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Taboo in language and discourse:
The case of Kasem

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1. Introduction

Language users create and share from one generation to the other words and expressions deemed inappropriate generally or in certain contexts (Allan and Burridge 2006; Frazer 1911; Agyekum 1996; Ljung 2011; Christie 2013). These words and expressions are commonly referred to as linguistic taboos. Linguistic taboo, as a concept, has cultural overtones and may be defined as the created, established and shared prohibitions ascribed to certain expressions or words in some particular discourse situations or general contexts. It is an act, either verbal or non-verbal that is considered inappropriate in a given context. How, what, when, where, who and to whom an act is made has diverse interpretations

and implications prescribed by the people in question. According to Hughes (2006: 463) linguistic taboo “refers to prohibitions against socially unacceptable words, expressions, and topics”. Allan and Burridge (2006) maintain that: “taboos arise out of social constraints on the individual’s behaviour where it can cause discomfort, harm or injury.” According to Jay (2009: 153), “Taboo words are sanctioned or restricted on both institutional and individual levels under the assumption that some harm will occur if a taboo word is spoken”. Accounting for the motivations for the use of taboo words or expressions, Jay (2009: 155) notes thus: “Reasons for using or not using taboo words depend on the conversational goals of the speaker. Swearing is like using the horn on your car, which can be used to signify

a number of emotions (e.g., anger, frustration, joy, surprise)."

Taboo in language and discourse is common to many languages throughout the world, with Kasem being no exception. Some languages have common linguistic taboos while other linguistic taboos are specific to some particular languages. Linguistic taboos are generally shaped by the beliefs, perceptions, aspirations, environment and the entire worldview of a people. In the wake of globalization however, linguistic taboos are more binding in traditional Kasena communities as compared to nearly urban Kasena settings mostly inhabited by diverse people of other language groups. Likewise, some linguistic taboos may not be strictly adhered to, in recent times as compared to the past decades and the possibility of newly invented and instituted linguistic taboos and the linguistically creative ways of managing such taboos cannot be overemphasized. Storch (2011: 9) stresses that languages are

a powerful form of socially active knowledge maintained by and belonging to people who share ideas and ideologies of aesthetics, truth, sacredness, and identity. The manipulated words and proverbial expressions in created, deliberately changed languages hereby encode various levels of meaning, expressing distance and group boundaries. They are also encoding sacredness and universal truth, unlike the ordinary language beneath it.

More palpable are the unique and diverse measures employed by language users to circumvent linguistic taboos. They are often discussed in round-about ways and most creatively in figurative expressions like metaphors, euphemisms, neologisms, understatements, metonymy amongst a host of other lexical

replacements. Linguistic taboos are mainly of two categories, namely: verbal and non-verbal linguistic taboos. With respect to Kasem, further classification kinds are identified as General Linguistic Taboos, Linguistic Taboos Associated with the Supernatural, Social and Physical Ailments and Deformities, Body Parts and Body Functions and Body Language.

Linguistics taboos to a great extent aspire to maintain the status quo. By their deployment in a language like Kasem, both verbal and non-verbal obscenity, profanity, accusations, blasphemy, contempt and general misappropriations of language are put in check. This paper therefore seeks to identify, classify and examine linguistic taboos in Kasem, with respect to the contexts in which they are situated and bring to the fore the linguistic innovations employed by the Kasena to circumvent Kasem linguistic taboos.

In Kasem, linguistic taboos (verbal and non-verbal) like any other taboos are generally referred to as *chulv*. Quite apart from the oath in Kasem, that is specifically termed as *dvvri*, all other taboos or general restrictions are known by the term *chulv*. In Akan for example, the concept *abususem* translates as verbal taboos (Agyekum 2004: 318). However, there is no concept used exclusively to denote linguistic taboo in Kasem.

Particular situations may give rise to certain linguistic taboos as the following discussion reveals. Some linguistic taboos are more general to other languages but other linguistic taboos are more specific on the grounds that, the social or cultural experiences that pertain in languages differ from one culture to the other. More so, linguistic strategies such as figurative expressions and concepts amongst a host of other measures employed to evade linguistic taboos, may vary significantly from one language to the other. Hence, the presence of a linguistic taboo in one

Kasena community and its absence in another Kasena community is not in doubt. The following sections elaborate the reasons for such differences. The diverse words and expressions employed to manage linguistic taboos are common and varied in Kasena communities. Yet, there are other words and expressions to evade similar linguistic taboos in Kasem that are typical to some particular communities or peers. Generally, however, the most pervasive strategy employed to evade linguistic taboos is the use of euphemisms. Euphemism refers to “the use of deliberately indirect, conventionally imprecise, or socially ‘comfortable’ ways of referring to taboo, embarrassing, or unpleasant topics” (Hughes 2006: 151)¹.

Taboo in language is common to most known languages and adherence to these language taboos in the Kasena community does not only serve as a mark of competence on the part of the speaker, it also implies maturity, wisdom and respect amongst a host of other qualities cherished by the Kasena as far as communication is concerned². That notwithstanding, linguistic taboo violations in Kasem as in other languages are common without respect to age, gender or authority. They are generally broken either advertently or inadvertently in communication. Ghounane (2014) however observes that the attitudes of speakers towards the use of taboos and the circumventive use of euphemisms in the Tlemcen speech community in Algeria differ according to sex, age and educational backgrounds of speakers. Jumat et al. (2018) also note a quite unique linguistic taboo where there is a prohibition of communicating directly in some kinship relationships

in Karonese culture. These observations do not pertain in the Kasena community.

As reiterated above, either intentionally or unintentionally, linguistic taboos are breached in one way or the other. The Kasena are certain of this fact and will usually state that:

(1) Nagə na ba dı soro yı
Leg now NEG eat slimy (sauce) yet

dı sorə mu nu nan na dı soro
3SG.slips FOC mouth that now eat slimy(sauce)

‘The foot does not take slimy sauce yet slips, what then will happen to the month that eats slimy sauce.’

What is implied is that people are bound to make inappropriate pronouncements in the communication process. Therefore, diverse linguistic strategies have been put in place to redress such breaches. There are instances where the speaker, where linguistic taboos are hitherto known, intentionally employs them in other to demean the listener. There are however some speakers who are ignorant of the linguistic taboos they employ in some contexts. It is possible for Kasem language speakers, as it is normally the case with other language speakers, to tell whether a linguistic taboo is breached intentionally by speakers or not. Some measures that may be employed to ascertain these breaches mostly rely on the situations (for instance, if a speaker is deliberately rude as a result of a quarrel) involved in communication as a whole. Generally, one’s knowledge of linguistic taboos in Kasem ensures a

¹ See Burrige (2012) for a detailed examination of the kinds and nature of euphemisms and other linguistic circumventions in discourse.

² See Brown and Levinson (1987) for an elaboration of politeness in discourse situations.

better relation with people as these linguistic taboos serve to maintain the status quo in Kasena communities. One can avoid breaking taboos by either learning them or experiencing them in diverse discourse contexts as time goes by. It should be reiterated that “learning and knowing the contexts of the different ways of speaking can be an ability as critical as the ability to speak a certain language or register” (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 77).

The following sections aim at identifying the types and kinds of linguistic taboos in Kasem. Attempts are also made to categorize the linguistic taboos and examine the ways and manner in which the linguistic taboos are realized in Kasem discourse as well explore the linguistic measures employed to circumvent linguistic taboos in Kasem. It is hoped that the contexts will give deeper insights into the understanding of linguistic taboos. Though most of the linguistic taboos stated herein are common to Kasena speaking communities in general, the linguistic measures to evade linguistic taboos may vary slightly from one community to the other: the main reason being that a word or expression may have a better appeal to one community as compared to the other. Hence, some language speakers may therefore be familiar with or prone to using what is common in their respective communities.

It should be noted that the discussion is primarily based on the native intuition of the author. Clarifications from some other native speakers of Kasem and Kasena elders have also been ascertained with respect to issues that needed clearer elaborations.



Map 1. The Kasena of Ghana and Burkina Faso

2. The Kasena and Kasem: The people and language

Kasem is the language spoken by the Kasena (Kasem SG). The Kasena are found along the fringes of the north eastern border of Ghana in the Upper East Region and along the southern border of Burkina Faso in the Nahouri Province. According to Ethnologue (Simons et al. 2017), the Kasena are estimated to be two hundred and thirty-two thousand, six hundred (232,600) in number. Kasem is a Gur language, belonging to the Niger Congo language phylum. Languages that are mutually intelligible with Kasem are Nuni and Nyele, both spoken in Burkina Faso.

The Gurene speaking neighbours refer to the Kasena as Yulhi/Yulsi (Yulka SG.) whereas others refer to them as *Awuna*, a preamble that translates as ‘I say’ and often introduces many Kasena expressions. The Kasena are also known as Gurunsi, a term often used to denote some Gur language speakers in the Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana. Find below a map highlighting the areas in which the Kasena are found in both Burkina Faso and Ghana.

The boundaries between the Kasena of Ghana and those in Burkina Faso could be said to be imaginary by nature as both share striking similarities, if not the same in culture and worldview in general. The differences are mostly with respect to the Kasem dialects spoken. There are some dialectical differences in the Kasem spoken in Burkina Faso just as there are dialectical differences in the Kasem spoken in Ghana. Generally, the Kasem spoken in Burkina Faso is influenced by French, the national language of the country, and Moore and other neighbouring languages in general whereas the Kasem in Ghana is influenced by English, the national language of the country, and Nankani, Gurune, Buli and other neighbouring languages. Nonetheless, irrespective of the slight differences between the Kasena in Ghana and those in Burkina Faso, the people generally regard themselves as one, as their oral history maintains that the Kasena in Ghana originally migrated from the Kasena lands in recent day Burkina Faso some centuries back in time.

3. Types of linguistic taboos in Kasem and their manifestations

With respect to the types of linguistic taboos in Kasem, what is meant is the nature of linguistic taboos and the manner in which they manifest. People create sounds and movements to express diverse ideas and meanings. Language is complex and involves cross-modality to a large extent especially when taboo is concerned. Hence, it will be practical to categorize linguistic taboos under two main types, namely: Verbal and Non-verbal linguistic taboos respectively. In Kasem, both verbal and non-verbal linguistic taboos

abound and each type is considered with no mean discrepancy.

What is generally meant by verbal cues are spoken language. Words and expressions realized in speech may have certain connotations or denotations that restrict their utterances in certain contexts. Some of the verbal linguistic taboos to be explored are words that refer to the female genitalia, totems and several other general verbal linguistic restrictions created and maintained by the Kasena.

Non-verbal cues refer to body language or any form of communication that is not realized in speech. Non-verbal cues are very crucial as far as communication is concerned. They may be referred to as the silent speakers. They are mostly culturally specific. Hence, the discussion on non-verbal cues in the sections that follow refer to the interpretations held by the Kasena. Notable non-verbal cues to be addressed include the way and manner in which a speaker maintains his or her body language as realized in body posture, gestures and facial expressions. Other non-verbal signs examined include the use of space and time.

It is well noting that, non-verbal cues can be employed to create strategic impressions. These impressions are usually more affective as compared to verbal cues. As reiterated earlier, non-verbal cues are silent speakers, yet they speak volumes. Non-verbal cues also seek to reinforce verbal cues. However, a good synchrony of both verbal and non-verbal cues can best enhance communication, whereas a bad synchrony may hamper communication. For instance, in an attempt to give direction to a location, one may verbally state that the direction is to the north meanwhile the hand gesture may be pointing to the east or west or

any other direction order than what is indeed stated. This is common as orientations are not well known to some speakers.

4. Kinds of linguistic taboos in Kasem and the contexts in which they are realized

Kinds of linguistic taboos refer to the functions inherent in taboo words and expressions in Kasem. Linguists have categorized linguistic taboos with respect to kind diversely. These categorizations are usually dependent on the language in question and the convenience of elaboration in general. Writing on avoidance language and word taboo, Storch (2011: 34) makes reference to Allan and Burridge as maintaining that:

Linguistic avoidance and taboo may occur in a variety of contexts, but in most African languages they seem to be related to the common word taboos that are known in most, if not all, languages worldwide and concern the semantic field of body parts and bodily effluvia, sexuality, disease, and death.

Taboos in Kasem discourse abound and range from diverse kinds. There are the most general ones that address speech or discourse in general to the more specific linguistic taboos associated with the supernatural, body parts and body functions, social and physical defects and last but not the least, associations with body language in general. Allan and Burridge (2006: 1) note five categories of verbal taboos as follows:

- bodies and their effluvia (sweat, snot, faeces, menstrual fluid etc);

- the organs and acts of sex, micturition and defecation;
- diseases, death and killing (including hunting and fishing);
- naming, addressing, touching and viewing persons and secret beings, objects and places
- food gathering, preparation and consumption.

Several are the themes in relation to the categorized kinds of linguistic taboos stated in the preceding paragraph. Most categorizations vary with respect to the people or language under study. Though the classifications by Allan and Burridge like many other researchers are insightful, Kasena linguistic taboo classification vary in certain respects. It is worth noting that categorizations of Kasena linguistic taboos herein are solely the work of the author for ease of elaboration and for similarities in thematic focus.

4.1 Associations with the supernatural

Linguistic taboos associated with the supernatural are generally words or expressions deemed too holy or contempt to be mentioned without any reasonable motive. They range from the words *We* 'God', *Tangbana* 'gods', *Chuli* 'totems' in general, which often come in the form of flora: the baobab, kapok trees and sacred groves in particular, fauna: leopard, lion, python and several other animals and objects in the environment such as mountains and last but not the least, *Chura* 'the departed'. Gods and totems are almost one and

the same, as gods are often known to either inhabit or own certain totems. Though it is not uncommon to mention the above stated words or concepts in normal Kasem discourse, what is forbidden in Kasena contexts in particular is the invocation of these spiritual words in a 'curse' *sɔlə*, 'swear' *dvvri* and 'an oath' *ni*, generally referred in Kasem as *n' tɪŋ ni* 'to take an oath'.

Gao (2013: 2313) observes "that among all the people of the world there is a feeling that the names of the gods are too holy, and the names of evil spirits too terrifying, and they are not supposed to be treated as other common words". God and gods according to Kasena worldview are inextricably entwined. Accordingly, the gods were created by God Almighty to assist in running errands of human demands. As it is the case with most other people, gods, some noted to have wives and children and other social relations as found with humans, are varied and perform diverse functions in the human world. They are revered in all instances as they are known to bring both good and bad fortunes in human lives. Even though the Almighty God is mostly revered above any other thing, gods or deities are feared as much as they are revered. Generally speaking, invoking deities is deemed sacrilegious. Reasons that account for these assertions are explored in the paragraphs that follow.

The verb 'swear' *dv* itself is forbidden and generally not encouraged as its ramifications can be very devastating. Most instances of swearing revolve around two parties, and in one way or the other one party is definitely affected by the consequences stated by the swearer. Speakers often try to swear by God and gods as proof that what they maintain is

what is truly the case. Though swearing is generally not encouraged, especially on normal discourse situations, it becomes imperative in instances of accusations such as murder and theft amongst a host of other indictments for an accused to swear in order to affirm his or her innocence.

Speakers swear by deities or entities associated with them. For instance, one may hear the expression *A dvɔɔ di ... tangbɔm* which loosely translates as 'I swear by the god ...'. The god that is generally mentioned is usually known by the speakers. In other instances, one may say *A dvɔɔ di di* which loosely translates as 'I swear by the python', whereby the python is known to be a totem of the speaker(s). Swearing by the Almighty God is however more common as compared to gods. Speakers are aware that, the Almighty is more relaxed with apportioning sanctions as compared to his god emissaries.

Kasena may also invoke 'the dead' *Chura* or mostly their 'ancestors' *Nabɔra* in swearing. As with the cases of the Almighty God, gods and totems, swearing by the ancestors is also abhorred. Kasena believe in the hereafter, and that death is just a transition of life. Hence, the deceased have simply moved into a different realm. In fact, ancestral worship is a common religious practice amongst the Kasena as the Kasena belief that the dead or ancestors for that matter have an influence in the affairs of the living. Quite apart from the reasons given above, stating why swearing is forbidden amongst the Kasena, the elders also maintain that the dead are to be allowed to rest in peace. Also, making references in the form of allegations to the deceased are also forbidden in Kasena discourse contexts. Kasena elders maintain that such restrictions are done as to

deter people from making wrong allegations to the deceased who are not present, in the physical sense of the word present, to defend any allegations. If this linguistic taboo on making (wrong) allegations or references to the deceased is not taken seriously, some speakers may easily find escape grounds for their wrong actions by simply relaying them to the deceased.

Swearing and cursing are often realized in the same discourse situations. The infliction of harm (either physical, spiritual) or bad omen on someone through the invocation of the supernatural is termed as cursing (Hugh 2006). Just as swearing by God, gods, totems and the departed are generally abhorred, cursing is likewise forbidden in Kasena communities. The accused perpetrators of these linguistic taboos as swearing and cursing are usually sanctioned by both spiritual and mundane means to revert the said afflictions invoked. In most instances also, the accused is made to render an apology to the one the affliction is directed to and an entire group of elders in some instances. As a whole, invoking deities, totems and the departed in swearing and cursing are restricted due to social constraints as reiterated in the preceding discussion.

Taking or making oaths with gods in Kasena land is also a common phenomenon. "Dvuri" refers to an oath as well as swear in Kasem. The Akan have two perspectives of taboo oaths as in *Duabɔ* and *Ntam* taboos respectively (Agyekum 1999: 318). Stories are told of people who in one time of their lives sort assistance for children, riches, power and a host of other human desires through oaths. In most of these tales, the end is usually a bitter one as the gods tend to punish men who do not stick to their pledges. The fact is that, the

gods do not forget, and it may take generations upon generations before a god decides to act on a man's failures. In some instances, those who are punished in diverse ways, of which death is common, are usually not directly involved in the oaths. The elders maintain that, successful oaths are rarely known. However, unsuccessful oaths are known to many as a result of the unfortunate happenings that ensue. For this reason, Kasena warn against making oaths with gods and prefer that one prays for solutions. Though oaths with gods in particular are forbidden, some people still venture into taking oaths with gods in dire situations.

It is also a taboo to announce a case of death explicitly. When issues of death are announced explicitly, what is normally implied is that the speaker has no feeling of empathy with respect to the demise of the person. Hence, matters related to death are often veiled in euphemisms. Euphemisms employed to announce death in Kasem are diverse and generally depend on the linguistic prowess of the speaker. The most common euphemistic circumvention to announce death in Kasem is *ajəŋwi mv tirə* 'X is no more' amongst a host of others. It is worth noting that with respect to the demise of notable figures as chiefs and custodians of the land, epithetical euphemisms such as 'the mighty tree has fallen' or 'the mighty elephant has fallen' may be applied. In traditional Kasena settings, there are people who are known by some epithets and more often than not things associated with them as totems. Epithetical concepts may therefore revolve around totems associated with the deceased.

The coming generations have also expanded their creativity with respect to death. It is therefore not uncommon to hear

expressions like *ajəŋwi bəm* which translates as ‘X has said goodbye’ or *Ba bəm ajəŋwi (ba yəgi)* which translates as ‘They have said good bye to X’ when communicating an instance of death. It must be noted here that what is usually implied with the former is that the deceased has supposedly died naturally whereas the latter expression usually implies that the death of the deceased has been orchestrated by someone or a group of people. That notwithstanding, both expressions can generally be employed to mean the former. Matters relating to death as a whole are accorded strict restrictions. For instance, amongst the Kasena, dirges are forbidden to be sung in any other contexts other than the funeral (Taluah 2013).

4.2 Associations with bodyparts and bodily functions

Linguistic taboos associated with body parts and body functions are viewed by the Kasena in quite different ways. Generally, one cannot be explicit with sex or activities related to sex. Matters relating to sex or sex organs in particular are considered taboo in Kasem discourse. This is especially true with matters or words related to women. Male sex organs are much more likely to be tolerated in discourse as compared to female sex organs. Anxiety, embarrassment, profanity and vulgarity are the repercussions of linguistic taboos associated with body parts and body functions cited in inappropriate discourse contexts.

For instance, the verb *dzvm* ‘fuck’ and *mampvlɔ* ‘vagina’ are the most delicate tabooed words in this category. These two words are hardly heard in conversations because the mere mention of them is a complete

embarrassment on the part of the speaker in particular and the listeners in general. Hence, sexual activities that relate to sex or the female genitalia come in understatement as *n’ pəm di* ‘to sleep with’ to refer to sexual intercourse for humans and *di* ‘climb’, the verb to express sexual intercourse amongst animals. The female genitalia are simply referred to as *yigə*, a polysemous word that means ‘face’ or ‘front’. More so, menstruation is referred to as *zarem* ‘wash’ and as such, a lady in her menstrual period will usually say:

- (2) A nɛ a zarem mu
 1SG. see 1POSS washing FOC
 ‘I am menstruating’.

Agyekum (2002b) examines menstruation as a verbal taboo amongst the Akan of Ghana and notes how varied euphemisms serve as taboo avoidance techniques. He also observes that most of the Akan euphemisms for menstruation “have become fossilized” with the advent of urbanization and its currents.

Interestingly, other sexual words associated to the male gender as ‘penis’ *pəm*, ‘testis’ *manchalə* and other female sexual associations like ‘buttocks’ *benə* and ‘breast’ *yilə* are accorded much less restrictions as far as linguistic taboos are concerned.

‘Saliva’ *lileirv*, ‘urine’ *fiə*, ‘sweat’ *lvluŋv* are not deemed serious linguistic taboos and can be heard in many discourse situations. Any one may mention these at any time without qualms. However, some notable human excretions such as ‘faeces’ *benv*, ‘Phlegm’ *mvmeirv* and ‘menstruation’ *zarem* in particular are not mentioned, especially in certain contexts, of which meal times is paramount. These words

are repulsive and tend to evoke disgusting images. For the sake of courtesy, it is also not advised for any speaker to resort to mentioning these words.

4.3 Associations with social and physical ailments and deformities

Other linguistic taboos in Kasem relate to prohibitions in overtly mentioning the social and physical defects of people. These linguistic taboos also tend to affect the social roles and endeavours of individuals in the community in general. In Kasena contexts, not considering the prohibitions associated to these concepts is considered offensive, a mockery of both God and man.

Some notable ailments that are forbidden in discourse and require evasive substitutes include *nayorem* 'leprosy', *kinkirisā* 'epilepsy', *kadeḡo* (generally feminine) 'sterility' and *Aḡo ti* 'HIV/ Aids'. The words to denote leprosy, epilepsy and sterility are indigenous to Kasem whereas the expression *Aḡo ti* to denote 'HIV/ Aids' is a neologism that loosely translates as 'I will kill, no matter what the case may be'. Another evasive expression often employed to denote HIV/ Aids is generally *jawiv kum* 'the sickness'. Physical defects include albinism, blindness, deafness, dumbness, deformities of the limbs and any other forms of deformity either acquired by accident or birth. Though physical defects may be mentioned as a genuine point of reference, it is the mockery of such abnormalities that is considered offensive, and as such, abhorred in Kasem discourse.

Most importantly, insults that directly comment on the aberration or abnormality of a person either as a result of nature or accident is strictly abhorred. For instance, one does not

insult someone as a cripple when one is indeed one as a result of nature or accident. One does not insult very obvious or serious defects as big head, big ears and so on and so forth of a person when it is indeed true one has such features that may have been attained by nature or by accident. Pregnant women in Kasena society in particular are very careful with insinuations to deformities of people as it is believed that the pregnant woman can bring forth a child with such deformities she attacks. Indeed, you do not mock the deformities of others when you do not know the state and nature of the foetus you are carrying.

The idea is that, if it is indeed by the dictates of nature, it is not the person's making, so any insult directed to such a person is actually being directed to God the creator. Since one does not wish to tell God that He is imperfect, it is better for one not to resort to direct insults of a person's disability either by nature or accident at all. In the instance that a person's deformity or disability is by accident, the Kasena maintain that until the grave one can never be certain about how he or she will end up in this world. Therefore, you do not mock a person's deformities as any can befall you. In fact, such admonishments when considered critically actually deter people from mocking the deformities of others.

Some other notable insults that can stir commotion in Kasena communities are *kaboro* 'whore', *varem* 'animal', *chiri* 'witch' and *tampiri* which loosely translates as 'one whose father is unknown'. These insults carry with them diverse other insinuations. For instance, if a person is labelled as *tampiri*, it does not only mean that the person has no knowledge of his or her father but that his or her mother is consequently a 'whore' *kaboro* and as such, can

be likened to *varem* 'an animal'. In fact, insults as these are usually considered as affronts to one's personality as compared to ordinary insults. Veiled words or expressions for these taboo words are hardly available. The only way a speaker may mention these words without getting into trouble is to say them to one who is not attributed to in the insults in secret.

It is also strictly abhorred to overtly state the negative effects of an ailment when the affected person is yet to recover from that ailment. For instance, informing a sick person that he or she is deteriorating is strictly abhorred in Kasem discourse situations. It is advised that one encourages the sick to be comfortable by maintaining that they are faring well, even when one clearly notices the opposite. If indeed one does not have any positive remarks to make, it is better for one to keep quiet with his or her reservations. It is said that when negative comments are made to the hearing of the sick, they are normally demoralized and that may worsen the healing process.

More so, drugs like cocaine and weed are generally considered as bad drugs, and as such, persons who engage in the sale and/or intake of these drugs are often looked at with disgust. The mere mention of these words can raise contention in many discourse situations. At instances where cocaine or marijuana are to be mentioned, speakers usually circumvent these words by applying concepts such as *tuntuarimu* which actually means 'ashes' to refer to cocaine and *nanwali* which means 'tobacco' to refer to marijuana. In other instances, some speakers may employ expressions as *wun'tin banna ficsi tv* implying, 'the things that are sniffed' to refer to cocaine. *O di wo yorv mv* as in 'He or she eats useless things' is also employed in reference to one who takes illicit drugs. It is also

possible to find other words and expressions in Kasem that try to evade the use of illicit drugs especially in the discourse of diverse peer groups. For instance, to say one smokes marijuana, some Kasena youth employ the evasive expression thus: *O dvri weela yam mv*, which loosely translates as 'he or she runs the wheels'. There is certainly a reason for the use of wheels to refer to the smoking of marijuana. Based on enquiries, some Kasena maintain that what the statement seeks to convey is that one is engaged in useless activities. Wheels are often driven by children as representations of their vehicles in unproductive ventures. Hence, the expression evokes images of unproductiveness on the part of the smoker.

Also, worth noting are linguistic taboos against accusations in Kasem. Accusations of different kinds often arise in Kasena communities as people associate with each other in their daily endeavours. Though these social connections may run smoothly at a point in time, misunderstandings are bound to arise at certain times. The results of misunderstandings between people are petty squabbles which in some instances may result in one party or the other making accusations. Some common accusations include *chrem* 'witchery' or 'sorcery', *chnem* 'poisoning' and *gvm* 'murder'. It appears that in most cases, the deaths of persons are usually attributed to orchestrations by enemies. Only in rare occasions, such as deaths of the elderly in particular, do people assume that it is indeed natural.

Since accusations of witchery or sorcery, poisoning and murder are often difficult to ascertain and may lead to mistaken culprits, Kasena elders forbid their pronouncements. These accusations can stir suspicion amongst people and must be treated with the strictest

care in other not to arouse distrust amongst people. More so, as a result of grief, relatives of a deceased person may try to apportion blame where it is not due. People who are also tagged as committing such heinous crimes are often looked at with disgust, if not ostracized or banned from the community. Kasena elders do not see it fit for the innocent to go through these ordeals and thus, these accusations are only allowed if they can be verified beyond all reasonable doubt.

4.4 General verbal linguistic taboos

Whereas some linguistic taboos are considered inappropriate in certain contexts in particular, others are more general with respect to the contexts of their realizations and can be referred to as general verbal linguistic taboos. These linguistic taboos in Kasem are diverse. Attempts are made to capture most of the general verbal linguistic taboos that are taught and known by many people raised amongst Kasena.

Perhaps, the first and paramount general linguistic taboo as far as Kasem is concerned is that you do not divulge vital information to strangers. The word strangers may be relative, however, what is meant is that a man without as secret ultimately lends himself to destruction.

Commenting on an issue when one is being spoken to is regarded as gross disrespect especially when the speaker is an elderly person. It is also a taboo to tell an elderly person he or she is lying even if he or she is indeed not speaking the truth. This is one of the taboos that infringes on truth and justice. More so, finding an outlet to state what is polite and also not offensive by traditional dictates is almost impossible. It is said that the elder's hand is

not twisted. Implying you don't engage in an argument with the elderly as a sign of respect.

Linguistic taboos raise issues of politeness in language. Being patient and not being harsh with respect to the diction one employs and the nature of expressions uttered, even in arguments where one is right is considered a linguistic virtue. Amongst the Kasena, humility is a virtue most cherished. One needs to avoid boastful words or expressions. You stand out the more if you have others blow your trumpet than you blowing it yourself.

Sound and silence in Kasena discourse also carry with them some linguistic taboo overtones. It is significant to note that, there is a thin line between sound and silence in Kasem discourse situations. Speaking at the wrong time or being silent at the wrong time have quite negative implications. Amongst the four contexts examined by Johansen (1974), the second contexts he notes: "the role of silence in purposive, every day, interpersonal communication" is what is implied in this discussion. One needs to be very careful, especially with relation to the elderly in matters of sounding and remaining silent. There can hardly be an instance or context deemed most appropriate for either the former or the latter to be observed. In that regard, one needs to monitor the mood of the addresser to be able to make a right decision at the right time. When one is being communicated to, the general practice is that one remains quiet and listens. "[T]o remain silent is the politest strategy for handling face threatening acts" (Agyekum 2002b: 34). Agyekum observes further that the conformity of silence is a social control mechanism and measure of communicative competence. One who speaks in a discourse situation when he or she is being spoken to by an elderly person is considered

disrespectful. However, one who remains quite at the time he or she is considered to speak is also tagged as disrespectful. Perhaps the old English adage “silence is golden” is a force to reckon with. The usual practice is that one does not speak when one is not asked to speak. More so, in an attempt to respond either to a question or an allegation, one may be told to “shut up and listen” and this instruction must be strictly adhered to. “Thus, silence is communicative and functional. It carries illocutionary force and perlocutionary force and has pragmatic uses, meaning and impact” (Agyekum 2002b: 32-33)³.

Verbal taboos that restrict whistling at night, in the forests and during rainy seasons have some general cultural and environmental undertones. Whistling in the process of bathing is considered a taboo. It is said that one who whistles in the process of bathing invites dwarfs, whom people naturally dread. However, a significant case is made that when one sings or speaks in the process of bathing, the probability of one imbibing the detergent or dirt supposed to be washed away is high. Kasena maintain that it is a taboo to speak while eating. Reasons are that food is king and should be respected as such. The palpable reason for the adherence of this taboo stems from the fact that one can get choked in the process.

It is a taboo to stand by a water body such as a river and pronounce your fear of it or profess equality or superiority to the water body. What is modest is that as human you humble yourself before the water body whether you believe in its existence or not. These taboos have spiritual implications. Generally, most water bodies such as rivers are inhabited by gods. Therefore, if the water

body or god for that matter is offended by one’s pronouncements, the probability of one drowning in the water, when one attempts to cross is great. More so, names of some particular animals (mostly dangerous) are forbidden to be mentioned especially at night or in some obscure places like the forest. For instance, it is believed that names have far more spiritual connotations than can be imagined. Therefore, the mere mention of the names of dangerous animals as snake or scorpion may invoke the said animals in reality.

It should be borne in mind that the environments or the settlements in which the Kasena find themselves is reflected in their linguistic taboos and taboos in general. Hitherto, settlements were scattered around bushes, forests and water bodies. The presence of forest and water spirits like gods, dwarfs, animals (totems and wild) is a case to reckon with in some of the taboos associated to the supernatural in particular.

4.5 Associations with body language

Body language, otherwise known as kinesics plays an important role in human communication. In fact, the employment of body language can enhance communication. However, body language can also serve as a bane rather than blessing in Kasem discourse and as such, the employment of body language in inappropriate contexts are strictly tabooed. Body language taboos may be termed as non-verbal linguistic taboos as a whole. These non-verbal taboos include body postures, gestures, eye movements, contact and distance amongst diverse cues.

³ See Agyekum (2002a) for an examination of the kinds of silences and their contexts amongst the Akan of Ghana.

In Kasem discourse situations, personal relationships in communication must strictly be maintained. When one is being spoken to by an elderly person, the way and manner in which the body is maintained can send varied signals. The one being spoken to (if he or she is younger for example) must stand straight and at best, his or her hands folded to the back and must be very attentive as a sign of respect. Any other body posture that falls short of these descriptions is suspect. Standing akimbo or raising the hands haphazardly in discourse situations as this is forbidden amongst the Kasena.

Social use of space, also known as proxemics and contact are also crucial non-verbal cues amongst the Kasena. Building from the above argument, one who is being communicated to by an elderly person must maintain good social distance by standing close to the speaker. Standing at a distance or communicating from a distance when one is being communicated to is seen as a sign of gross disrespect. This holds true with respect to contact as well. In fact, the distance one maintains in a discourse situation as stated above should be such that one is unable to touch the speaker when spoken to. In the process of communication, it is also deemed inappropriate for one to turn his or her back in the process of communication. Walking out on or away from people when communication is in process is forbidden. If indeed one wishes to leave, then the interaction or discourse must have been considered complete by both parties. A breach of this is considered arrogance and impolite.

Chronemics, which is the use of time in Kasena communities cannot be overemphasized. The time one takes to respond or attend to a call especially from an elderly person

must be immediate. When a response or an attendance to a call is breached by immediacy, then fault is ascribed to the person that was called upon. One who does not pay attention to respond to calls at the appropriate times is considered disrespectful in general.

Perhaps, the most adhered to non-verbal linguistic taboo is the use of the left hand. Irrespective of age or gender, the left hand is strictly abhorred in Kasem discourse. Generally, raising or gesturing the hands in an angry manner in communication is disrespectful. More specifically, the use of the left hand in greeting, pointing to a person or thing is a sign of gross disrespect. For instance, you do not raise your left hand to respond or comment on something in any discourse situation. You cannot use the left hand independently in gestures. You may either use your right hand independently or a combination of both hands. Pointing the left hand at a person is considered disrespectful and so is pointing your left hand at a thing or object considered to be of significant value. A Kasena proverb explains the taboo associated with the left hand in general and pointing at a thing in particular quite succinctly when it says: *Ba ba jigi jəŋwɔ ba bri ko/nabrə sɔŋɔ*, which loosely translates as 'you don't use the left hand to point at your father's/mother's house'. What is implied is that you don't deride your origin. An investigation of the use and consequence of the left hand taboo on Ghanaian gestural practices as a whole are in tandem with, and confirm the observations of left hand taboos amongst the Kasena in particular (Kita & Essegbey 2001).

Taboos associated with the left hand can be quite extensive as well. For instance, using the left hand in drinking *pito* (locally brewed beverage) or other beverages like beer, in the

mist of elders or other people is strictly forbidden in Kasena communities. This act has diverse connotations that may range from the spiritual to the mundane. One who decides to drink with the left hand, be him or her left handed or not, is interpreted as a profession of spiritual potency (juju) or deliberate disrespectfulness. Offenders can be sanctioned in diverse ways ranging from the mildest which is normally a rebuke, to stronger sanctions as spiritual challenges which normally come in the form of poisoning or spiritual attacks. In as much as the use of the left hand is seen as a sign of disrespect, it is also assumed that one who uses the left hand to drink possesses some kind of magical power. Using the left hand to eat is also generally disallowed. However, the implications of eating with the left hand are not taken seriously as compared to drinking with the left hand. This is so because, most of those who may be found eating with the left hand are children. In fact, the left-hand taboo to say the least is prevalent across Africa.

More so, nodding or shaking of the head when communicating is considered as inappropriate amongst the Kasena. It is possible to nod to the verbal affirmation yes or to shake the head with the verbal affirmation no when communicating. Head nods and shakes done in the absence of their verbal constituents are considered impolite amongst the Kasena. A reaction to these linguistic appropriations is usually countered by the elderly in the question "Are you a lizard?" Why? Because lizards nod and shake their heads without utterances.

Eye contact, also known as *oculesics* when not well controlled does not auger well for communicators. Blinking and winking of the eyes is considered inappropriate in Kasem discourse situations. It is natural that

some of these nonverbal expressions may seem involuntary to some persons. However, what is required generally is that one should remain steady in the process of communication. In instances where those involved in the discourse are not peers, care must be taken by the younger one in order not to appear disrespectful or arrogant to the older person being communicated with. Blinking or winking may send wrong signal in the process of communication. The general Kasena belief is that those who wink or flutter their eyelids incessantly are liars and criminals. What is also implied is that culprits of these acts are generally disrespectfully evasive.

5. General implications of linguistic taboos in Kasem

From the foregoing discussions, it could be deduced that linguistic taboos are speech ethics, such as prohibitions or restrictions and sanctions of words or expressions maintained by language speakers in certain contexts of communication. It is worth noting also that linguistic taboos abound in diverse languages. Though there are many similarities, especially with relations to themes and evasive strategies of linguistic taboos, the evidence of some differences especially with relation to sanctions as unique to some languages or people cannot be denied.

What do linguistic taboos portray about a language or people in general? Taboos in Language or discourse can be very revealing. Critical examinations of linguistic taboos reveal that they are shaped by the worldview of the people who speak the language in question. To some extent, some language taboos may sound illogical in recent time or to some other

language speakers, but a critical examination of their etymology and circumstances at a particular time and place can be very enlightening. What is certain is that linguistic taboos exist and shape language and discourse and the worldview of a people as a whole.

Interestingly however, linguistic taboos are not intrinsic but extrinsically acquired. And if indeed, linguistic taboos are words or expressions forbidden in society, how do people get to know of such words or expressions, let alone avoid them in speech?

Once one is raised in a community or speaks a particular language, knowledge of the linguistic taboos that pertain in the said language, if not fully, is acquired mostly effortlessly. In certain discourse situations, some speakers are bound to employ linguistic taboos either consciously or unconsciously. Speakers get offended sometimes and may in retaliation resort to defend themselves with words or expressions that are considered inappropriate in the society. In other instances, people in an effort to express their feelings or intentions unintentionally employ linguistic taboos. These amongst other instances account for ways in which linguistic taboos are acquired and either adhered to or breached by speakers.

When linguistic taboos are breached, society is quick to effect sanctions, in order that such linguistic taboos are considered seriously amongst speakers. In the presence of such linguistic offenses and sanctions, one is certain to understand linguistic taboos. Knowledge of linguistic taboos in Kasena communities can also be acquired in diverse ways. Most significantly, linguistic taboos are enshrined in oral traditions like folk tales, proverbs and riddles amongst a host of other oral genres. For

instances, there are diverse tales that showcase the breaches of linguistic taboos and further consequences. Proverbs more significantly also caution languages speakers on the dos and don'ts enshrined in the language.

That notwithstanding, acquiring linguistic taboos can also be quite simple. For instance, some language speakers maintain that, for the fact that some words or expressions are not uttered in certain situations, they simply abide by such measures. Sometimes, one does not need to know the reasons for such restrictions, knowledge of the instruction is enough. For example, as reiterated earlier, Kasena dirges are not sung in any other context or situation other than the funeral. Since one has made this observation, there is no need for one to sing dirges on the way to the riverside when he or she has never heard anyone in the community do so.

Nonetheless, no matter the nature of the linguistic taboos or their consequent sanctions, they are broken at one point in time or the other in diverse situations. What is significant to note is that the community does not relent in their efforts to implement sanctions. Depending on the gravity of the offense, some linguistic taboos are sanctioned by rebukes. Other linguistic taboos may require the offender to render an unqualified apology while in strict situations of breaches that relate to the supernatural in particular, offerings and sometimes rituals are rendered as sanctions for appeasements.

How then do speakers go about linguistic taboos? One cannot imagine a language without figures of speech such as euphemisms, metaphors, understatements, neologisms, code switching, code mixing and other kinds of language ambiguities and linguistic strategies to offset linguistic taboos.

Euphemism, the tendency to express a painful situation in a mild way or to assert what is serious in a mild way is the most common linguistic strategy employed by Kasena speakers in most situations. Most Euphemisms relate to death, sickness, loss and general matters of politeness. Code switching and code mixing have also been the order of the day especially with respect to the growing rate of bilingualism amongst recent generations in particular. Some young speakers of Kasem today rely on code switching, code mixing and neologisms to confound linguistic taboos and messages in the presence of the elderly. Normally the sanction givers have no knowledge what so ever in the language being switched to, mixed or words or expressions employed in general. Children may employ these strategies in the presence of parents who are unlettered.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, we come to a clear realization that what is considered inappropriate in certain discourse contexts is termed as linguistic taboo. Linguistic taboo also implies avoidance, offensive and forbidden words or expressions entailed in a language. Linguistic taboo may then simply be expounded as to do, use, talk about issues or concepts in inappropriate ways.

The way and manner in which linguistic taboos are constructed and maintained in a language are based on the worldview of the speakers. These linguistic taboos are also created, shared and transferred from one generation to the other. As some linguistic taboos may lose their significance in certain discourse contexts and languages in general, other new linguistic taboos are created with time and with influences of globalizations and its cur-

rents. In most instances, taboos in language and discourse serve as basis of politeness, courtesy, maturity, knowledge and wisdom as a whole.

With respect to language, both verbal and non-verbal cues in the communication process are complementary by nature. Hence, linguistic taboos range from the verbal to the non-verbal as the preceding discussions seek to elucidate. More so, one needs to be explicit in communication in other not to appear offensive. Strict care must also be maintained in observing the nature and contexts of linguistic taboos in a language and adopting evasive linguistic strategies in order for one not to fall prey to sanctions. Actions that do not attract social approval and are abhorred by speakers of language should be appreciated as such.

From all indications, linguistic taboos also serve to expand the linguistic creativity of a people. They give room for linguistic creativity in the forms of euphemisms, metaphors, neologisms, proverbs and other linguistic strategies.

Efforts have been made to capture Kasem linguistic taboos in detail. It is significant to note that some of the linguistic taboos discussed herein are also common with some neighbouring groups while others are more specific to the Kasena in particular. In all, language censorship is a long-term process as far as communication is concerned. It takes two people (male and female) to give birth to a child, however, it takes a whole community to raise a child.

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