

# Humorously Illuminating yet Insulting: A Feminist Deconstruction of Selected Asante Proverbs

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## Abstract

The research looked at the illuminatingly obscure nature of the proverb related to the people of AnhwiaNsensanso in the Kwabere East District of Asante. A descriptive survey of ten selected Asante proverbs was used. The purpose of the study was to use AnhwiaNsensanso as a case study to examine how the proverb is humorously illuminating, yet insulting. A qualitative approach was employed to access and describe the related views concerning the use of Asante proverbs. It was informed by the theories of Humour, Pragmatics and Feminism. The main finding of the study indicated that Asante proverbs capitalize on culture and tradition to humorously tease and denigrate women sexually. It was observed that this is done without regard to gender constructions that seek to remedy the imbalances created in our contemporary African society. It is recommended by this study that for the contemporary African society to succeed in the application of prescribed gender constructions put in place by the feminist function, a serious survey must be done to address rules that support those utterances in Asante proverbs that are shockingly vulgar. This is because they serve to put women back into a position fought already by gender activists.

## Keywords

Humour, Feminism, Pragmatism, Proverbs, Obscure Nature of Proverbs

## 1. Introduction

Context and intentions are very important if utterances are to be interpreted and

understood beyond the literal meaning. For meaning to be achieved through this means the pragmatic interpretation of humour is very useful. This is because relying only on the literal meaning of an utterance does not properly communicate the message (Mabaquiao, 2018). To detect humour or know that an act or utterance is not a mistake, one must understand intentions or notice cues which will indicate the humorous aspect of the utterance. Let us consider this example of an utterance from Asante proverbs.

“Yebaammebuo a, ankayesonkuma. (If we had come to ‘fell’ proverbs, then we would carry axes.)”

An interpretation of this considers intensity. “ebe” and “abe” have the same final syllable in Asante language and “bu” is used both for felling (of trees) and for making a proverb (buebe). Nouns that begin with “B” in Asante form their plurals in “mm” and verbal nouns from “bu” and “buo,” we get “mmebuo” meaning both palm felling and proverbs making.

An addressee of this utterance may mistake understanding stemming from the choice of word selection of an intended referring expression which can lead to a breakdown of communication. This can occur when the addressee is not the type that does not understand proverbial sayings or does not use proverbs. The context and intention that can provide meaning in this case are cue of the utterance as a proverbial saying and the rules that go with it. This intention and context are what provides how the utterance is to be understood. The point, where meaning and understanding occur, is what also produces the humorous aspect of the utterance.

Whether humorously desirable or not, Asante proverbs contain some utterances that can be vulgar and humorously tease its referent. Utterances of this sort, found in Asante proverbs are considered vulgar and rob away the dignity of the female. Butler indicates in feminism about how this type of language in Asante proverbs is seen as “a less form of speech as a performative act of sexual degradation.” Meanwhile the intended significance of such performative acts forces such utterances to be considered as a socially valid verbal action.

This study seeks to select and use ten Asante proverbs that indicate how vulgar language in Asante proverbs can be and can as well be considered with a less form of speech as a performative act of sexual degradation. Yet, we see that the intended significance of such performative acts forces such utterances to be considered as a socially valid verbal action.

The study will specifically seek to: Explain how an utterance made in Asante proverbs has an already existing meaning and yet, the already existing meaningful utterance has an intended significance that is socially valid in communication, then, identifying the aspect of the speaker’s intention of the verbal action that is humorous and finally consider the effect of the humorous aspect of the intended verbal action in the light of feminism.

The results of the study will answer the following questions:

1) Why is the already existing meaningful utterance considered vulgar and yet

has an intended significance that is socially valid.

2) Which aspect of the speaker's intended verbal action is humorous?

3) What is the effect of the humorous aspect of the intended verbal action in the light of feminism?

The study finds justification in the fact that though many writers present ideas about the pragmatic interpretation of humour, the idea of considering humour in relation to how the intended verbal action can be interpreted in the light of feminism is a rarely studied field. Even though publishing collection accrue throughout the world with respect to this situation, there still remains much work to be done in the area of the pragmatic interpretation of humour in the light of feminism.

An analysis of ten selected Asante proverbs is used to do this investigation. The choice of the selected Asante proverbs is founded on the fact that such utterances from Asante proverbs create surprises and provoke sexual degradation which affect the feelings of others when it comes to gender issues. Yet, it is regarded as "the wit of one and the wisdom of many." And that it is a "terse witty philosophical saying that conveys a lesson" (Yanka, 1986: pp. 280-303). Asante proverbs, found with AhwiaNsensanso in the Kwabere East District of Ashanti is specifically chosen because the Asantes, and for that matter, the people of AhwiaNsensanso, are believed to be the ethnic group that cherishes culture and tradition. It is in this light that the study generates this awareness through the pragmatic interpretation of humour in connection with feminism to investigate why Asante proverbs contain elements of sexual degradation that rob away the dignity of humanity. To achieve this, a theoretical framework that gives strength to whatever arguments raised in connection with the issue under discussion is very useful.

## 2. Methodology

The study employed the qualitative research approach to describe and evaluate the utterances made from the proverb use of the people of AhwiahNsensanso in the Kwabere East District of Asante. Sampling was purposively done because of proximity, availability and expert information that can enrich the description of the information to be provided.

## 3. The Theories of Humour, Pragmatism and Feminism

The study is guided by the theories of humour, pragmatics and feminism. These theories are used concurrently with style to bring about the truism of the study.

Several theories explain how humour is processed. Though the tripartite classifications have advanced with classical views on the subject, humour has been studied extensively in contemporary humour research. Attempts to define humour present it as something that evokes an emotional reaction in an audience. Such reactions are usually those that make people laugh or smile or even feel the alarm of a tragic outcome. In examining the subcategories, superiority, incon-

gruity and relief, criticisms are realized. These criticisms are so important because they produce new ways of looking into the term. Labacz, (2014) provides insight into the tripartite classifications of humour as: Incongruity, Superiority and Relief. A closer look at these shows derivations. The very popular philosophical category is incongruity which dates back to Aristotle (Morreall, 2009).

We realize incongruity when there is a juxtaposition of what is expected and the unexpected. This situation is common to ordinary jokes such that to consider a joke as funny, the person telling the joke and the listener or audience should have a common understanding of the situation or the idea. Labacz, (2014), posits that the context provides the expectation of how the course of events should occur when a person tells a joke. However, the joke teller may flip what is expected and provide the unexpected which produces the punch line. It is from this unanticipated situation which is not the normal or the expected, that produces laughter. Haig, (1998), adds that the tension release is obtained as a crucial generation of laughter that happens from incongruity.

Tension release theory is premised on the release of psychic energy coming from the physical reactions of laughter. This idea dates back to Sigmund Freud (as cited in Martin, 2007: p. 125) that “Laughter served to release nervous energy that was no longer needed. He goes on to say that humour can also be used to release tension and stress (funerals and other somber events).

Martin (2007) again contends about the superiority theory which is linked to a sense of superiority that results from the disparagement of another group or individual. This form of humour is usually found with ethnic and gender humour. Humour of this type can be mean spirited or may be aggressively playful.

Humour also involves creating implausible or ambiguous literal meanings which can be interpreted as amusing and the literal meaning is not enough on their own. In this case, pragmatic interpretations can help. Interpretations of this sort can be explained using Bach (2008) and his notion of the speech act theory which describes that “Almost any speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker’s intention.” He goes on to say that “There is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting or promising, and how one is trying to affect one’s audience... the utterance made has an already existing meaning to its listeners; the already meaningful utterance also has an intended significance that is socially valid in verbal communication and its effect on the listener, as in persuading, convincing, instructing, advising, commanding.” The contemporary use of the term dates back to Austin (1960) and his development of performance utterance and his theory of Locutionary, Illocutionary and Perlocutionary Acts. The three acts of sayings are explained as follows:

- 1) Locutionary act, the performance of an utterance: the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning, comprising phonetic, and rhetic acts corresponding to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance.
- 2) Illocutionary act: the pragmatic illocutionary force of the utterance, thus its

intended significance as a socially valid verbal action and

3) In certain cases a further Perlocutionary act: its actual effect, such as persuading, convincing, scaring, enlightening, inspiring or otherwise getting someone to do or realize something, whether intended or not (Austin, 1960).

The pragmatic interpretation of humour goes back into the notion of incongruity. This is explained to mean that, at the level of the “locutionary” act, we have the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning. Then, the next illocutionary level that forces the utterance for its intended significance as a valid verbal action produces the incongruity. At this point, the expected (locutionary) and the unexpected (illocutionary) produce the punchline. The unanticipated situation which brings about a further “Perlocutionary”, the actual effect, generates the laughter that happens from the incongruity. This level is where feminism sets in.

Feminism rejects the injustices in patriarchal societies and is concerned with gender differences and campaigns for the rights of women. It caters for issues that deal with women’s rights which have been trampled upon and specifically focused on women’s experience and highlights various forms of oppression that the female gender is subjected to in the society.

Crawford (2003), describes how review research on gender and humour describes a theoretical and pragmatic framework for studying the intersection that bothers on the feminist function in this humorous tease. This situates the idea of the superiority theory of humour that deals with sense of superiority resulting from the disparagement of another group or individual and is mean spirited and aggressively playful as said already.

Crawford (2003: pp. 1413-1430) emphasizes that “Gender is conceived as a system of meaning that influences access to power, status and material resources whereas humour is conceived as a mode of discourse and a strategy of social interaction.” The understanding obtained here explains how men and women use gender settings as tools to construct whilst the properties of humour deconstruct gender constructions. With influence from Austin, Butler shows how some Speech acts like Asante proverbs serve to define and maintain identities; one that is imposed upon women. The relationship among the three theories and how they come together as a framework is what underpin this research. We understand that the Speech Act Theory from Pragmatics explain how the unintended meaningful utterance has an intended significance that is socially valid in communication. When these ambiguous literal meanings are interpreted as amusing, pragmatics has been used here to interpret humour. The feminist function also appears in the humorous tease where there is evidence of sexual degradation. This becomes a form of sexual degradation because of the feminist stance that rejects the injustices in patriarchal societies. We realize this when Butler questions the belief that certain gendered verbal acts are natural when they illustrate the ones learned performativity of gendered behavior commonly associated with femininity and masculinity; ones that are imposed upon us by normative hete-

rosexuality. *Diaba & Appiah (2015)* argues that the performativity of gendered behaviors serves to define and maintain identities. It is for these reasons that the study tries to investigate with ten selected Asante proverbs used by the people of AhwiaNsensanso in the Kwabere East District of Ashanti.

Since proverbs make use of utterances and these utterances provide meanings that are socially valid verbal actions, the study adopts this means of linguistic interpretation substantiated through humour and feminism to analyze the main issue under discussion; Humour and Gender Association with the illuminatingly obscure nature of the proverb related to the people of AhwiaNsensanso in the Kwabere East District of Ashanti.

#### 4. Results, Findings and Discussion

In discussing Humour and Gender Association with the illuminatingly obscure nature of the proverb, one should not forget the social context with which it is closely associated and the fact that the proverb is an important aspect in the training of courtiers, who are required to show brilliance, wit, and sophistication in debates. It should be clear that there exist in the language multiple expressions common to central idea or philosophy and differ in the intensity and quality of their language and imagery.

The proverbs associated with the people of AhwiaNsensanso capture the essence of life, thoughts and human endeavours. The proverb in general has an impression of eternity of the language and a sense of already experienced situation that it vividly speaks of, and authors go to great lengths to explain the pun on words and meanings which are sometimes shockingly vulgar though they are precious nuggets of words that according to (*Appiah, Anthony, & Agyemang-Duah, 2008*), they must be preserved and cherished in all their richness, profound or punning, profane or illuminatingly obscure nature. Several familiar proverbs that have basic truths in their perceptive manner as well as robs away the dignity of humanity, especially the female factor could be discussed as follows

1) *Obaaahoodengyinan'atofu mu*: A woman's strength is in her bustle. Different interpretations and contexts are presented when there is the performativity of this verbal action. Women used to wear their clothes in a kind of roll at the back "atofu" apaded bustle, where they keep their money and other valuables, and on which it is easy to carry a child. The common understanding of the striking metaphor around the bustle, "atofu" is both her femininity and her wealth. From the context of wealth, it is believed that the "atofu" attracts men for sexual satisfaction. That is, when the size of the "atofu" is considered by men as attractive. In this sense, it is not the intension of the woman to seek for sexual satisfaction. From another context, it is also a safe, "ahinta mu", the secret place where "wealth" is kept. The context where the "atofu" is used as "a secret place of wealth" is a means of sexual degradation and the point where there is the humorous tease. This is what supports the feminist function by Crawford that hu-

humour deconstruct gender constructions and what Butler also emphasizes as the performativity that serve to define and maintain identities. From the context of femininity, the bustle, “atofo” is seen as a support of the waist for carrying a baby at the back “turuba” The social significance of this utterance, according to Nana Kwame Panyin, the Odikro of AhwiaNsensanso, is that however weak someone may be, he or she also has his or her own strengths. Either using it positively or negatively depends on the speaker and the listener. A careful observation of the situation reveals that a speaker is only interested in putting across a point and this can be achieved without resort to utterances that need not be moral or didactic but only to elevate his message with a poetic dimension and demonstrate to his opponent his superior sophistication, education, or sensitivity in the use of his language.

2) Obaa ho bon a naefiri ne twe. If a woman stinks, it is because of her vagina. The social significance for this shockingly vulgar utterance is that “Internal cleanliness is as important as external cleanliness.” The question remains “why can’t the user consider a rather decent word use that is not also a play on words (pun) around femininity. Nana Kwame Panyin answers that it is only to create the fun of it. He continues that there are consequences of human behavior and that society is shaped by conventions and these conventions must be followed in order to bring about order in society. Again, the meaning is defined by conventions than the initiative of the user such that when we speak, we are following learned rules. This is what (Austin, 1960) considers in his illocutionary act which looks at the intended significance of a socially valid verbal action. If society is constructed in this form, then we realize the belief that certain gendered behaviours are natural and thus, illustrate the way one’s learned performance of gendered behaviours associate with femininity.

3) Obaadwamanfoo se: “nyeatopa a ankaontempoma mu” A lecherous woman (literary, a prostitute) says: “If it were not for the way I shake my hips, I would not stay in the window” (If you are provocative, you will get a reaction) We realize the different aspect of the speaker’s intention; the act of making the utterance: locutionary, and how the utterance affect its audience: perlocutionary. From the utterance, we see how the play on words describes how a lecherous woman behaves but listeners or hearers are met with the intended significance that is a socially valid verbal action. Instead of going about this in a more refined way, the female gender needs to suffer humiliation before a social significance is achieved.

4) Obaa a odankunkyirenaopenekotekom. A woman who sleeps with her husband is the one who asks for sex. (The person who has a right to something will ask for it). The social significance for this intended meaning is very humorous. It is the occurrence of the incongruity that produces the effect. This is why Butler’s argument that humour deconstructs gender construction, is seen to be very necessary. Here, the female gender is found with a taint that is very difficult to clean. It appears that the female gender is the name that can be used for this

form of disrespect. Why can't the speaker use the male gender for this same purpose? The intended significance of the utterance answers with covering the illuminatingly obscure nature for the meaning to sound valid.

5) Obaa a n'aniatee no yedi no wodantuo mu. We have sex with a devious woman in an unfinished room. (If you have a bad character, you will be treated without respect.) The expected meaning from proverb five, is obtained from "Litotes" (understatement) to consciously make femininity less. This is what according to Nana Kwame Panyin, the Odikro of AhwiaNsensanso, is expected by convention and to show to the listener or hearer, the superiority of the male gender in the Akan society. Ironically too, there is the representation of two meanings at once. The simple statement produced here suggests a sophisticated woman, meanwhile, the actions demanded from the woman of this caliber does not allow her to be used in a kind of environment suggested from the utterance. This is what makes less, the identity of the woman; and what also humiliates her identity as a human being. The conscious effort of humiliating the female gender with this utterance is the humour in it. It is this humorous tease that undermines the rights of the woman in the society. However humorously presented, the social significance obtained gives a valid verbal action.

6) Obaa a osona ne tweso: wo ware no a wontompa. If a woman is fat, her vagina is also fat. If you marry her, you don't buy a bed. (If you have something good, in this case, to rely on, you don't use a substitute.)

7) Obaabonoaan'odekotokuroyi ne twe so. A tough woman uses a cutlass to shave her pubic hair. (You act according to your character.)

8) Obaadwamanfoonaotommarimammaa. A prostitute rapes men.

9) Obaakondokotee a, ose: "Mekunummo me akonhoma". If a woman is eager to have sex, she says: "My husband does not give me daily allowance."

10) Owontaansurokote kese3. A thick/big penis does not scare the mother of twins.

Proverb "Six", Seven and "Ten" hyperbolically humiliates the female. The results of this humiliation are what opens up the humour in the utterance. (Butler, 2006) identifies this situation as an unsettling problem at the heart of feminism. The lines have effective tools that consciously and purposefully ridicule the female gender.

Proverb "eight" "nine" robs away the respect attached to the female gender and humorously renders the woman very inferior. The situation presented from the utterances allows humour to deconstruct gender constructions as emphasized from the point of view of Crawford (2003).

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, the study sought to find out how important context and intensions are when the pragmatic interpretation of humour is at play. From the findings, meaning is provided from cues of the utterances as a proverbial saying. Meaning is also provided from the rules that go with Asante proverbs. The humorous



tease occurs at the point where meaning and understanding are received from the utterance. From the discussion, the unanticipated situation which brings about the actual effect that generates laughter is what sets the pace for the feminists function. This feminist infuriation emphasizes how the properties of humour deconstruct gender construction. A careful observation from the proverbial illustrations reveals that a speaker is only interested in putting across a point and this can be achieved without resort to whether the utterance is moral or didactic. The speaker only tries to elevate his message poetically and to demonstrate to his opponent, his superior sophistication, education, or sensibility in the use of his language. Again, we see clearly from the illustration that meanings are defined by conventions than the initiative of the speaker.

The study therefore concludes based on these findings that the Asante proverb capitalizes on culture and tradition to humorously tease and denigrate women sexually. This is done without regard to gender constructions that seek to remedy the imbalances created in our contemporary African society.

It is recommended by this study that for the contemporary African society to succeed in the application of prescribed gender constructions put in place by the feminist function, a serious survey must be done to address the rules that support those utterances in Asante proverbs that are shockingly vulgar. This is because they serve to put women back into a position fought already by the feminist function and covertly destructs and delays the success of the feminist function.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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