



## Tweaa! – A Ghanaian interjection of “contempt” in online political comments

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Tweaa  
Interjection of contempt  
NSM  
Politics  
CGCGE16  
Ghana

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of *tweaa* [tɔɪaa], an Akan emotive interjection that expresses “contempt” for a person, in the Corpus of GhanaWeb Comments in Ghana’s 2016 Election (CGCGE16). CGCGE16 comprises reader comments posted in the build-up to Ghana’s presidential elections in December 2016 on [www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com), a news website that guarantees freedom of speech and ensures citizen participation in online sociopolitical discussions. The study employs the semantic explication method of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to unpack the meaning of *tweaa* to give a fuller understanding of its rhetorical power in online political discourse. It points out that *tweaa* is derogatory and expresses lack of respect for the user’s target, thus, according to traditional Ghanaian values, its use is unacceptable, especially during asymmetrical interactions. Citizens, however, hide behind the shield of anonymity online platforms guarantee, and their ability to circumvent traditional gatekeepers of acceptable speech forms during online discourse, and freely use *tweaa* to vent their feelings against authority figures.

### 1. Introduction

In Ghana, social status is based on age, rank, wealth and gender. There is usually a link between the status of an individual and the discourse flow; thus, a person’s communication role should reflect their position [1]. An interlocutor who is considered superior in terms of any the abovementioned social variables must be treated with respect or deference. The subordinate in the speech event must avoid being offensive and must be able to properly manipulate their linguistic actions and expressions in acceptable fashions. “Indirectness” is in many cases the preferred norm when one has to confront people considered to be socially higher [2,3]. Specifically, plain and/or rude speech is socio-culturally sanctioned, especially when it is directed at an elderly person or an authority figure as a criticism [4]. It is generally unacceptable to verbally confront or directly disagree with such persons, regardless of their actions or inactions [5]. It is not tolerated and considered unpardonable if such disagreement is expressed in a public space. This implies that normally, Ghanaians are concerned about what is said, as well as how it is said [6–8].

The present paper explores how, contrary to the sociocultural norms of communication in Ghana, citizens employed an Akan emotive interjection *tweaa* [tɔɪaa], as an effective tool for expressing strong disapproval towards national leaders involved in the 2016 general

elections on [www.ghanaweb.com](http://www.ghanaweb.com) (GhanaWeb). Also, the paper demonstrates that the meaning of *tweaa*, like that of any other interjection, can be rigorously stated and expanded using a culture-free semantic metalanguage, instead of merely defining it as “an interjection that expresses contempt”. It shows how precisely pinning down the semantics of an interjection can be used to illuminate pragmatic concerns such as political communication and the impact of social hierarchies on communication.

*Tweaa* was promoted into general Ghanaian usage by an episode captured on video.<sup>1</sup> This video recording was widely circulated on YouTube and other social media platforms in Ghana in late January to early February 2014. In the video, the then District Chief Executive (DCE) of the Ahafo Ano South District in the Ashanti Region, Mr. Gabriel Barima, was delivering a speech to a group of health workers and others at a public function in his district. He was asking his audience to listen to him because he is the privileged one who has the floor. This statement earned him some cheers and applause from his audience, so he had to pause briefly. Just before he could resume his speech, an unidentified member of the audience, who may be one of the health workers, exclaimed *tweaa!* [tɔɪaa!].

Mr. Barima retorted, “Who said *tweaa?*”. Nobody owned up to saying *tweaa*, and the other people present dared not to expose the person, considering how angry the DCE was at the time. While

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRedIfpW8nY>.

switching between Akan and English, he reminded the audience of the unequal power relations and the social distance between him and the unidentified speaker. He then walked out of the gathering, refusing to continue with the speech and ignoring the calls of the people who were imploring him to return. The following is a rough transcription of the angry outburst from Mr. Barima in English:

‘Am I your mate? Do you think you are my mate? Why are you saying *tweaa*? What does *tweaa* mean? What do you mean by *tweaa*? ... You sit somewhere and behave like you are 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 have ended my speech. I'm not talking again. If you don't respect people ... I'm not talking again. Take your program’.

Apart from the spread of the video on social media, the traditional media (i.e. television and radio) took it up and aired it several times either as an entertainment news flash or a funny video/audio of the day. Thus, citizens who did not have access to social media platforms became acquainted with the incident. Within a short period, *tweaa* had gone beyond the Akan speaking areas of Ghana to, arguably, every part of the country and had taken over the social discourse of the country in both formal and informal settings (e.g. parliament<sup>2</sup>, religious gatherings<sup>3</sup> for comic relief. The term *tweaa* was used across the nation in both face-to-face and online interactions.<sup>4</sup>

In this study, it is shown that during the campaign period of the 2016 general elections which obviously depicts a tense moment in the country, *tweaa* was not employed by the citizens for comic relief. Suffice it to say that Ghanaians had gained a shared understanding of the interjection, because of the incident displayed in the “who said *tweaa*” video and some explanations provided by various Akan native speakers that were aired across the country. They realized its potency as a self-contained utterance to express contempt and show disrespect and thus employed it against some of the presidential candidates, and the electoral commissioner.

Generally, interjections are used to express, but not to describe, a speaker's emotions or mental state, attitude, action, or reaction to a situation. They may suggest what someone feels, thinks, wants, believes or knows at a particular moment [9]. They appear to be in all human languages and can be very significant in daily interactions. For instance, besides *tweaa!* which expresses ‘contempt’, in Akan, the interjection *yie!* expresses (roughly speaking) ‘fear’; likewise, *ei!* expresses ‘surprise’, *agyei!* expresses ‘pain’, *buei!* expresses ‘sorrow’, while *o!* can be used to express ‘anger’, ‘surprise’ or ‘disappointment’. Several studies agree that interjections are often monomorphemic, and typically, cannot be inflected. Interjections are not grammatically connected to a sentence they are part of. They are self-contained, and syntactically independent (see Refs. [10–12]. According to Ref. [13]; interjections are language specific and thus their meanings do not map precisely onto the meaning of their equivalents in other languages. In her words, “they are neither universal nor meaningless. On the contrary, they are language-specific, and they are meaningful” (p. 163).

Interjections are mainly characteristic of oral speech; however, they commonly appear in text types that mimic speech [14–16]. Some of these text types are comic or drama scripts, and online interactions, which the current study concentrates on [17–19]. In spoken language, interjections can often be “stretched” prosodically to demonstrate the intensity of the emotion a speaker wants to express [20–22]. In order to represent the phonological patterning of this spoken paralinguistic cue in a text, some letters, especially the vowels in the interjection are repeated, and this results in word elongation or lengthening [23]. Also,

research shows that often, during online interactions, members of bilingual or multilingual communities such as Ghana tend to code-switch when they have to use interjections. The reason why these participants maintain the interjections in the original languages is that they want to convey their emotions in a more economical and effective manner [24–26].

In the 1992 special issue of the Journal of Pragmatics (Volume 18, 2–3) [27], made a call for more linguistic research on interjections in various languages (p. 116). This call was made again in a study by Ref. [28]. In response, several studies have been done on interjections (e.g. Refs. [29–33]. Among Ghanaian languages, interjections have been studied in Ewe [20,27] and Ga [34]. However, there is no extensive scholarly work on Akan interjections. The study of *tweaa* in this paper serves as a response to the call.

The remaining sections are organized as follows. Section 2 describes the methodology. In Section 3, *tweaa* is explicated in terms of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, but before that, some examples are examined to show the traditional and contemporary uses of *tweaa*. Section 4 examines some examples from CGCGE16. In Section 5, a general overview of the discussion is presented. The last section concludes the paper.

## 2. Methodology

Data for this study consists of YouTube videos, Facebook and Twitter comments, and mainly comments from the Corpus of GhanaWeb Comments on Ghana's Election 2016 (CGCGE16). CGCGE16 was created, principally, for my PhD thesis “Ethnopragmatic perspectives on political discourse on news websites in Ghana: Invective and Insults on GhanaWeb” after ethical clearance was obtained on 30th August 2016. GhanaWeb, where CGCGE16 was sourced, is a news website that guarantees freedom of speech and ensures citizen participation in online sociopolitical discussions. Participation on GhanaWeb is free from official constraints and is characterized by a high level of anonymity and pseudonymity. As a result, there is active participation in sociopolitical discussions on the site to the point where, sometimes, emotions are laid bare in ways that do not conform to traditional and cultural ideals of social interactions among Ghanaians [35].

In addition to the videos and comments, native speakers' intuitions about the meaning and uses of the interjection *tweaa*, and other Akan invective in CGCGE16 (not included in this paper), were sought through interviews. Using snowball sampling, 10 native Akan speakers from the Kumasi Cultural Center in the Ashanti Region of Ghana, who are well versed in the traditional and cultural systems of the Akans, were consulted. All are more than 50 years of age and have lived in Kumasi<sup>5</sup> since they were born. Their responses helped inform the meaning of *tweaa* and subsequently the explication presented in Section 3.

I combined the quantitative method of corpus-based searches with qualitative methods of enquiry for the analysis. A lexical search was run in the CGCGE16 corpus using the Word list tool of AntConc 3.4.4w (Windows), a software package developed by Laurence Anthony. This tool counts all the words in the corpus, presents them in an ordered list, and shows their frequency [58]. Word types that appeared fewer than three times in the corpus were discarded. It was seen that 4 out of the 74 word types identified as insults that appeared more than twice in the corpus are interjections. Among those four interjections (i.e. *tweaa*, *apuu*, *mtchew* and *shaame*), *tweaa* has the highest occurrence with 53 percent. The remaining 70 word types are adjectives such as ‘stupid’, ‘foolish’, and ‘silly’ and nominal expressions such as ‘fool’, *ofui* ‘idiot’ (Akan), and *adzeto* ‘witch’ (Ewe). The number of interjections in CGCGE16 is not unusual as it has already been noted that interjections occur more frequently in face-to-face interactions than in other forms of

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RIh1hNgsss>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBaJKV8Gnac>.

<sup>4</sup> There is no existing corpus on Ghanaian discourse as far as I know that demonstrates how widely *tweaa* was used at the time, but almost everyone who is abreast with social issues in Ghana will not dispute this assertion.

<sup>5</sup> Kumasi is the second largest city in Ghana, and it is regarded as “the citadel of Akan culture” [57]: 372).

communication. The semantic explication method of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage framework was applied to more fully capture the meaning of the interjection as it was used in comments from the social media sites and CGCGE16.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) was developed by a group of researchers led by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard. Over the past three decades, they have employed universal or near-universal concepts such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘do’ and ‘happen’, ‘want’ and ‘feel’, ‘know’, ‘say’, and ‘think’ to capture lexical meanings from many domains and many languages (e.g. Refs. [36–38]). These researchers believe that one way to find the irreducible semantic cores of various languages is to engage in explicating meanings of many different kinds from many different languages, while aiming at reducing the terms of the explications to the smallest possible set. They have identified a set of 65 cross-translatable and indefinable expressions referred to as “semantic primes” (see Ref. [9]: 63) for an inventory of semantic primes). These can be used to construct “semantic explications”, i.e. explanatory reductive paraphrases, of words or expressions.

The choice of the expression “semantic primes” suggests that they form a controlled vocabulary of conceptually simple and intuitively intelligible meanings [39]. That is to say, they cannot be further explicated without one getting circular and obscure definitions. NSM researchers stress that the semantic primes appear to have equivalents in all or most languages. This means that explications based on the vocabulary and grammar of semantic primes escape the danger of the metalanguage of semantic description being influenced or distorted by English. This has been substantiated by research work in many languages including English, Malay, Japanese, Vietnamese, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean which can be found on the NSM homepage, <https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/schools-departments/natural-semantic-metalanguage>.

Consider below the semantic explication of the interjection *wow!* as presented in Ref. [9]: 57):

*Wow!*

I think like this: “this is very good”

I didn't know before that it can be like this

I feel something very good because of this

I feel like someone can feel when this someone sees something very big

Ref. [9] explains that “although they look and feel very different from conventional definitions, explications have a high level of intuitive accessibility and are capable of capturing nuances that elude dictionary definitions and conventional translation” (p. 56). An explication such as the one shown above appears to be very simple, but it must be noted that formulating such an explication is a complicated, laborious and time-consuming task. It usually goes through several revisions in order to conform to the combinatory syntax of the metalanguage, and to be suitable for the full range of use of the explication (see Ref. [40]). The significance of this explication method is that it allows researchers to formulate detailed meaning descriptions of culture- and language-specific terms, such as interjections, in such a way that they can be appropriately understood as they are used by cultural insiders [41]. Also, as these terms are usually associated with culture-specific values and speech practices, the explication method ensures that they are explained in a way that avoids the danger of having them being misinterpreted and misunderstood from the perspective of a foreign culture [9].

By using the semantic primes, the subtlest shades of meaning encoded in interjections can be articulated in a way that accounts for their range of use without having to rely on language-specific terms such as ‘disgust’ (for *yuck!*), ‘impressed’ (for *wow!*) or ‘pain’ (for *ouch!*) [13]. In this vein, the meanings of a number of interjections in different languages have been described using the NSM technique. They include *fu*

and *oj* in Polish and Russian, *pfui* in German, *fy* in Danish, *feh* in Yiddish, *ach, fe, t'fu, ojej, och* in Polish [13]; *waa3!* and *ai1jaa3!* in Cantonese [9]; and *oops, wow, gee, gosh, yikes, ugh and yuck* in English [42,43]. *Atuu!*, *dzaa!*, *u:ru!*, *u:wui!* and other interjections in Ewe have been analyzed using the NSM technique [20]. Some of the components in the explications for these interjections are “I didn't think before that it would be like this”, “I feel something good/bad because of this” and “I don't want something like this to touch part of my body”.

### 3. Meanings of *Tweaa*

[44]: 307) describe *tweaa* as “an interjection of uttermost contempt”, while [45] states that its use shows “an utmost disregard and contempt for the addressee as a subhuman” (p. 370). Consider its use in the following face-to-face discourse:

1. AK: *Me dee mempe onipa a m'ano beka no. Nea ene no awo mpo na mereye no deen na menese nea ne sso atw Birim mu Tweaa.* (Akan)

‘As for me, I don't like one who comes close to my lips [one whom I have to insult]. I don't even have regard for the one who has had a child with her, let alone the one whose hoe has fallen into the Birim River [one who is impotent] *Tweaa!*’ [4]: 55).

Example 1 is an excerpt from a recorded conversation presented in Ref. [4]. AK is a 70-year-old woman who is insulting her son-in-law, whom she regards as impotent. In the second sentence, AK states that she does not even have regard for the one who has had a child with her daughter (this could be an ex-partner of her daughter). This means that she has no regard for her son-in-law too. Expressing this with *tweaa* shows the degree of the speaker's contempt for her son-in-law.

Example 2 is an utterance from a conversation between two friends, Fosua and Aba in a scene of the Akan movie, *Medofo be ba*. The background to this utterance is that, Aba was trying to urge Fosua to consider a gentleman (Kobby) who has expressed his interest in marrying her because the gentleman is affluent. In response, Fosua said:

2. Fosua: *Wo gyafu ye guy guy kwa, etae ko sre atadee wo Nimo boutique, tweaa! obetumi aware me?* (Akan)

‘Your colleague is just a show-off, he often goes to borrow clothes from Nimo's boutique, *tweaa!* Can he marry me?’

Fosua refers to Kobby as *wo gyafu* ‘your colleague’ (used in a casual conversation, sometimes, when one wants to avoid the name of a referent in a potentially conflictive situation) and claims he is *guy guy kwa* ‘merely a show-off’. She indicates that Kobby is not worthy to have her hand in marriage because he even borrows the clothes he wears. She uses *tweaa* to express the idea that Kobby is disreputable.

It has been mentioned earlier that although interjections generally occur in spoken language, as in Examples (1–2) above, they sometimes occur in written texts that reflect spoken language. With the current trend of online interaction, it is not uncommon to find interjections in discussions among Ghanaians on interactive news websites and social media websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Depending on the goal the commenter wants to achieve, they may choose an interjection in English or a Ghanaian language. For instance, in the online examples hereafter discussed, the main language used is English but the interjection is in Akan.

Before the reader comments posted on GhanaWeb are presented and discussed, let us consider comments (3) and (4), which are examples of the use of *tweaa* on Facebook and Twitter. In order to protect the identity of the people who posted these comments, I have used pseudonyms.

3. An inefficient coach, and a number of old players to ‘inspire’ an ineffective B. Stars team? *Tweaa!* #UprootKAppiah [Jomawi 04/09/2017 ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com))]

The use of *tweaa* in Example (3) shows Jomawi's contempt for the old players of the Ghana National Football Team and for their coach. Jomawi describes the coach as "inefficient" because of the poor performance of the team during the football matches for the World Cup qualifiers. The comment ends with the hashtag "#UprootKAppiah", which means the coach, Mr. Kwesi Appiah, should be fired.

4. Manchester United deɛ anka my school team kraa gud, tweaa this be team (Ghanaian Pidgin English)

'Even my school's team is better than Manchester United. Tweaa! Is this a team? [Bema 5/05/2018 ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com))]

Here, Bema employs *tweaa* to express a strong resentment for Manchester United for losing 1-0 to Brighton in the Premier League on May 4, 2018. They denigrate the team by comparing it to their school team, which they claim is better. Bema is, obviously, very disappointed in Manchester United, thus, this comment.

On the basis of the examples above and my consultations with native speakers, I propose the explication that follows:

*Tweaa* [tɛɪɪaa]

- (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 semantic explication demonstrates that the use of *tweaa* involves a connection between (a) a negative emotion, triggered in the speaker towards the target as a result of a negative perception or evaluation by the speaker about the target, and (b) a communicative impulse (the speaker wants other people to know how they feel about the target). The first component of the explication relates an immediate thought with a "very bad" feeling that is based on the speaker's knowledge about the target. The second line in component (a) indicates that the speaker believes that they have some knowledge of something negative about the target which may be a publicly available fact or notion.

For instance, in the case of the DCE in the video described in Section 1, it could be a general perception that, politicians are corrupt, thieves, liars, etc. In Example 1, the speaker knows that her son-in-law is impotent and in Example 2, Fosua knows that Kobby portrays himself as an affluent person, but he borrows clothes from Nimo's boutique to keep appearances. Other people may or may not be privy to these pieces of information. The "very bad feeling" in the next line could be a feeling of disgust or any form of negative feeling such as disrespect, resentment, etc. The last line of component (a) "I can't not feel like this", shows the strength of the feeling that triggers the outburst of *tweaa*. As reflected in component (b), by the utterance of *tweaa*, a speaker openly expresses their emotion towards the target to let other people know that the target is contemptible. This explication can enhance the understanding needed to see how *tweaa* is serviceable as a rhetorical device in online political commentary discussed in the following section.

#### 4. *Tweaa* as a rhetorical device in online political commentary

The online reader comments presented here can be viewed as the attitudes of some citizens towards three key individuals involved in the 2016 general elections. These individuals are (a) John Dramani Mahama, the president at the time who was seeking a second term, (b) Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, a former first lady who was one of the presidential candidates, and (c) Charlotte Osei, the chairperson of the electoral commission (EC). Generally, the commenters sought to

discredit the presidential candidates and subvert their influence on the electorates, and also, to express their reservations about the credibility and integrity of the electoral commissioner. The reason why reservations were expressed about the electoral commissioner is that she had been appointed by the sitting president, who, as already mentioned, was seeking a second term. To these citizens, who may be members of the opposition parties, she was going to do the bidding of the one who gave her the appointment and manipulate the election results to favour him.

Six examples, consisting of two comments with *tweaa* directed at each of the abovementioned individuals, are analyzed. For each example presented, the headline of the news report to which a comment was given is provided first. This is followed by the date and time the comment was published online, the pseudonym of the commenter, the comment, and its analysis.

5. Re: Everything I do, I do for Ghanaians – Mahama

Date & Time: 02-09-16 21:15

Name: Boach

Comment: Wat do u do 4 Ghanaians. Tweaaa. We ghanaians made a huge mistake voting 4u to become president in de first place. But we wil never make such a mistake again. Bcos u don even no why Ghanaians gave u the power if not 4 our welfare. But u make ghanaians very sad wid d dis suffering.

The commenter shows their disagreement with the president by posing the question *wat do u do 4 Ghanaians* 'what do you do for Ghanaians?' They then express contempt for Mahama's (in)actions. As indicated in the second line of component (a) of the explication, the use of *tweaa* suggests that it is a publicly available notion that the president has done a lot of self-serving things, things that have not been good for Ghana. Therefore, it is contemptible for him to say 'everything I do, I do for Ghanaians'. Furthermore, the commenter states how they and all other Ghanaians feel disappointed and regret voting the president into power, and how they are determined not to make that mistake again.

6. I used my first term to lay a solid foundation - Mahama

Date & Time: 06-09-16 18:43

Name: AB

Comment: Anything this man speaks, I feel like vomiting ... tweaaa!! Solid foundation of thievery!!

The expression of disgust in Comment 6 is explicitly presented with a visually repugnant act "vomiting" and augmented with "tweaaa". It appears that the expression of disgust, as expressed in this example, is for the words of the target, and not necessarily his person. This is seen in "Anything this man speaks ...". That is, AB states their physical reaction to anything Mahama says and expresses their feelings by using the interjection. Nevertheless, it is impossible to rule out the implication of disrespect for Mahama totally. The implication of disrespect is amplified if one considers the first part of the comment together with the concluding remark, "Solid foundation of thievery!!", in terms of the fact that Mahama was the president at the time. With regard to the Ghanaian sociocultural norms of communication, it is unacceptable for a citizen to speak about him in this manner on a public platform.

7. Re: Ghana needs a female leader now - Nana Konadu

Date & Time: 11-10-16 15:57

Name: FONKAR

Comment: TWEAAAAA, NO KAKAI UGLY FEMALE PRESIDENT Keep on dreaming on your wishful-thinking fantasy, that will never come to pass till your grave, Ghana deserves much more better than you this kakai ugly witch konadu

FONKAR is not objecting to the need of a female president, but the use of "TWEAAAAA" at the beginning of the comment implies their

revulsion against Nana Konadu being that female president. They employ name calling, referring to her as KAKAI ('monster' in Ga language) and 'ugly witch'. Their strong disapproval towards her can be seen through the hyperbolic phrase "much more better" used in the statement "Ghana deserves much more better than you ...". Apart from the use of the hyperbolic phrase, the extremity of the negative feeling expressed towards Nana Konadu in this comment is also shown by the use of the elongated form of *tweaa* in capital letters, which signify shouting when used online.

8. Re: I will be Ghana's first female president – Nana Konadu  
 Date & Time: 11-10-16 16:56  
 Name: Teahiabuah  
 Comment: Tweaaaaah Konadu as president? ...

Starting the comment with "Tweaaaaah" conveys the message that the commenter knows something about Konadu that makes her unfit to be president. It can be deduced from the commenter's rhetorical question, "Konadu as president?" that the fact that such "a bad person" might become president fills him much revulsion. The commenter cannot bring themselves to terms with the thought of Konadu being president. As reflected in component (b) of the explication, the use of the interjection draws the attention of the other participants to how the speaker feels about her. The shared understanding of *tweaa* allows others to also disapprove of Konadu.

9. Re: It's impossible for gov't to influence election - Charlotte Osei  
 Date & Time: 03-11-16 14:36  
 Name: KILL ME SOFTLY  
 Comment: This witch will only bring misfortune to gh is care is not taken. a liar like you, Charlote Osei tweeeaaaa

The electoral commissioner is described as a "witch" and a "liar". The use of the pronoun *you* in the phrase "a liar like you, Charlote Osei" indicates a direct attack on her integrity. The commenter reinforces the attack as they elongate *tweaa* just like the commenter in Example 7 and ends the comment with it. The use of *tweaa* in addition to *witch* and *liar* is a signal to the public to treat the commissioner's assertion with contempt, and subsequently, disregard it.

10. Re: Election 2016: I can't be influenced - EC boss  
 Date & Time: 03-11-16 15:41  
 Name: THWARTTHERIGGING  
 Comment: Tweeeaaaa

This comment exemplifies the use of *tweaa* as a self-contained utterance. This independent use of *tweaa* suggests that the commenter is aware of certain characteristics of the electoral commissioner that run converse to the characteristics of a person who cannot be influenced. Instead of giving details, the commenter expresses their contempt for her with only the interjection, considering its rhetoric power. This commenter stretches the interjection to let other participants know the intensity of their negative feelings towards the electoral commissioner.

## 5. Discussion

Generally, like in Example 1, *tweaa* can be used among interactants of unequal social status (in age or authority), provided that the speaker is socially higher than the target. Sometimes, it is used among peers, as in Example 2, to express one's contempt for a person or an idea espoused by the person. However, due to its derogatory implication, its use is not tolerated and is judged as unpardonable when the speaker is younger or considered as socially lower than the target, as seen in Examples 5 and 6. This explains why the Ghanaian politician and government official in the story presented in Section 1 could discontinue the delivery of a speech and walk away on account of a single

utterance of *tweaa*. As I gathered from the interviews, the use of *tweaa* in situations such as Examples 1 and 2 is not uncommon during social interactions among Akans.

Some of the interviewees explained that *tweaa* is akin to spitting, in that when a speaker uses *tweaa* at someone because they said something or did something, it can be interpreted as the speaker is saying to the target, "I spit on you". The extent to which the interjection is lengthened shows the degree of negative emotion being expressed. For emphasis or to demonstrate how strong the feeling of contempt for the target is very strong, the speaker may spit physically after saying *tweaa*. Spitting at someone, in a general sense, is an expression of contempt or disgust towards them. It symbolizes a rejection of them or their idea, thus, it is not tolerated, and it is considered very offensive among the Akans.

In this regard, one can even understand better why the DCE, at hearing *tweaa* was so much offended and had to walk away after an angry outburst on the gathering. Being a native speaker of Akan and an elderly person, Mr. Barima should be well versed in the use of cultural communicative forms and understand the connotations associated with them. That is to say, Mr. Barima most likely understood it as the equivalent of being spat on publicly. It can be inferred from the sentence, "am I your co-equal", that he judged the actions of the health worker as a defiance of the sociocultural communicative norms underpinning asymmetrical interactions that demand that speakers show respect and deference to interactants of higher social status. The use of *tweaa*, in the words of Flamenbaum ([5]: 140), "poses a direct challenge to both the legitimacy of Barima's authority and rights to speak, as well as the deeply entrenched system of age-and-status-graded respect hierarchies that undergird those rights". Since the speaker was unidentified, Mr. Barima meted out his punishment to everyone present. He withheld the message he had for them, ignored their pleas and left the place, thereby disrupting the whole program.

Examples 5 to 10 illustrate how *tweaa* was deployed by commenters on GhanaWeb as a very effective device to directly challenge and undermine the reputation of the presidential candidates and the electoral commissioner during the campaign period of the 2016 general elections. Considering that the referents in these examples are national leaders, the use of *tweaa* is inappropriate and unacceptable just as it is in the DCE's case. However, unlike the people who were gathered for the DCE's speech, it is improbable that the commenters would face any punitive action. Due to the effective anonymity that is ensured on GhanaWeb, these commenters can circumvent sociocultural and religious authorities who usually play the role of gatekeepers of 'appropriate' communication [46–48]. This demonstrates and affirms the notion that during online interactions, some of the participants freely express their opinions with certain language forms that they might not use if they were involved in a face-to-face interaction with their referents [49–51].

In line with the explication, it is seen that the "very bad" feeling that triggered the use of the interjection in all the examples presented is as a result of how the commenters perceive the target or their knowledge of something negative about the target. For instance, in Examples 5 and 6, the commenters imply that Mahama (the president of Ghana at the time) is a self-seeking politician and a thief respectively while both Konadu (a former first lady) and Charlotte (the electoral commissioner at the time) are regarded as evil in Examples 7 and 9 respectively. It can be observed from Examples 5 to 10 that *tweaa* has been lengthened in various degrees. This technique of word lengthening in the examples is not applied arbitrarily but as stated earlier, it suggests emphasis on the emotion/feeling the commenters wanted to express [52,53,59]. Thus, if the use of *tweaa* expresses "a very bad feeling" as indicated in the third line of component (a) in the explication, then this study can claim that the lengthened forms such as *tweaaaaa* in Example 7 expresses "a very very bad feeling". Note that the varying degrees of intensity of the emotion expressed as demonstrated in these examples is not surprising because research has shown that naturally, the discussion of politics is

done in an emotional manner (see Refs. [2,54,55]).

As shown in Examples 3 to 10 (that is, all the online examples presented), the Akan interjection *tweaa* appears even in comments that were otherwise in English. This corroborates the assertion that interjections are one of the linguistic forms that bilinguals switch between codes to achieve certain communicative purposes [56]. As already stated, every interjection is language specific, with no precise equivalent in English. Therefore, any attempt at translating it will make it lose some meaning content. In this regard, if the actual meaning of *tweaa*, like the meaning of other derogatory expressions, is preserved through code-switching, the target(s) can feel the intended effect in an unmitigated manner. The common assertion is that, emotive expressions such as *tweaa* express one's thoughts and feelings better when maintained in their original language [25,26]. The present study, thus validates the view that one of the reasons why bilinguals or multilinguals switch codes to use interjections is that they communicate their emotions towards their targets in a more economical and effective manner.

## 6. Conclusions

The paper has sought to explain how a single term, *tweaa*, serves as an effective rhetorical device in political discourse. It has described the context in which this Akan emotive interjection became part of the vocabulary of Ghanaians and was used by online participants in their discourse on the 2016 presidential elections. It has illustrated how commenters employ *tweaa* to express strong disapproval for the presidential candidates and the electoral commissioner and portray them as disreputable. It is notable that in the examples related to politics, different levels of intensity of the emotions being expressed were displayed by means of word lengthening. The differences in the length of the "stretched" interjections and also, the connection between the degree of lengthening and the strength of emphasis in the individual uses of the interjection is beyond the scope of this research and can be considered for further research.

The use of *tweaa* as in the political contexts herein discussed flouts the Ghanaian sociocultural norms and values of communicating with authority figures. A critical consideration of the comments indicates that in as much as people have a clear understanding of how offensive the use of *tweaa* can be in the Ghanaian context, especially in asymmetrical interactions, they use it freely in online commentary. This is not unexpected due to the lack of gatekeeping, monitoring, and accountability associated with interactions on online platforms such as GhanaWeb. The participants are well aware that they are divorced from the consequences of their comments. The use of *tweaa* in this article is similar to the use of other offensive Akan terms such as *kwasea* 'fool/oaf' and *aboa* 'animal/beast' and all other linguistic forms people use against authority only when they feel they can escape the consequences of their language choices. The connection between the use of *tweaa* and the act of spitting is interesting and can be investigated further from the perspective of sound symbolism.

Also, the paper has shown language choice and language use in online news reader comments by demonstrating that the commenters draw on their linguistic repertoire as bilinguals/multilinguals for interactional purposes rather than just displaying that they speak two or more languages. The results of this study is consistent with some observations in the code-switching literature that bilinguals often switch between languages to use highly emotive expressions because such expressions are more likely to have the effect a speaker intends when said in their original language. Even though the language of the online interaction is English, the commenters prefer to code-switch and use the Akan interjection *tweaa* which is a self-contained utterance to express negative feelings towards others in a more precise and effective way.

In terms of a theoretical contribution, this study has demonstrated that it is not enough to define *tweaa* as "an interjection that expresses contempt". This is because "contempt" is an English word which does not have an exact equivalent in Akan. The meaning of *tweaa* has been

rigorously stated using the semantic explication method of the NSM approach. The explanatory paraphrase with simple cross-translatable words aptly lays bare the meaning of the interjection to reflect to cultural outsiders what it means to cultural insiders. Future studies can be done with this method to explore the meanings of other Akan emotive interjections, such as *apuu*, and their range of use in different contexts.

## Acknowledgements

The entire research out of which this paper was extracted is sponsored by the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. I am very grateful to my supervisor, Professor Cliff Goddard for talking me into writing this paper, his help with the formulation of the explication, and his extensive comments on its earlier versions. I would also like to thank Derrick Ocansey, Vincent Tawiah, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments that greatly improved the paper. The inadequacies of the paper remain my own.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2019.100047>.

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