

# ARTICLES

**Kofi Agyekum**

Department of Linguistics

University of Ghana – Legon

ORICD 0000-0002-6177-2819

## **Cultural values and human cognition in the Akan proverbs on lying**

### **Abstract**

This article investigates the Akan proverbs on the concept of lying aiming at filling the gap in understanding the concept from the perspective of individual languages. The article looks at the situations and thematic areas where proverbs on lying are encountered. The data collection was done using both primary and secondary data. The primary data was captured through socio-cultural situations such as funeral rites, marriage engagements, local arbitrations, daily conversations, travelling, etc. The data will be interpreted by employing Language Ideology and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, coupled with semantic and pragmatic tools. The finding of the article is that the Akan proverbs help to categorize lying into thematic areas which include understanding lying as a morally unacceptable act, as an opposition to telling the truth, as a “double-edged sword” and as a threat to individuals and a state. Metaphors extracted from the proverbs indicate cognitive associations with lying in the Akan society.

**Keywords:** lying, white lying, proverbs, Language Ideology, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Akan

## 1. Introduction

Lying is recognized as part of human life in history, religion, culture, business, politics sociology, communication, justice, etc. My research has shown that most of the publications on lying investigate its definitional framework that incorporates perspectives from various disciplines, such as philosophy, cognition, management studies and psychology (see Meibauer 2018). Research into the linguistics of lying is crucial since lying is part of language and prevalent in our daily interactions. However, publications and research on lying in Akan ethno-linguistic studies are very scanty, the sources for this research are also small, apart from few narratives in history. It is on the backdrop of this huge gap that the main objectives of this article is to research into the concept, language, ethnosemantics and pragmatics on Akan proverbs of lying. The investigation includes reviewing papers on lying referring to other societies especially in Africa. The data collected for Akan will be subjected to language ideology, conceptual metaphor, semantic and pragmatic analysis.

### 1.1. The Akan people and language

The word *Akan* refers to the people as well as their language.<sup>1</sup> Akan can be considered from two perspectives: ethnographic and linguistic. Akans are the largest ethnic group in Ghana. Ethnographically, the Akans include the Ahanta, Aowin, Nzema, and Sehwi groups who do not speak Akan as L1, but share cultural similarities with Akans. Based on the linguistic criterion, Akans are those who speak Akan as their L1. In the 2021 national population census, 45.7% of the Ghanaian population (about 14.1 million) were identi-

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a proto-Akan language common to all the 13 linguistic Akan ethnic groups. Linguistic evidence suggests that the Akan-speaking people likely originated somewhere from Old-Ghana to the present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast. Over time, as the Akan people migrated southwards and westwards and settled in different areas, their language evolved into the various Akan dialects spoken today, especially Twi, Fante, and Akuapem. Dolphyne (2006: xi-xii) states that "The name Akan is also used to refer to the people who live in most of the coastal and forest areas of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. They speak languages/dialects which include Baule, Anyi (Aowin), Sehwi (Sanvil) Nzema, Ahanta, Fante, Akuapem, Asante, Brong, Wassaw, etc. The ethnographic non-Akan L1 groups speak their respective languages which have traits of the proto-Akan language under the Tano language family. These languages/dialects are all closely related, and have a number of vocabulary in common". In Ghana, the non-Akan L1 speakers share common geographical boundaries with the Akan, and are potentially bilingual; they speak Akan as L2 in addition to their respective L1. This accounts for Akan L1 versus non-Akan L1 forms.

fied as Akans and about 44% of non-Akans used Akan as a lingua franca (see Agyekum 2023).

The Akans inhabit the greater part of southern Ghana. Akan is spoken as a native language in nine (9) out of the sixteen (16) regions in Ghana, namely Ahafo, Ashanti, Bono, Bono East, Central, Eastern, Oti, Western and Western North Regions. The Akan speaking communities in the Oti region are surrounded by the Gbe language communities of Ewe, Guan and Gur. There are thirteen (13) Akan dialects: Agona, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Asante, Assin, Bono, Buem, Denkyira, Fante, Kwawu, Twifo, and Wassaw. Some Bono speakers are found in Cote d'Ivoire. Akan is studied from primary school up to the university level (Agyekum 2023).

## 1.2. Aim and scope of the study

The article is aimed at opening gates for further studies on lying and contributes to proceedings on the concept of truth, which is important for further studies in Akan and other Ghanaian languages. Attention should especially be on political and mediatized lying, which has been very profound in Ghanaian contemporary politics since 1992. The article will examine if the Akan concepts of proverbs on lying are related to the individuals' communicative competence on Akan norms of socio-cultural interaction.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: section 2 discusses the methodological aspects of studies on lying in Akan, taking into account the primary and secondary data and reference to their source. This attitude determines research questions formulated for this study. Section 3 seeks for the definition of lying, which functions in different contexts. Section 4 presents the theoretical framework of the research and outlines the basis for applying the Linguistic Ideology and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory to this research. Section 5 discusses the ethnosemantics of *ɛtorɔ*, 'lying', presenting both the etymology and semantic scope of the lexical equivalent for lying, as well as the African perspective of the proverbs on lying. Section 6 is devoted to data analysis. Subsection 6.1 discusses thematic areas of Akan proverbs on lying which manifest their cultural understanding. Subsection 6.2 presents social and pragmatic implications of lying. In the analysis, the proverbial expressions are interpreted in terms of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Section 7 comments on the need to conduct studies on lying in other Akan literary genres and section 8 is the conclusion.

## 2. Methodological aspects of studies on Akan proverbs on lying

The article employs both primary and secondary data with the emphasis on the latter. Akan books on proverbs were consulted and proverbs on falsehood, lying, deception, treachery were selected. The expressions *ɔtorofoɔ/kontomponi* 'liar', *daadaafoɔ/dabrabani* 'deceiver/liar/swindler' were sorted out (see Cofie 2011: 89). Some of the proverbs from books had English translations which were examined to find their suitability in Akan contemporary society. Several Akan graduate students, faculty members and professors from the Department of Linguistics at the University of Ghana, evaluated and authenticated the proverbs from the Akan books.

The interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. What are the Akan indigenous concepts and terms for lying?
2. In which Akan sociocultural contexts do people lie?
3. What expressions do people use when lying in social events like funerals, durbars, marriage contracts, and meetings?
4. List as many Akan proverbs on lying as you know.
5. Provide the literal and extended meanings of these proverbs.

I used my phone to record the data from the interviews and participant observation during arbitrations, funeral donations and traditional marriage engagements. I wrote the relevant portions of the discourse and crosschecked them later. I transferred the data from my phone unto my laptop and transcribed the interviews and recordings. I meticulously checked the voice with the transcribed data to ensure accuracy. The interpretations of the proverbs on lying were first considered from their literal meanings and then their semantic and pragmatic properties and usage were examined.

The article employed the ethnopragmatic approach coupled with Conceptual Metaphor Theory to analyse the Akan proverbs on lying. It looked at the core meanings of the proverbs, contexts of usage and their impact on the liars, and the society. Goddard and Ye (2015: 66) stated that, "Ethnopragsmatics designates an approach to language in use that sees culture as playing a central explanatory role, and at the same time opens the way for links to be drawn between language and other cultural phenomena". The ethnopragmatic approach helped in the discussion and interpretation of the proverbs on lying from Akan "inside-perspectives" and cultural knowledge (Goddard 2006: 3, 15).

This article asserts that the Akans are the best to explain the indigenous terms and proverbs on lying based on their shared epistemology, experiences, and

environment. The article examines why people use harmful or white lies in specific situations (see section 4.5).

## 2.1. Data source

Seven Akan books on proverbs were consulted, namely Adu Gyamfi (1999), Akrofi (1958), Appiah et al. (2000), Asare Opoku (1995), Bannerman (nd), Ofei Ayisi (1966) and Rattray (1914). The search was meant to identify proverbs on lying and select those that are fit for this article. Again, literature on African proverbs from renowned scholars of African oral literature were consulted. These included Agyekum (2021; 2016), Agyekum & Arhine (2022), Finnegan (2012), Okpewho (1992), Oluwole (1997), Ssetuba (2002) and Yankah (1989). These works provided insight into proverbs and their sociocultural functions.

## 3. The problematic question of the definition of lying

Lying is any communicative act that causes the receivers to adopt, or persist in a false belief. Williams (2002: 96) defined lying as “an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with respect to that content”. Lying as part of the speech act of assertion must have the liar’s intention to cause the target person(s) to believe and accept the content of the assertion as true (Primoratz 1984: 54). Simpson (1992: 625) posited that: “In a lie, we act to deceive someone regarding our belief in some proposition, and that we have the primary intention that they would be deceived. This appears to give us an account of lying as intentional untruthfulness”. The structure of lying is as follows:

liar                   -----> falsehood -----> the one lied to

The liar sends a powerful, unidirectional, falsehood message to the person lied to.

Simpson (1992: 630) further asserted that:

“In lying, we directly or indirectly represent some state of affairs, present ourselves as believing that representation to be true, and act on the intention that the one or ones to whom we lie have reason to think that we intend them to take this as a sincere presentation of our belief-but we lack the requisite belief”.

Simpson (1992) emphasised the morality principle where the liar assumes his actual beliefs are opaque to the lied as follows: “When I lie to you I do not just treat you as an object to be deceived, regarding you as an obstacle or a means to an end. When I lie to you, I engage at the core of the lie, the mutuality of our