despite its negative connotations swearing remains an intrinsic part of languages and cultures worldwide” (Stapleton 2010: 290).

When one looks at Table 6.1, it is clear that Ewe does not have a linguistic label for cathartic swearing, although there are several terms for other types of swearing. It appears that languages differ in terms of which type or readings of Anglo swearing they elaborate. Floor (2015), for instance, identifies as many as five distinct categories, each with its label, of foul language in the cursing domain in Persian. What is striking, from an Ewe point of view, is if one sucks one’s teeth, for example, either in frustration at oneself or towards someone else, it is not reported with the verb *dzu* ‘insult, verbally abuse’. This suggests that this linguistic act is not classified with other insults or expressions of abuse. It is hard therefore to think of it as a type of swearing. It is more of an expressive or emotive word-like interjection whose manifestation can be described as a vocal gesture. Thompson (2019) treats its Akan equivalent *tweeaa* as an “interjection of ‘contempt’” (see further discussion in Sections 6.2 and 6.3).

**Table 6.1:** The multiple readings of *swear* and their equivalents across languages.

	English	Dutch	German	Ewe
Swear profane (religious)	<i>blaspheme</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>ketteren</i>	<i>fluchen</i>	<i>yɔ̃ X ɲkɔ̃ dzódzrɔ̃</i> call X [=supernatural being]’s name in vain
Swear (profane) invoke supernatural being on someone	<i>curse</i>	<i>iemand vervloeken</i>	<i>jemanden verfluchen</i>	<i>yɔ̃ nú dó ame</i> invoke a being on someone <i>sa gbe dó ame</i> cast a spell (with words) on someone
Swear, out of frustration etc. (profane)	<i>curse, cuss</i>	<i>vloeken</i>	<i>fluchen</i>	??
Swear (oath-taking)	<i>take/swear an oath, affirm, vow, pledge</i>	<i>zweren, een eed afleggen</i>	<i>einen Eid schwören</i>	<i>ká atám</i> ‘SAY oath’ <i>ká X fé aɔ̃</i> ‘SAY X POSS foot’ <i>ta nú</i> ‘put.around thing’ <i>fia adzɔ̃gbe</i> ‘speak. code destiny’
Swear at someone/ something	<i>insult, abuse</i>	<i>schelden</i>	<i>schelten beschimpfen</i>	<i>dzu</i> ‘insult’, ‘abuse verbally’

<sup>a</sup>Rongier (2015) suggests that *gblɔ̃ busúnya* ‘say an abonimable word’ is the equivalent of *blaspheme*. However, the Ewe expression covers a much wider space and is less likely to be used to talk about blasphemy in the religious sense.

In the rest of this chapter, I examine the interactional meaning and use of two multi-modally packaged emblems that are widely used in two linguistic areas: the Lower Volta Basin (West Africa) and the Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund. The former includes the Lower Volta speech and cultural area as well as the Circum-Caribbean creoles, like the creoles of Suriname and Jamaica. The languages in the Lower Volta Basin belong to different subgroups of the Kwa family: Gbe, Ga-Dangme, Ghana-Togo Mountain, and Tano, which includes Akanic and Guang languages (Ameka 2006a, b). In Section 3 I discuss *tséduqu* ‘suck teeth’, which has been characterised as a rude sound (Figuro 2005). Perhaps it is the rudeness that links it to swearing. This vocal gesture is used in the Volta Basin and beyond, in other parts of Africa as well as in the Trans-Atlantic linguistic area by peoples of African descent. Its semantics reveals that it is an expressive, emotive interjection. In Section 4, I present a rude physical gesture, a

thumb point which can be used to insult someone by itself, or which can be accompanied by verbal expressions that contain words from the scatological domain, or make reference to the mother's genitalia (depending on the language). This emblematic embodied multimodal utterance is widely used in the Lower Volta Basin. It does not seem to have spread to the Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund. To what extent can the performance of these rude pragmatic acts be considered instances of swearing, even if only in one of its readings? Before presenting these forms, I describe the meaning of the Ewe word *dzu* 'insult, verbally abuse' to give a background to what kinds of activities are culturally recognised as verbal abuse in the language. Similar conceptualisations of verbal abuse occur in other Lower Volta Basin languages.<sup>4</sup>

In accounting for the use and meaning of the signs, I use the reductive paraphrase method of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) and the meanings and the cultural scripts that describe the cultural norms associated with signs are represented in Minimal English, which "provides informed guidelines and guidance, based on linguistic research, about how to say important things in a clear and translatable way" (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2018: 7).

## 6.2 The linguistic acts of insult and abuse in Ewe

Ewe has a hyperlexeme *dzu* 'insult, abuse', which has a verbal as well as a nominal form. Westermann (1973 [1928]) has the following entry, with the illustrative example involving a nominal form:

- (1) *dzu* to scold, abuse, chide, revile, insult, blame.  
*dzu vé-ná wú hě tsó-tsó si ame*  
 insult pain-HAB exceed knife RED-take cut person  
 'An insult is more painful than being cut with a knife.'  
 (interlinearisation and glosses added)

Westerman's example points to the pain one feels when one is on the receiving end of verbal abuse. Example (2) is another saying about *dzu*, which indicates that even though it may be painful it is ephemeral. No matter how much of it is heaped on you, it does not leave a permanent mark (it does not develop into visible spots on your body):

<sup>4</sup> The Ga verb *je* [dʒɛ] and the Akan verb *yaw* (Akwapim) or *yeya* (Asante) translate as 'insult', verbally abuse'.

- (2) *dzu mé-tó-á kó o*  
 insult NEG-grow-HAB lumps NEG  
 ‘An insult does not leave scars/marks.’

As a verb, *dzu* obligatorily takes a complement and participates in various argument structure constructions, as shown in (3). (3a) is an agentive two place construction. In (3b) the topic of the abuse is spelled out and has an object function. The addressee of the insult is coded as a dative oblique object. In (3c) the topic of the insult is coded in a complement clause.

- (3) a. *é-dzu=m vé-vé-ǵé*  
 3SG-insult=1SG RED-pain-ADVZER  
 ‘She insulted me painfully.’  
 b. *é-dzu ko ná=m*  
 3SG-insult poverty DAT=1SG  
 ‘She insulted poverty for me’  
 c. *é-dzu nyónu=a bé é-nyé gbolowǵlá*  
 3SG-insult woman=DEF QT 3SG-COP prostitute  
 ‘She insulted the woman that she was a prostitute.’

Consider also the following excerpt from a written Ewe play. Amenyo, a middle aged man, is asking for the hand of a young girl (Yawa), whom he had earlier on insulted in public. The girl rejects the proposal, saying she will not marry an old man who is a bachelor. The man reacts by saying that Yawa has insulted him, reporting it with the verb *dzu*.

- (4) Yawa: ... *adzum le ame dome vɔ ava ǵema? Nyemele ame tsitsi xoxo si nye tre tsu la ǵe ge o*  
*ǻ-dzu-m le ame dome vɔ*  
 2SG:POT-insultPREP people amidst PFV  
*ǻ-vá-ǵe=m=a?*  
 POT-VENT-marry=1SG=Q  
 ‘You have insulted me in front of people and you now want to marry me.’

Amenyo: *èdzum be menye tre tsitsi xoxo*

- è-dzu=m bé me-nyétre tsi.tsi xóxó*  
 2SG-insult=1SG QT 1SG-COP bachelor aged old  
 ‘You have insulted me that I am an old aged bachelor.’  
 (Setsoafia 1982: 15)

As the examples show, different kinds of expressions are used and categorised as *dzu*. There are insults that relate to the physical characteristics of the target, such as *mo globui* [face hollowed.DIM:IDEO] ‘Your narrow pointed face’ or *ta gǎ wò* [head big 2SG] ‘Your big head’. Others involve name-calling based on perceived or assumed behavioural patterns, including habits such as *gbolowólá* ‘prostitute’, as in (3c) above, *fiafití* ‘thief’, *dzi-ma-kplá* [born-PRIV-train] ‘uncouth, untrained person’ or *yakamě* ‘useless person’. Some of the insults are animal terms where the addressee is likened to animals. For instance, a common *dzugbe* ‘abusive language’ that one hears is the term *avǔ* ‘dog’. Others are *kesé* ‘monkey’ and *gbe-me-lā* [bush-inside-animal] ‘undomesticated animal’ or just *lā* ‘animal’. Some insults involve the attribution of low mental capacity or the lack of good thinking abilities to their target. Expressions with such a meaning include *aso* ‘a fool’, *alě* ‘a stupid person’, *azúi* ‘stupid’ and *kosiaa* ‘a foolish person’.

These different categories of abusive language also occur in other languages of the Lower Volta basin. For instance, a common insult in Akan is *aboa* ‘animal’, and the Ga use a common insult *dzyulb* ‘thief’. In fact, the term *kosiaa* ‘a foolish person’ is an areal and pan-Ghanaian expression adapted into the other languages, probably from Akan *kwasiaa* ‘a fool’, and used even in Ghanaian English.<sup>5</sup>

As should be evident from the discussion so far, insulting words or abusive language in the languages of the Volta Basin need not be vulgar, obscene or dirty, as seems to be the case in ‘profane swearing’ noted in the literature (see Samarin 1969 and Irvine 1993 respectively on Gbeya and Wolof insults for a similar claim). Nevertheless, some acts of insulting can involve the use of vulgar words, as is the case reported in example (5).

- (5) Context: two women were having an argument and they were trading insults with one another. One of them used the following simile with reference to the male genitalia to return some of the other person’s insults:

[What have I done to you this morning before . . .

è-ǎ́                      nu              abé      flǎ́·dome-va . . .

2SG-become.erect    mouth    SEMBL    dawn-penis

‘What have I done to you before you projected your mouth (in a straight line) like an erect penis at dawn [and insulting me].’

<sup>5</sup> Some of the terms I have listed here either as Ewe or as Akan have spread throughout the Volta Basin and are used in English in Ghana. Daku (2003) has the following entries for four of the terms I have used as examples: *kwasia* taboo ‘fool’ (Akan); *aboa/abua* N. ‘animal’ (Akan); *dzimakpla* N. ‘dirt, bastard, uncouth, wayward person’ (Ewe); and *dzulo* N. ‘thief’ (Ga). It is interesting that Daku classifies *kwasia* as a taboo word and all the rest as just nouns.



Abusive language can thus be vulgar or obscene. And this may be the relationship between profane swearing and the cultural activity of *amedzudzu* ‘insulting/abusing people’ in Ewe and other languages of the Volta Basin. An English “swear word” based abusive formula is also categorised as *amedzudzu* in (6).

(6) Grandpa and Grandma have an argument and one of the “bad words” that Grandpa always uses is: *damn fool* [dam fuul]. On this occasion, Grandma decides to respond using the same words. Grandpa then invites the grandson, Matthew, to explain to his Grandma, who does not have English in her repertoire, that the expression is an insult.<sup>6</sup> The Ewe variety used here is Anfoegbe, the language of Anfoega.

(6) Grandpa: ... *dám fuul*  
damn fool

Grandma: *gbe-síáá-gbe dám fuul! dám fuul!*  
day-INT-day damn fool damn fool  
*dam fuul né weε tsyé*  
damn fool DAT 2SG too  
‘Everyday, damn fool, damn fool, damn fool to you too’

Grandpa: *Matéo de me né mamá=wò*  
Matthew remove inside DAT grandma-2SG  
*bá-xée dam fuul yi, ame-dzu-dzu yé*  
COMP-REL damn fool TP person-RED-insult FOC  
‘Matthew, explain to your grandma that damn fool is an insult.’

From the discussion so far, utterances that are categorised as *amedzudzu* ‘insulting someone’ in Ewe are perceived as offensive, contemptuous or rude. From this perspective they are related to profane swearing. As Stapleton (2010: 300, my emphasis) suggests, “The linguistic practice of swearing” has the “capacity to shock, alienate, *insult*, *abuse* and generally *cause offence*”. Similarly, Allan and Burridge (2006: 79) state that “[T]o insult someone verbally is to abuse them with contemptuous, perhaps insolent language that may include an element of bragging. It is often directly addressed”. Thus insult and abuse are intertwined and connected with swearing. What is less obvious is whether one can identify some words as “swear words”, as is the case in Anglo lingua-cultures. Be that as it may, one can suggest the following paraphrase for the illocutionary meaning of the verb *dzu* ‘insult, verbally abuse’.

<sup>6</sup> There is a subtext here. Grandma, the wife of Grandpa, is not supposed to use abusive language towards her spouse. Grandpa assumes that if Grandma knew that the expression *dam fuul* was an insult she would not use it towards him, as that goes against the cultural norms.

- (7) The meaning of the Ewe verb *dzu*
- a. I know something bad about you.
  - b. I think something bad about you now because of it.
  - c. I feel something bad towards you because of it.
  - d. I want to say something bad to you because of it.
  - e. I cannot not do it.
  - f. I say: I know something bad about you.
  - g. Because of this I feel something bad towards you now.
  - h. I say it like this because I want many people to hear it.
  - i. I say it because I want you to feel something (very) bad.

The assumption is that as a speech act verb, the illocutionary meaning of *dzu* is made up of bundles of features including a dictum, introduced by the ‘I say’ frame as in component (7f), and an illocutionary point as represented in component (7i) (see e.g. Ameka 2006b). Other components spell out the trigger, that is the insult or abuse, which comes about because the speaker has come to know something that the addressee did which caused them to have a bad feeling. Component (7e) captures the idea that typically the insult is an immediate reaction that cannot be resisted. The speaker expects the target to feel something bad because of what they say.

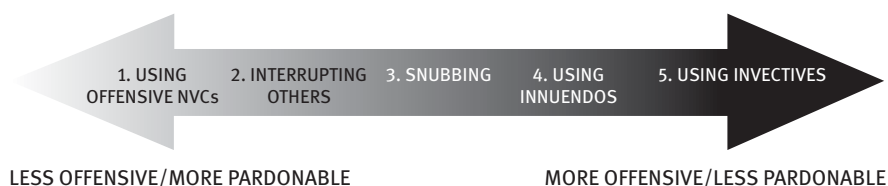
Having clarified how insult or abuse activities are understood, we now turn to the emblematic areal invectives beginning with suck teeth. The term is understood to be an insulting or abusive word, expression or utterance.

## 6.3 Suck teeth or kiss teeth – a rude sound in the Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund

As noted above, a rude sound called suck teeth or kiss teeth is very widespread in Africa and in the circum-Caribbean Creoles, which have African language substrates (see Rickford and Rickford 1976 for an initial description). Figuero (2005) has described in detail the pragmatics and variation in the Caribbean on this form. What is common to all uses of the element is that it is a vocal gesture used to express bad feelings of contempt, frustration or disdain towards one’s interactants. It is also used cathartically to express one’s feelings about oneself or about a situation one finds oneself in. It can thus be used without a targeted addressee. This is the sign that Collins suggests could be considered a form of

swearing in Ewe. The only thing it shares with profane swearing, in my view, is rudeness.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson and Agyekum (2016), in discussing what they call the Ghanaian standpoint on impoliteness, propose a continuum with respect to the degree of offence felt or perceived to be caused by different categories of “impolite acts” (see Figure 6.1). On that scale, they put invectives, that is, insults and abusive language, as the most unpardonable interpersonal offence one can commit. They note that sucking one’s teeth at someone else is also one of those invectives that are unpardonable.



**Figure 6.1:** Offensive behaviour (Thompson and Agyekum 2016).

The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo gives a vivid description of how this emotive interjection is used in interpersonal relationships in her fictional love story *Changes*. She describes a scene where the behaviour of a husband offends his spouse very much and she expresses her complex emotions of frustration, contempt and disgust by sucking her teeth.

- (8) Ama Ata Aidoo’s description of Esi’s (the wife’s) reaction to an extremely unpleasant incident involving her husband:

Esi’s anger rose to an exploding pitch . . . . What really finished her was her eyes catching sight of the cloth trailing behind Oko who looked like some arrogant king, as he opened the door to get to the bathroom before her. *She sucked her teeth, or made the noise which is normally described, inadequately, in English as a sucking of the teeth. It was thin, but loud, and very long.* In a contest with any of the fishwives about ten kilometers down the road from the Hotel Twentieth Century, she would have won. (Aidoo 1991: 10, my emphasis)

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Collins (p.c.) commenting on an earlier version of this paper suggests that even though *tséduqu* ‘sucking teeth’ may not be a swear word as it is quasi verbal, there are parallels between the act and swearing: (a) it is conventional; (b) it is linguistic; (c) it is offensive; (d) it is intentional; (e) it is directed; (f) it is taboo/prohibited. It will become apparent that I agree with some of these parallels. I would propose a slight revision of parallels (d) and (e) as follows: (d’) it can be intentional or unintentionally uttered and (e’) it can be directed; it can also be used carthartically.

As Ama Ata Aidoo's depiction of Esi's suck teeth performance suggests, the emotive interjection is produced by pursing one's lips, creating a hollow in the oral cavity and drawing air in by suction. One's tongue touches the sides of the mouth while the tip and blade of the tongue are in contact with the alveolar ridge. The result is a click sound. As indicated by Ama Ata Aidoo's description above, the vocal gesture can be modulated and manipulated in different ways to express nuances of feelings. Thus, it can be lengthened, as Esi did, to emphasise the degree of contempt. The stricture can also be modified to intensify the contempt expressed.<sup>8</sup>

The embodied click sound produced by sucking one's teeth has been conventionalised in the languages of the Lower Volta Basin. As noted above, it is represented as *qu tsé* [bite the inside of cheek] 'suck teeth', with the nominalised form *tséduqu* 'sucking the teeth'. The act of producing the click sound of suck teeth is described in Akan with the verb *twe* 'to suck teeth'. The sound is verbalised as an interjection and represented in Ewe as *Tsuiā!* and in Ga as *Tsyuuu!*, while in Akan it is *Tweaa!* The stand-alone interjectional use of this is delocutivised as *ka tweaa* 'say tweaa' in Akan and as *dó tsuiā* 'say *tsuiā*' in Ewe. As the interjection is quotable and accountable, one often hears in interaction a question aimed at establishing the identity of the target of the rude sound. Thus one can ascertain whether the interlocutor is sucking their teeth towards oneself by posing one of the questions in (9) in Ewe:

- (9) a. *nye è-qu tsé ná=a*  
       1SG 2SG-bite cheek.inside give=QP  
       'Are you sucking your teeth at me?'  
       b. *nye è-qu tsé dó-e=a*  
       1SG 2SG-bite cheek.inside put-3SG=QP  
       'Are you sucking your teeth at me?'

The Akan interjectional form *Tweaa!* has entered pan-Ghanaian political discourse with a life of its own.<sup>9</sup> Thompson (2019) shows how online commentators used this expression to vent their contempt and disapproval of the two leading Presidential candidates, John Mahama and Nana Akufo Addo, during the 2016 election campaign. The use of the Akan version of the interjection

<sup>8</sup> See some of the variations that are possible in the production of suck teeth: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSBMqGCdw84>

<sup>9</sup> In 2019 the word *tweaa* has been adopted into the Oxford English dictionary as an English word from Ghana, see <https://awakenewsroom.com/ghanaian-word-tweaa-captured-oxford-dictionary/>

increased even in Parliament during 2014. It began when the then District Chief Executive (DCE) for Ahafo Ano South, Mr Gabriel Barima, got very angry when a member of the audience he was addressing at an end of year function (December 2013) in Mankraso Hospital sucked his or her teeth at a comment he made. The DCE was infuriated, stopped his speech at once and was eager to find the one who made the utterance. No one owned up and so he abandoned his speech and stormed out of the event. A video of the scene went viral on both social and mass media outlets in the country. The *Daily Graphic* reported part of what could be heard and seen on the video on January 20, 2014 as follows:

He exclaimed in Twi [Akan] interspersed with English; “who made that ‘tweaa’ sound? Am I your size? . . . I have been given the platform to talk. You were not given the platform to talk. And so, what you are saying, nobody is listening except mine. Am I your colleague? Do you think you’re my colleague? . . . You sit somewhere and behave like you’re talking to your co-equal. Am I your co-equal? If you’re a hospital worker, who are you? Why do you have to behave in that manner? I’ve ended my speech. I’m not talking again. If you don’t respect people . . . I’m not talking again. Take your programme.”<sup>10</sup>

From the excerpt, we infer two things relevant for the semantics of the emotive interjection: first, its use is a sign of gross disrespect, especially if used in an asymmetrical communication. Note that question: “Am I your co-equal?” Second, the use of the utterance causes great anger and fury in the targeted addressee. The DCE’s reaction shows how unpardonable this non-verbal offence is and its perlocutionary effect.

The use of *tweaa* gained currency in the ensuing weeks on the floor of Parliament, where some Members of Parliament used the word against their colleagues during debates and discussions in the House. With a clear allusion to the episode involving the DCE, the use of the word usually led to laughter and took attention away from the issues being discussed. This led the Speaker of the House to ban the use of the word in the House. Here is part of the report that appears in the *Daily Graphic* of February 19, 2014:

#### **Parliament bans use of ‘tweaa’ in House**

The Speaker of Parliament, Mr Edward Doe Adjaho, has banned the use of the Akan word ‘tweaa’ in Parliament. He said the use of the Akan word *tweaa* was un-parliamentary and should not be part of the “Parliamentary lexicon.”

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/government-investigate-who-said-tweaa-dce.html>

Mr Adjaho banned the word after the member for Subin, Mr Isaac Osei (NPP), had drawn his attention to the fact that the word had gained currency in the House lately and sought to find out if that word could be used.

*Tweaa* is an Akan interjection used mainly to express contempt for a statement made.<sup>11</sup>

The ban on the use of the interjection in Parliament suggests that even among equals, assuming MPs are equals, its use is censured. Thompson (2019: 4), based on a corpus of uses in online commentary on Ghanaweb, proposes the following explication for the Akan interjection *tweaa*:

(10) *Tweaa* [tɔɣiaa]

- (a) I think like this now: “I know something very bad about this someone;  
people can know this something  
I feel something very bad towards this someone because of it  
I can’t not feel like this”
- (b) I want other people to know this

This explication is linked to the kind of data that Thompson analysed. In particular, it only accounts for the use of the interjection as directed at someone and does not necessarily account for the cathartic uses which involve the use of the interjection out of frustration or anger at oneself. I propose a slightly different explication as in Table 6.2, based on the semantic template for (secondary) interjections as outlined in Goddard (2015). The semantic structure of such signs involves a Cognitive Trigger, i.e. a situation that engenders a thought or realisation in the language user; a Reaction, which signals the feeling and how intensely it is felt; an Expressive Impulsive component, which depicts the strong and immediate urge to say or do something; and then the Utterance component, which may be a word or a noise. As it is a pragmatic act, I would argue that there is an illocutionary point and/or a manner component. Then there is a metalexical awareness component, which Goddard sets apart from the rest of the explication, but which, I would argue, is part and parcel of the significance and the shared understanding of the sign. With all these considerations, I propose the following representation to account for the use and meaning of the embodied sign of suck teeth in the Volta Basin:

This explication in Table 6.2 applies to both the self-directed and the other-directed uses of the interjection. Contextual information will interact with this meaning to yield on-line interpretations for both the speaker and the hearers and other participants. We now turn to the second areal invective, the

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/parliament-bans-use-of-tweaa-in-house.html>

**Table 6.2:** The semantics of [tɕɪɪaa] ‘suck teeth’ in the Volta Basin {tsuiā/tweeaa/tsyuu}.

I know this now: something bad is happening here I don’t want it	Cognitive Trigger
I feel something bad because of it	Reaction
I want to do something bad because of it I cannot not do it	Expressive Impulsive
I do this: [tɕɪɪaa]	Performative utterance
I do this like this because I want other people to know how I feel	Illocutionary Point
I know many people think like this It is bad if one does something like this when they feel something bad	Metalexical Awareness

multimodal packaged utterance comprising a non-verbal gesture – a thumb point, and a verbal component that includes themes that are usually used in swearing: scatological in Ewe and the mother theme in Ga.

### 6.4 “I sh.t in your mouth”

While suck teeth is a noise-like word, an interjection, a vocalisation, as we have seen, the emblematic thumb point physical gesture is a gestural part of a composite signal. It is a quotable gesture, an emblem. It is made up of a thumb point directed at the addressee. The thumb moves from a higher position and rests flat on the other folded fingers. At the same time as one moves the thumb to come to rest on the folded fingers, one can say the accompanying words; see Figure 6.2. This utterance is closer to profane swearing than suck teeth. The accompanying verbal expressions in the different languages make use of words referring to scatological, sex and mother themes (cf. e.g. Ljung 2011 on themes deployed in swearing). The alternative Ewe expressions are given in (11)<sup>12</sup>, and those of Ga which have spread in the Volta Basin are given in (12).

<sup>12</sup> While the expressions in (11) are used by speakers from Ewe communities in Ghana, Togo and Benin, it is only Ghanaian Ewe users who accompany the expression with a thumb point. In fact the thumb point gesture is not known by Ewe language uses from Togo and Benin. This provides strong evidence for the gesture to be a feature of the Lower Volta Basin in Ghana.



Figure 6.2: Thumb point gesture.

- (11) a. *Me-nye mí dé nu=wò me* Ewe  
 1SG-swing faeces ALL mouth=2SG inside  
 ‘I defecate/sh.t in your mouth’  
 b. *Me-nye mí ná-a* Ewe  
 1SG-swing faeces DAT-2SG  
 ‘I defecate/sh.t onto you’
- (12) a. *sóðmi!* Ga  
 ‘inside vagina’  
 b. *onye sóð mli* Ga  
 mother vagina inside  
 ‘inside your mother’s vagina’  
 c. *onyáe gbè mí* Ga  
 mother vagina  
 ‘your mother’s vagina’



This multi-modal composite utterance is perceived as more rude than the sucking of teeth. Unlike the suck teeth, it carries social censure. In fact, if this thumb pointing, with or without an accompanying verbal expression, is used in asymmetrical communication by a participant lower in status in terms of variables like gender, age and social status, the user may be summoned for arbitration. Thus it is accountable.

The enactment of this pragmatic act in Ewe can be responded to with a rebuttal from the targetted addressee with expressions that show that despite the formulaicity of the expressions, language users are aware of and deploy the literal meanings. Consider the following occurrences:

- (13) Context: An older girl (C) asks a younger one (D) to bring her a napkin from the washing line outside. The younger girl (D) takes a long time and comes and throws the towel from a distance to her (C). The older one (C) insults the younger one (D) with the words and the gesture:

a. *Me-nye mí qé nu=wò me* Ewe  
 1SG-swing faeces all mouth=2SG inside  
 ‘I defecate/sh.t in your mouth’

The younger one (D) retorts with these words and the gesture back:

b. *Me-ɛ kpé ná-a*  
 1SG-knead.3SG feed.fluid DAT-2SG  
 ‘I mash it and feed it to you.’

The message here is that the addressee does not want the thing that the speaker has put in her mouth to be in her mouth, let alone does she want to consume it. The rebuttal therefore just says I take whatever you have put in my mouth and I make it into something that I can feed to you. The interesting thing is that Ewe has two verbs for feeding people: one is *kpé*, which means to feed fluids to someone through the mouth. The sense of the verb is to bring the fluid food to the mouth of the person. (The verb also translates as ‘meet’.) It is as if one is saying ‘I retaliate’.

A similar rebuttal is used in the occurrence reported in (14). This happened on January 27th, 2019 in Have near the Police Barrier in the Volta Region of Ghana.

- (14) Context: The major road that runs through the Have township has potholes, and drivers tend to drive around them by moving from one lane to the other. Two drivers were passing each other at one of these pothole ridden points. One driver (Driver A) was using the right lane going towards Accra and the other (Driver B) was using the left lane going in the opposite direction. Driver B has a huge pothole in his lane so tries to dodge by using the lane of Driver A. One would have expected that, given that

Driver A was moving in his lane, Driver B would have stopped for Driver A to pass. No, he used the narrow edge of the pothole and veered into Driver A's lane, even though he saw that he was moving. When they came abreast, Driver A insulted him with the Ewe expression *Me-nye mi dé nu=wò me* 'I sh.t in your mouth', whereupon Driver B retorts as follows:

*me-l=e                      dó ná-a*  
1SG-collect =3SG put DAT-2SG  
'I gather it and feed it (solid) to you.'

In (13b) the retort uses the verb expressing the feeding of fluids. In (14), the retort again suggests that the speaker does not want whatever is being put in his mouth to be in his body, so he gathers it and rather feeds it to the one who put it there. The rebuttals are a clear rejection of whatever the user of the insult is trying to place on the addressee.

As noted earlier, one difference between the suck teeth and this composite utterance is that its performance can be reported by the verb *dzu* 'insult, verbally abuse'. This suggests that it is an illocutionary act. I suggest the following explication to account for its use:

The explication proposed in Table 6.3 accounts for the use and meaning of the utterance in the Lower Volta Basin area. As indicated, the verbal expressions that accompany the physical gesture have different foci, and for a full account of the meaning as used in a particular language such as Ewe, we need a

**Table 6.3:** The semantics of the composite utterance: thumb point and verbal expression.

I think something very bad about you now Because you have done something bad towards me	Cognitive Trigger
I want to do something very bad to you because of it I know this: people can think something bad about me if I do it I cannot not do it	Reaction
I feel something very bad because of it I want something bad to happen to you because of it	Expressive Impulse
I say it with these bad words: [I shit in your mouth]/ [your mother's vagina] At the same I do this bad thing: [thumb point]	Utterance Words Actions
I do these things because I want you to feel something very bad	Illocutionary Point

metalexical awareness segment to be added to what is in Table 6.3. For the Ewe expression, I propose the knowledge structure in (15) to account for it. I have framed it in the terms “If I have to say it in words . . .”

- (15) Metalexical awareness of the Ewe expressions accompanying thumb point
- a. If I want to say what I want in words
  - b. I say it like this: sometimes people don’t want bad things in their body  
     When it is like this: People do something because of this  
     After this the bad things move from their body to another place  
     People do not want the bad things to touch their bodies  
     People do not want to be in the same place as the bad things
  - c. I want these bad things to be in your mouth
  - d. I want you to feel very bad  
     like people feel when these bad things touch their mouth

The rebuttal expressions discussed above suggest that people do not want the things that are said to be deposited in people’s mouths to be there. This is part of what is captured in the components in (16b). These are the components that link the expression to notions of vulgarity and obscenity. From this follows a perception that the utterance is rude or impolite. But this aspect is linked to the socio-cultural norms associated with language use. In the ethnopragmatic approach adopted in this study such norms are captured in cultural scripts. In the next section (Section 6.5) the norms and values that govern the use of the invectives are outlined in a cultural script.

## 6.5 Attitudes towards the two multi-modal embodied utterances

In the discussion so far, it has been noted that people disapprove of others sucking their teeth towards other people, especially if they are not co-equals. Recall the issue of the DCE reported in Section 6.3. The use of dysphemisms in the scatological and sex domains accompanied by a rude thumb point gesture is also disapproved of in the Lower Volta Basin area. Children are trained not to use these utterances. When people use such utterances to people who are thought of as above them, they can be punished. When someone uses the Ewe vulgar expression ‘I defecate in your mouth’ and they are brought to arbitration, at the end of the process the judgement is usually phrased in terms of

‘cleaning the anus’ of the speaker, like what one does when one has eased oneself. The speaker may be further asked to provide drinks so that the mouth of the recipient of the insult can be cleaned. Moreover, in Ewe one can use a euphemism instead of the expression that contains the offending words, with or without the thumb point. The expression is given in (17).

- (17) *me-bíá nya áqé wò*  
1SG-ask word INDEF 2SG  
‘I ask you something’

This suggests that people are aware that the expressions involving the dysphemistic expressions are not to be used in polite company. I propose in Table 6.4 a representation of these attitudes, values and norms about the use of these linguistic acts in the Lower Volta Basin using cultural scripts, the instrument used in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework for the meta-representation of how people think that many people in their communities of practice think (see e.g. Ameka 2006b; Goddard 2006, 2015; Wierzbicka 2014b).

**Table 6.4:** Cultural script about the expressive emblems suck teeth and thumb point.

Many people think like this about these words: They are bad words It is (very) bad if someone says these bad words to someone else It is bad if someone does (says) these bad things to someone else because they want them to feel something bad People can think of people of this kind like this: they are bad people People can say bad things about people of this kind	Thinking
Many people think like this: Sometimes, people say these words because they feel something (very) bad It is very bad if people say these words to some people It is very bad if this person is someone people think about like this: This person is someone above many people	Attitude/ Value

The main features captured are that people think of and know that these words are “bad words”, and that people should not use these bad words nor perform the physical gesture associated with them. People also know that people can think or say bad things about those who use these words, especially when they use them to people who are above them in any of the socio-cultural variables, especially age and status. This is the way that the use of this form of swearing

relates to respect. People also know that it is bad to use them and that it is not good to use them to cause offence.

## 6.6 Conclusion

I have explored the meaning and use of two emblematic signs that have spread in these linguistic areas. The study confirms the idea that linguistic signs, including gestures, can diffuse across language and culture boundaries. As a backdrop to the discussion, I investigated the semantics of the verb *dzu* ‘insult, verbally abuse’ in Ewe, which has equivalents in other languages in the area, to show how speakers conceptualise the use of words to cause offence to the other. The question was posed whether the semantics of this verb and similar words is related to swearing. It was suggested that there is a slight family resemblance to swearing, especially profane swearing, when it comes to name-calling and denigrating the physical characteristics of addressees. Nevertheless, the verb covers only a small part of the phenomena labelled in English as swearing. Other forms of swearing, such as invoking supernatural beings to do something to someone, or blasphemy, are not covered by the term *dzu*.

The core of the discussion concerned two multi-modal utterances. It was argued that the enactment of one of them, suck teeth, is not reported by the insult and verbal abuse verb in Ewe (and the other languages). It is rather represented by a descriptor of the action that is performed in the mouth to produce the sound. I suggested, along with Thompson (2019), that the utterance be considered an emotive interjection used to express contempt and frustration at someone else or at oneself. I proposed a semantic explication for it using the semantic template for an illocutionary act. I discussed the possibility noted by Chris Collins in his Facebook post of June 23, 2018, that the suck teeth act might be an instance of swearing in Ewe. I noted that to the extent that the expression is evaluated as being impolite, it bears some relation to profane swearing; however, it does not deploy dysphemisms, as is characteristic especially of profane swearing.

A better candidate for swearing, both from the point of view of its language and its evaluation as a very rude utterance, is the thumb point and its accompanying verbal expressions, which contain scatological and sex references as well as the mother theme. These are the features that Ljung (2011), for example, identifies for profane swearing. What is more, the enactment of this composite utterance is categorised as an insult (unlike suck teeth) as it is reported with the Ewe verb *dzu* and its equivalents. In addition, its effect is that it causes offence to the targeted addressee, and it is socio-culturally disapproved of, as I have tried to

capture in the cultural script. Is this composite utterance a manifestation of profane swearing in Ewe and the other languages of the Volta Basin? Probably.

This brings me to the question of whether swearing is a universal. It depends on what is meant by swearing. I think formal swearing in terms of oath-taking might be universal. What about profane swearing? The features or acts that can be characterised as such are so varied that I doubt that it constitutes a universal domain. Perhaps the question should rather be framed in terms of: (i) “How does one express bad feelings towards someone else who has done something bad?” and (ii) “How does one express bad feelings towards oneself when one realises one has done something bad?” in a community of practice. More research is needed to formulate answers to such questions. In the current study I have suggested answers from the perspective of language users in the Volta Basin of West Africa and beyond. Similar utterances should be investigated in order to answer these questions.

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## Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ADVZER	adverbialiser
COP	copula
DAT	dative
DEF	definite determiner
DIM	diminutive
HAB	habitual
IDEO	ideophone
NEG	negative
PFV	perfective
POT	potential

PREP	preposition
PRIV	privative
QT	quotative
QP	question particle
RED	reduplicative
SG	singular

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