

EUPHEMISTIC-METAPHORS IN NZEMA DISCOURSE IN SEXUALITY

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Abstract:

This paper qualitatively examines the euphemistic means of mitigating vulgarity in Nzema discourse. The paper focuses on certain expressions that involve the activities of sex, sexual organs and menstruation; with the intent to discussing how the people of Nzema use a 'fair' and 'polished' means to engage in such 'tabooed' utterances in order to avoid unpleasant speeches. The paper adopts Goddard's (2006) Ethno-pragmatic model, which maintains that speech practices are best understood from culture-internal perspective. Data were collected mainly from a primary source, through recordings from interviews with native respondents. Some data were also tapped from spontaneous natural speech contexts as well as introspections based on the researcher's intuitions as an indigenous speaker. The paper reveals that the Nzema euphemistically describe the male genitalia as 'a stick/tree', 'a pestle', 'a gun' and 'a match', while conceptualising the female genitalia as 'mortar', 'Bible/book', 'property', and 'chief's palace' among others. It demonstrates that the Nzema as part of their culture do not plainly utter vulgar words; especially those related to sexuality and menstruation. Rather, they resort to culturally established euphemistic strategies to cover up the tabooed words and to strip off the discomforts and embarrassments that might be caused when a listener hears such 'plain' utterances. These polished means of discussing sexuality and its related notions are best understood by the people of Nzema as a cultural group. In essence, any member of the Nzema traditional society who explicitly makes such utterances without 'fairly beautifying' them is regarded 'uncultured' and lacking proper parental upbringing.

Key word: Communication, Vulgarity, Euphemisms, Linguistic Taboos, Ethno-pragmatics.

1.0 Introduction

Among the Nzema of Ghana, like in many other African societies and perhaps beyond, certain utterances are culturally regarded as taboo; which are not mentioned without linguistic hedges and safeguards. Agyekum (2002) describes taboo as a system of placing prohibitions and restrictions on certain acts and utterances in a society. Taboo may be behavioural or verbal (Agyekum, 2002; Agbedor & Johnson, 2009) which is a universal phenomenon practised by every human society around the globe; however, the concept of taboo is language and culture-

¹Nzema is part of the Niger-Congo Kwa group of languages, which is spoken mainly in Ghana and some part of La Côte d'Ivoire (see Annan, 1980; Kwesi, 1992). The language and people who speak it are referred to as Nzema. The Nzema people occupy the South-West part of the Western Region of Ghana.

specific, in that what may be forbidden in a particular society may be a norm in another society (Agyekum, 2002: 370). In the view of Wardhaugh (2006), taboo is a way through which a society expresses its disapproval of certain kinds of attitudes and behaviours that are believed to be harmful and destructive to its members, either for supernatural reasons or because such attitudes are violations to cultural and moral codes.

Describing linguistic taboos, Fakuade, Kemidirim and Nwosu (2012) opine that some expressions are to be avoided because resorting to their direct use in public is tantamount to disregarding certain moral ethics in terms of religious and cultural norms. This implies that certain concepts are banned to be spoken freely in the public domain. A part of such unmentionables, which shall be the focus of our discussion, has to do with communications that involve human sexuality and menstruation, particularly among the Nzema of Ghana.

Akanbi (2015: 173) avers that, the culture of a people can determine what to say and what not to say; and that there is always a kind of decorum in the speech of individuals. This is true of the Nzema, in that people do not make haphazard choice of words in communicative situations; rather, they display communicative competence by resorting to acceptable utterances in appropriate contexts of speech interaction. In Nzema traditional setting, matters concerning sexual activities and sexual organs are not discussed straightforward because they are perceived to be obscene, profane, and sometimes offensive; which largely come with embarrassment and displeasure in the ears of the listener. In this vein, the language speakers have established certain 'cover up' mechanisms in order to lessen or absolutely get rid of such unpleasant sayings, so as to sanitise their sexual-related discourses. These euphemistic-metaphors are formulated based on the cultural values, norms, beliefs and cognitive experiences of the Nzema people.

Several scholars have posited various definitions on the concept of euphemism. For example, Allan & Burridge (1991, as cited in Al-Khasawneh, 2018: 218) described a euphemism as a courteous means through which a harsh, inappropriate, obscene, or offensive word is substituted or replaced by a more polite one. In a more concise sense, a euphemism, as in the literature has also been referred to as 'verbal hygiene' (see Cameron, 1995), 'polished and beautified expression' (Agyekum, 2002; 2013), 'implicit and comfortable expression' (Liu, 2016), 'fair speech' (Annan, 2017), 'inoffensive language', 'clean language', 'cover up utterance', 'polite expression', 'coined and indirect utterance' and 'circumlocutory language' among many other associated connotations. However, in my view, all these connotations on the subject of euphemism converge to a common notion that it is a way of mitigating and/or expelling shocks, embarrassments and discomforts in communication. Euphemistic utterances are capable of neutralising the unpleasantness of certain tabooed terms. They actually serve as face-saving mechanisms to both the speaker and the hearer (Wardhaugh, 2006).

1.1 The Rationale and Research Objectives

The effective use of euphemisms in discourse is culture internally constructed, though the phenomenon is perceived as a universal feature of language usage (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The fact that the notion of euphemism is a wide-spread and a cross-cultural concept has

stimulated enormous literature on it cross-linguistically. In Japanese, for instance, Ivanova (2015) studied euphemisms from the perspective of some thematic fields. Gathigia, Ndungu, and Njoroge (2015) also investigated sexual intercourse euphemisms in Gikuyu, a Bantu language spoken in Kenya. Karimnia and Khodashenas (2016) examined euphemistic strategies used by Iranian EFL learners with focus on death and dying, while Radulović (2016) did a comparative study of euphemisms in English and Serbian public discourse. Lui (2016) tackled a comparative analysis of euphemisms in English and Chinese, Mocanu (2017) studied taboos and euphemisms in the religious language, while Almufaez, Alawani, and Altalhi (2018) also undertook a contrastive study of euphemisms in English and Arabic. From a sociolinguistic perspective, Fakuade et al (2012) examined linguistic taboos in Igbo. Ofoegbu and Okoli (2018) also did a morphological analysis of euphemistic expressions in Igbo, while Akanbi (2015) looked at the use of vulgarity in Yoruba proverbs. Abijo and Ajandeo (2018) explored linguistic taboos in Yoruba society and their relevance to teaching-learning in Nigerian secondary schools.

Specifically, in the area of Ghanaian linguistic and anthropological research, a number of studies have also been undertaken by some renowned scholars, including Agyekum (2002) who extensively discussed euphemistic means of expressing menstruation among the Akan. Agbedor and Johnson (2009) also focused on Ewe verbal taboos from the perspective of indirection, Alhassan (2012), in his PhD dissertation, titled “The construction and reproduction of gender in Dagbani”, also highlighted some euphemistic means of talking about sex organs and avoiding sexually-explicit terms.

Gleaning from the foregoing studies, it appears that there is a rich body of cross-cultural scholarly contributions on tabooed and euphemistic expressions in the literature; however, I have not yet found any work that focuses on extensive exploration of the convenient ways of engaging in sexual-related discourse among the Nzema. To the best of my knowledge, the only study on Nzema euphemisms was done by Tomekyin and Nyame (2019), which sheds light on euphemistic utterances related to pregnancy, birth, deadly sicknesses/diseases, death, sexual organs and sex. Tomekyin and Nyame did a good work; however, they provided scanty information on euphemisms concerning sex. In other words, their discussions did not demonstrate exhaustive exploration of 'Nzema euphemistic-metaphors on sexuality', perhaps because they did not consider the subject as the focus of their research. This present study, thus, seeks to fill an essential gap; revealing the most interesting aspects of Nzema euphemisms on sexual discourse, and to expand the frontiers of the previous works. It is also prudent to mention that the dominant theoretical framework adopted for most of these previous studies is the Politeness Theory espoused by Brown and Levinson (1987). Unlike this present study, none of the works indicated above adopted the Ethno-pragmatic Model (Goddard, 2006) as its theoretical backing; which aptly renders this study different from those previous ones. The study is guided by the following objectives as to:

1. Ascertain how the Nzema conceptualise the male and female genitalia.
2. Discuss the euphemistic means of discussing sexuality in Nzema.
3. Highlight the appropriate means of making reference to menstruation in Nzema.

1.2 Notes on Nzema Euphemisms

The goal of this paper, though, is to unearth the euphemistic strategies adopted to 'refine' discourses related to sexual activities, sexual organs and menstruation among the Nzema, I deem it relevant to provide a brief overview of some of the various communicative instances of deploying euphemisms in Nzema traditional rhetoric for audience to have more insights and best appreciate the discussions. Somewhat in the form of idiomatic expressions, the people of Nzema relish in using traditional euphemisms to conveniently discuss matters concerning old age, death, theft, disgrace, madness, ignorance, unnecessary wandering, lactation, as well as bodily effluvia and excretion such as defaecation, urination and flatulence among other things that are regarded offensive to be discussed freely. Table 1 shows briefly, some of these euphemistic concepts; nonetheless, the core data of the paper shall be critically examined in section 4.

Table 1: Some Euphemistic Concepts in Nzema Rhetoric

Tabooed concepts	Euphemistic expressions ²	English translation
I. On defaecation Tabooed word <i>ebinli</i>	a. Mekɔ baka zo b. Mesoho me gyakɔ	a. I am visiting the tree b. I am escorting my legs
II. On urination Tabooed word <i>miene</i>	a. Mekɔ meahɔgua nzule b. Megua aze	a. I am going to pour water b. I am pouring water down
III. On death Tabooed word <i>ewule</i>	a. Yehɔ ye ɔkɔla nzi b. Yela ye bɔne zo	a. He has returned to his soul b. He has slept on his left hand
IV. On theft Tabooed word <i>awule</i>	a. ɔ sa wale/ɔ sa le tendenle b. ɔ sa ɔnga ɔ nwo	a. His hands are long b. His hands do not touch his body

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis/discussions of data in this paper are intended to be in the lens of Goddard's (2006) Ethno-pragmatic model. Goddard asserts that, though pragmatic 'universalist' over the years has gained dominance, a new pragmatic paradigm which he calls 'Ethno-pragmatics' has refused to dash away. The basic assumption of ethno-pragmatics therefore maintains that, speech practices are best understood from culture-internal perspective. It focuses on understanding discourse from the point of view of specific cultural perceptions, linguistic choices and communicative practices that are best conceived by a specific cultural group. Though culture is perceived to be a universal phenomenon, every cultural group is believed to have certain peculiar ethno-pragmatic concepts based on socio-cultural worldview and traditional experiences which enable the people of such particular local culture to better understand their own speech practices.

²It can be gleaned from table 1 that the tabooed words (in italics) are not explicitly mentioned in the various euphemistic expressions that are used by the Nzema to refer to their respective concepts.

More significantly, euphemistic speeches are noted to be culturally-oriented, and that they are conventionally understood by native speakers of a particular society. In other words, any 'outside member' who may not actually have a fair knowledge of a particular culture in terms of their values, beliefs, morals, general worldview including their linguistic patterns would find it difficult to understand their speech practices (Goddard, 2006; see also Sharifian, 2011 on cultural conceptualisations and language). For example, among the Nzema, if a woman sits with part of her panties unconsciously exposed, someone on seeing the panties would simply alert the woman by saying; *kpɔla ɔ bonyi zo* 'wipe on top of your nose'. This same euphemistic utterance is applicable in informing a man to cover up his private part in case it is exposed. The expression, *kpɔla ɔ bonyi zo*, among others which are meant to avoid profanity in Nzema are best understood specifically by the people of Nzema. Therefore, the choice of the ethno-pragmatic framework to underpin this study may be quite appropriate, since the Nzema within their own cultural setting had instituted certain euphemistic mechanisms to sanitise their verbal interactions related to sexuality and other shocking comments; which are best understood by members of the culture.

3. Methodology

The paper employs the qualitative research approach, which is concerned with a method of describing an event or a phenomenon without making use of numerical data (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2009). The choice of the qualitative approach is motivated by its flexibility in nature, providing the opportunity for a researcher to make adequate and comprehensive description of a particular phenomenon. Data for this ethnographic study were gathered from a primary source, involving information obtained from interviewees, and from participant and non-participant natural speech encounters. My knowledge as a native speaker of Nzema is also crucially brought to bear on this study.

The people of Nzema constitute the *Dwɔmɔɔ* District, *Ellɔmbɔɔ* District and *Evalɔɔ* (Nzema East District) in the Western part of Ghana. In order to avoid biases, and to obtain more reliable data for analysis, which could yield a true reflection of the linguistic choices and etiquettes of sexual discourse among the Nzema, I considered respondents who are indigenous speakers and are residence of communities in the three Nzema Districts. The various communities visited were *Axim* and *Bameangɔ* (in the Nzema East District), *Adoabo* and *Kekam* (in the *Ellɔmbɔɔ* District) as well as *Awiane* and *Mgbɔtɔba* (in the *Dwɔmɔɔ* District). These six (6) communities (two from each District), apart from being larger communities with many indigenous inhabitants, were also selected for the study because the researcher could easily get access to the places.

In this ethnographic study, eighteen (18) indigenous speakers of Nzema were selected and contacted as respondents for interviews. From each community (as shown above), I interviewed three (3) people. In this endeavour, prominence was given to grown-ups between the ages of fifty (50) years and seventy (70) years. The rationale is that old people have more experience and broader communicative competence as compared with the young ones (Rababa'h & Malkawi, 2012). Further, the elderly in many African contexts are perceived as 'the custodians of cultural values and etiquettes', 'the

symbol of wisdom' and 'society's reservoir of memory' (see also Thompson & Agyekum, 2015: 23). Therefore, twelve (12) out of the eighteen (18) participants were elderly people, while the remaining six (6) comprised the youth between the ages of twenty (20) and thirty (30) years. This was done to find out whether the younger generation (youth) may be employing certain 'contemporary' euphemistic means of avoiding vulgarity in relation to sexual discourse among the Nzema. Regarding their gender, the females were nine (9) and the males were also nine (9); this is because both genders do engage in sexual-related discourse. In essence, the technique for sampling the respondents is worth describing as purposive.

The techniques for obtaining the primary data involved elicitation through interviews, as well as participant and non-participant observations. The interviews were guided by a list of questions for the purpose of controlling the interview process. I visited the communities on different occasions and met the respondents separately for the interview sessions. As a matter of ethics, I began each session by seeking the consent of my respondent and explaining the purpose of the exercise. This maximised co-operation and enabled me to tape-record the interviews/discussions. I picked additional data when I observed and sometimes took part in arbitration proceedings among the Nzema, which were meant to resolve conflicts and issues related to marriage/divorce. Here, some discussions on sexuality obviously took place, which I hand-recorded in a data collection notebook. I also tapped some data from interlocutors in spontaneous speeches, including my native speaker intuitions. The recorded data were later transcribed and translated for analysis.

4.0 Data Presentation and Discussion

This section deals with the analysis and discussion of data. As part of the data presentation, the researcher has indicated the examples (euphemistic utterances) obtained through spontaneous discourse by abbreviating them as (SD). Some personal examples, which were generated through the researcher's intuitive knowledge, are also indicated as (PE). Other examples that are not referenced are those gathered during the interviews and observations.

4.1 Conceptualising the Male and Female Genitalia

In talking about both male and female sexual organs, the people of Nzema use 'circumlocutory jargons' in metaphorical sense to describe such 'sacred' parts of the human body. The following expressions in (1-4) show how the Nzema, in their daily communication, perceive and conceive the male sexual organ as a tree, a gun, manhood and total self of the man.

1. Ye baka mɔɔla ye ɔɔɔ nu la ɔn-le ekyi
3SG tree COMP sleep 3SG thigh. PL inside CDET NEG-COP small
'His tree that lies between his thighs is not small'.
2. Me-die me-di kɔ ɔ hu etu ne te kpalo
1SG-collect 1SG-eat COMP 2SG.POSS husband gun DEF shoot well
'I believe that your husband's gun can shoot properly'.

3. Ye mrenyia nu yɔ se (PE)
3SG.POSS manhood inside COP hard
'His manhood is strong'.
4. ɔ nwo wɔ ɔ nwo gyɔɔnyɛ (PE)
3SG self exist 3SG self proper
'His self (body) is indeed active'.

The expressions in (1-4) are meant to avoid direct mentioning of the male sexual organ, which is originally (traditionally) referred to as toalɔ 'penis'. In (1) and (2), we observe that the tabooed word toalɔ is not overtly mentioned; instead, baka 'tree' and etu 'gun' are respectively deployed to represent the male sexual organ. The metaphoric description of the concept of penis seems largely applicable in the sense that the penis, when erect, appears as straight and as hard as a tree or a gun. Among the Nzema, the male sexual organ is perceived to be a symbol of 'absolute manhood', and so they describe it as mrenyia nu 'manhood' or 'inside of a man' as evidenced in (3). In (4), the somewhat unmentionable, toalɔ 'penis' is replaced by nwo 'self' or 'body' of a man. Here, also, it is assumed that the penis makes up the total body of a man, without which the man is not complete. All these utterances are best understood by the people of Nzema as part of the convenient ways of speaking about the male sexual organ without making any explicit pronouncement of toalɔ 'penis'.

The female sexual organ is another sensitive part that the Nzema always try to avoid mentioning plainly; especially in public discourse. In examples (5-11), I show some of the euphemistic ways of conceptualising the female genitalia in Nzema discourse context.

- Kpondɔ dɔɔse keda wɔ ɔba ne azo (SD)
Search.IMP panties cover 3SG.POSS 'ɔba' DEF top
'Look for panties to cover your ɔba'.
6. Keda wɔ agyapadeɔ ne azo
Cover.IMP 3SG.POSS property DEF top
Cover your property'.
7. ɔ-le raalɔ ɔti siezie wɔ ahenfie ɔkɔ
2SG-COP female CONJ sanitise.IMP 2SG.POSS palace there
'You are a woman, and so keep your palace tidy'.
8. Nɔɔzo biala bɔ-si ye duba ne anu (SD)
Night every 3PL-pound. HAB 3SG.POSS mortar DEF inside
'They pound in her mortar every night'.
9. Saa ɔbia a, koto nrinzi wɔ aze boɔ
COND 2SG-bathe CON. PT squat clean 2SG.POSS down well
'If you take your bath, squat and wash your under properly'.

10. Saa raalɔ nwu nrenyia ndɔ a, ɔ nwo buke
COND female see male early CON.PT 3SG self open
'If a girl engages in premature sexual affairs, herself enlarges'.

11. Nyila ɔ-bɔ me mraalɔ nu (SD)
Boil PERF-hit 1SG.POSS womanhood inside
'A boil has swollen within my womanhood.'

In the context of discussing issues related to the female genitalia, the original word *todɔɔ* 'vagina' is considered obscene and therefore not stated openly. In essence, the tabooed word is rather called *ɔba*³, as indicated in (5). Another means of keeping away from the direct mentioning of *todɔɔ* 'vagina' in Nzema is to describe it as *agyapadeɔ* 'property' as shown in example (6). It is described as 'property' because it is owned by the woman, given to her by God, out of which she could gain a lot of wealth from men. Example (7) demonstrates the Nzema conceptualisation of the vagina as *ahenfie*⁴ 'chief's palace'. The Nzema depend on expression (7) to also prevent hearers from feeling uncomfortable within the context of holding discussions on the female genitalia. The vagina is described as a 'chief's palace' in the sense that a man is not supposed to have an opportunity to 'enter' the vagina on a silver platter; he needs to perform necessary marriage rites before getting access, just as one cannot easily enter a chief's palace without first consulting the chief's spokesperson for necessary arrangements. In (8), *todɔɔ* 'vagina' is metaphorically termed as *duba* 'mortar' as the man uses his 'pestle' to pound inside it. The vagina is located between the thighs of a woman; which is somewhat at the lower part of the body, and so the Nzema describe it as *wɔaze* 'the under of a woman' as illustrated in example (9). In (10) and (11), the woman's sexual organ is conceived as something that makes her a real/whole woman; hence, in order to do away with vulgar speeches, the average Nzema speaker would resort to *ɔ nwo* 'herself'/'her whole body' and *yemraalɔ nu* 'her womanhood' respectively.

4.2 Conceptualising the Act of Sex

In Nzema traditional communication related to sexuality, the activity of sexual intercourse is conceptualised as a means of undertaking a particular task, embarking on a journey and as an activity that involves mutual engagement for satisfaction. These notions are examined in turn as follows:

4.2.1 Sexual Intercourse as Performing a Task

The act of having sex with a woman is traditionally known in Nzema as *raalɔɔlilɔ* 'eating a woman' (having sexual intercourse with a woman). However, as a way of preventing such

³*ɔba* is a personal name in Nzema, which is used to refer to females. Therefore, the *todɔɔ* 'vagina', since it is found among women, is euphemistically described by the Nzema as *ɔba*.

⁴*Ahenfie* is the Akan variant of *Belemgbunli sua nu* (in Nzema), which means 'chief's palace'. The Nzema had therefore borrowed the Akan version as shown in expression (7).

vulgar expression, speakers rather perceive the act as a means of doing a particular work, thereby resorting to these expressions exemplified in (12) and (13):

12. Me-kola me-yɔ me ye anwo gyima kpalo (PE)
1SG-can 1SG-do 1SG.POSS wife self work proper
'I can work on my wife very well'.
13. ɔ-n-gola nɔzo gyima ne yɔ (SD)
3SG-NEG-can night work DEF do
'He cannot do the night work'.

In examples (12) and (13), we can deduce that the activity of sexual intercourse is a task that is controlled by the man. In both cases, the woman is portrayed as a passive recipient for whom such work must be done properly.

4.2.2 Sexual Intercourse as Embarking on a Journey

The Nzema also escape vulgar language in terms of sexuality by comparing the activity of sexual intercourse with the process of travelling. For instance, instead of saying ɔngola raalo di 'he cannot have sex with a woman'; which is considered obscene, they 'polish' the statement as indicated in (14-16):

14. ɔ-n-gola adenle zo ko (SD)
3SG-NEG-can road top go
'He cannot travel'.
15. ɔ-n-gola ɔ-n-gɔ moa (PE)
3SG-NEG-can 3SG-NEG-go far
'He cannot go a long journey'.
16. ɔ-n-gyɔ na ye-adwu aze (PE)
3SG-NEG-keep long CONJ 3SG-drop down
'He does not keep long on the way, he alights so quickly'.

The expressions in (14), (15) and (16) show that the 'journey of sexual intercourse' is a responsibility of the man. In the context of discussing sexuality among the Nzema, if a man is unable to satisfy a woman in bed, or if he ejaculates shortly after the insertion, these expressions are used to metaphorically describe the man's inability to make the woman reach her orgasm.

4.2.3 Sexual Intercourse as Mutual Engagement for Excitement

The activity of having sex is also seen as a mutual responsibility between a man and a woman. Each has a role to play; which further suggests that it is 'a face-to-face affair' (see also Tomekyin and Nyame, 2019). Thus, in order not to make explicit reference to the

tabooed expression such as *bɔlɔdi bɔ nwo* 'they are having sex', the Nzema employ some 'refined' statements as follows:

17. *Bɔ-lɔ-fa bɔ nwo* (SD)
3PL-PROG-take 3PL self
'They (male and female) are taking each other'.
18. *Yɔ-nwu yɔ nwo*
3PL-PER. see 3PL self
'We (male and female) have seen each other'.
19. *Yɔ-gya yɔ nwo na yɔ-tɔ-yɔle nrenyia nee raalɔ*
3PL.PERF-marr 3PL self CONJ3PL-NEG-do man CONJ woman
'We have got married, but we have never done man and woman before'.
20. *Saa yɔ-yia ɔkpazo a, yɔnye die* (PE)
COND 3PL-meet bed top CON. PT 3PL eye. PL happy
'If we meet in bed, we both become excited (satisfied)'.

From (17, 18 and 19), we notice the mutual contribution that needs to take place during sexual intercourse. In (17) and (18), *bɔ nwo* 'each other' and *yɔ nwo* 'each other' rightly emphasise that the exercise is not meant for one person, and that both man and woman need to co-operate for maximum satisfaction to be achieved. Examples (19 and 20) also stress that the exercise is a mutual face-to-face engagement (meeting) which takes two parties (man and woman), as evidenced in *yɔtɔyɔle nrenyia nee raalɔ* 'we have not done man and woman' and *saa yɔyiaɔkpazo a* 'if we meet in bed' respectively.

4.3 Contemporary Conceptualisation of the Act of Sex

In the course of gathering data for this study, it was noted that the younger generation (in Nzema society) had established certain 'recent' euphemistic-metaphors in engaging in discussions concerning the act of sex. The data precisely showcased the conceptualisation of sexual intercourse as a process of piercing an object, a process of driving a vehicle and as a process of reading a book. These are further examined below in turn.

4.3.1 Sex as a Piercing Process

In the context of discussing sexuality, the Nzema (particularly the youth), keep themselves away from the direct use of the unpleasant word *ɔlilɔ* 'sexual intercourse' by redefining it as an activity that deals with 'piercing' of an object. Examples (21) and (22) underscore this observation:

21. *Saa me sa sɔ ye a, me-ba-wɔ ye kpalɔ*
COND 1SG.POSS hand hold 3SG CON. PT 1SG-FUT-piece 3SG well
'If I get hold of her, I will piece her very well'.

22. M-raalɔ ɔ-bu, yɔ-lɔ-tua bɔ noko (SD)
PL-woman PERF. COP-common 3PL-PROG-penetrate 3 PLCONJ 'Women have been
in abundance, and so we (the guys) are piercing them'.

In both (21) and (22), the process of penetration; where the male sexual organ is 'injected' into the female sexual organ, becomes the basis for conceptualising ɔlilɔ 'sexual intercourse' as wɔ and tua 'to piece' a woman.

4.3.2 Sex as a Process of Driving a Vehicle

When talking about sexual intercourse, the youth also describe the phenomenon as a manner of driving a vehicle. As a way of refraining from the vulgar word ɔlilɔ 'sexual intercourse', they conceptualise the activity as kale ɔhanlɔ 'driving a car', so as to 'purify' their discourse on sexuality. Some examples from the data are shown as follows:

23. Kale ɔhye Koame a ka a
Car DEM PSN FOC drive. HAB EMPH
'It is Koame who drives this car'.
24. Kale zɔhane me-ha dedee me-gyakyi
Car DEM 1SG-PERF.drive continuous 1SG.PERF-stop
'I have continuously driven that car and stopped'.

In these expressions (23 and 24), which are highly based on context of discussion, the activity of sexual intercourse is metaphorically likened to driving a vehicle; since the man largely takes control and usually manipulates the woman in the process, just as a vehicle driver does. It is worth noting that in both examples, the interpretations transcend the basic (physical) activity of driving a vehicle which may contain a number of passengers. Here, the implication is that a man used to have sex with a woman.

4.3.3 Sex as a Process of Reading a Bible (book)

Another interesting conception of sexual intercourse among the youth of Nzema has to do with its metaphoric description as a means of reading a text (Bible). This also serves as an avenue through which they (the youth) escape unpleasant utterances on sexuality. Let us see two examples from the data as provided in (25) and (26):

25. Me-hɔ-genga Baebolo ne
1SG-go.PERF-read Bible DEF
'I have gone to read the Bible'.
26. Wɔ-genga Nzema Baebolotoo noko ɔ-n-gola Nzema ka
2SG-read.PERF Nzema Bible long CONJ 2SG-NEG-can
Nzema say
'You have read Nzema Bible for a long time, but you still cannot speak Nzema'.

As can be learnt from (25) and (26), the activity of sexual intercourse is perceived as a way of reading a Bible, since it usually happens with the woman's legs widely opened apart, just as

the way a Bible (book) is read by opening/separating the leaves apart. In both examples, reading the Bible does not actually mean the act of reading the Divine Scripture; rather, it is culture internally understood that the activity of sexual intercourse is being described euphemistically and metaphorically. In (26) for example, reading Nzema Bible for a long time, in this context, does not basically mean that a man had continuously read a Bible that is translated into the Nzema language; rather, the folks (especially the youth) by this utterance try to imply that a man (who may be a stranger) had lived and had had sexual intercourse with an Nzema woman for a long period, yet he could not speak the Nzema language.

4.4 Discussing Chastity

In Nzema cultural tradition, girls (young ladies) are usually advised to 'keep themselves' (to hold their chastity) to avoid premature pregnancies and to bring respect and honour to their parents (families). Therefore, in the context of discussing chastity, as part of sexual discourse, the people of Nzema dwell on euphemistic expressions in order to prevent an overt (obscene) statement like: *nrenyia ɔɔdile ye ɔɔ* 'she has never had sexual intercourse with a man'. Some examples of the appropriate utterances in this regard are presented below:

27. *ɔ-n-ze nrenyia* (SD)
3SG-NEG-know man
'She does not know a man'.
28. *ɔ-tɔ-nwunle nrenyia ɔɔ* (SD)
3SG-NEG.PERF-see man ever
'She has not seen a man before'.
29. *ɔ-le amunli*
3SG-COP green/unripe
'She is green' (she is not ripe).

The expressions in (27) and (28) do not actually mean that the young lady cannot recognise a man when she sees one, or has never seen a man with her naked eyes; rather, the examples show euphemistic means of communicating that the lady's virginity has never been broken. In (29), a young lady who has never 'tasted' sexual intercourse is likened to a kind of unripe fruit (which is often green in colour). These are strategies for swerving indecent (vulgar) utterances in connection with chastity.

4.5 Discussing Impotence

The concept of impotence is another crucial and sensitive area of discussion in terms of sexual discourse among the Nzema. If a man is not able to bear a child, people (especially his peers) mock at him and his dead body, as a cultural practice, is made to 'suffer' a particular ritual at the cemetery prior to burial. In this vein, the Nzema had culturally constructed many euphemistic means of talking about the subject of impotence so that they could desist from making any inconvenient statement such as: *ɔ toa ɔwu* 'his penis has died' or *ɔngola ɔnli raalo* 'he cannot have sex with a woman'. One thing that seems quite interesting here is that the Nzema people have various expressions to describe three different levels of impotence, depending on the state, degree or severity of the man's condition. These are highlighted in the following sub-headings.

4.5.1 Expressing Absolute Malfunction of the Male Sexual Organ

In the context of discussing impotence, examples (30), (31) and (32) are usually quoted to specifically indicate that a man's sexual organ has completely become 'dead' (does not erect at all). Some of the 'purified' expressions are:

30. Ye etu ɔ-dɔ nzule nu (SD)
3SG.POSS gun PERF-fall water inside
'His gun has fallen into water'.
31. ɔ-n-le nrenyia (PE)
3SG-NEG-COP man
'He is not a man'.
32. ɔ nwoɔn-le ɔkɔ (PE)
3SG self NEG-exist there
'His self (body) is not alive'.

In (30), the malfunctioning status of the male sexual organ is metaphorically described as a gun that has fallen into a pool of water. Obviously, if a gun is shot while it is kept in water, it cannot sound and 'fire' effectively, and so this is the essence of describing the malfunctioning nature of the male sexual organ as a gun that is drowned in water. Examples (31) and (32) are used more or less to show the Nzema perception that a man's sexual organ (a stronger one, of course) is what actually keeps him going as a real and complete man; despite his wealth. Therefore, when it does not function, the man is taken not to be a real/whole man and sometimes he is not accorded much respect if people realise his status.

4.5.2 Expressing Decline in the Strength of the Male Sexual Organ

The Nzema also have special expressions to talk about the condition where a man's sexual organ may erect though, but may suffer a decline in strength, resulting in the inability to undertake vigorous sexual intercourse. In this regard, the expressions (in 33-35) are commonly deployed euphemistically to demonstrate a man's inability to maintain erection, such as the following:

33. Ye anwosesebɔɔ ɔ-ha aze
3SG strength PERF-go down
'His strength has gone down'.
34. Ye mrenyia ɔ-ha aze
3SG manhood PERF-go down
'His manhood has gone down'.
35. ɔ nwoɔ ɔ-ha aze
3SG self PERF-go down
'His self (body) has gone down'.

In all the above examples (33, 34 and 35), we can find the incorporation of the words *ɔha aze*, which means 'has gone down'. These permeate the utterances to indicate a reduction/decline in the ability of the male sexual organ. In (33), the man's strength that is said to have gone down does not actually make reference to a reduction in his physical strength to either fight or perform any herculean task that may require heavy muscles; rather, in this context, reference is being made to the fact that his ability to maintain erection and continue to 'work' perfectly (during sexual intercourse) has indeed reduced. In (34) and (35), as has been hinted earlier, a man's sexual organ is considered to be his 'total manhood' and 'total body'. Thus, if there is a decline in the strength of his sexual organ, then the whole of his manhood and body could be described to have deteriorated.

4.5.3 Expressing a Man's Inability to Impregnate a Woman

The inability of a man to make a woman conceive can be another level of impotence as the data showcased. In the context of discussing this level of impotence, the Nzema conveniently rely on some euphemistic metaphorical expressions in order to refrain from making such a profane statement like: *ɔdi raalɔ a ɔnnrenzo* 'if he makes sex with a woman, she does not get pregnant'. Two of such utterances that could be made to avoid profanity in this category are presented here:

36. *Ye etu ɔn-gu nane*
 3SG.POSS gun NEG-kill animal
 'His gun does not kill an animal'.

37. *Ye makyese ɔm-kpa senle (SD)*
 3SG.POSS match.PL NEG-catch fire
 'His matches do not burst into flames'.

Both examples (36) and (37) are used to communicate a man's inability to make a woman take seed after sexual intercourse. Here, the man's sexual organ may erect alright, yet may not be able to fertilise the woman even when she is in her ovulation period. In (36), the man's inability to impregnate a woman (after sexual intercourse) is likened to a hunter who could aim at an animal and shoot his gun, but could not eventually kill the animal. In (37), the man's condition (impotence) is comparable with a match that cannot burst into flames, though the box may be containing the sticks.

4.6 Discussing Prostitution/Adultery

When it comes to discussions on promiscuity; where a man or woman would have multiple sexual partners, the Nzema make use of euphemisms in a way to 'save the face' of a person who may have numerous sexual partners, and to prevent unpleasant speech. Some of these euphemistic utterances in the context of discussing prostitution and/or adultery are outlined as follows:

38. *ɔ-n-nea ɔleka ko (SD)*
 3SG-NEG-watch place one
 'She/he does not look at one place'.

39. *ɔ nye ɔn-ga aze (PE)*
 3SG.POSS eye.PL NEG-touch ground
 'His/her eyes do not touch the ground'.

40. ɔ-le twea (SD)
3SG-COP dog
'She/he is a dog'.
41. Ye-va ɔ hu/ye anzi (SD)
3SG.PERF-take 3SG.POSS husband/wife back
'She/he has passed behind her/his husband/wife'.
42. Ye-dwu ye dwomaye-do ɔ kɔme zo
3SG.PERF-raise 3SG.POSS pestle 3SG-put 3SG.POSS neck top
'He has raised his pestle and placed it on his neck'.

The expressions in (38-41) could be used to describe either a man or a woman who may be having many sexual partners in a manner that is not acceptable per Nzema cultural values and tradition⁵, while example (42) is used specifically to refer to a male fornicator. In (38), the interpretation goes beyond not physically gazing at a particular place; rather, it actually means that a man or woman does not stick to one sexual partner (according to Nzema cultural context). Similarly, example (39) does not merely imply that the person's eyes are raised constantly in the sky; rather, it is a suitable means to communicate that someone (man or woman) is promiscuous, and so does not properly conduct himself/herself sexually⁶. Example (40) is usually said metaphorically to describe a man or woman who may behave like a dog; having indiscriminate sex with countless partners anywhere. The expression in (41) is used to imply that a man/woman has indeed committed adultery. In the context of discussing adultery, passing behind one's wife or one's husband implies that a man had sneaked to have sex with another woman who is not a 'legal' wife to the man, and the vice-versa. All these expressions (in 37-40) are meant to do away with an unpleasant statement like: ɔle alimrenyia 'she is a prostitute' or ɔle alimraalo 'he is a fornicator'. Example (42) is used particularly to define a man who sleeps with several women (who may not necessarily be his wives). In (42), the man's sexual organ is comparable with dwoma 'pestle', as it is used to pound inside the woman's 'mortar'. Here, a man placing his 'pestle' (sexual organ in this case) on his neck means that he has made it available for several women besides his wife; thus, he makes sex randomly with multiples of women.

4.7 Discussing the Phenomenon of Menstruation

As a natural phenomenon in the growth and development of women, the subject of menstruation have often been discussed among the Nzema by employing interesting euphemistic expressions. This is because the people attribute menstruation largely to filthy and unhygienic condition. It is considered to be an eyesore, and so every 'cultured' Nzema speaker tries to prevent an explicit pronouncement of the word fualɔ 'menstruation'. So, in order to avoid the tabooed expression such as yeyɔfualɔ 'she has menstruated', the Nzema resort to a number of euphemisms; some of which emerged during the data gathering as follows:

⁵Although the doctrines of Christianity have caused some reduction in the practising of polygamy among Nzema men, many of them still enjoy polygamy and so they believe that the acceptable cultural tradition is to perform all the necessary marriage rites when a man finds a woman.

⁶If someone behaves impulsively and haphazardly; without being vigilant and steady, the Nzema also use the utterance in (38) to rebuke the person euphemistically.

43. Ye-bu ɔ sa
3SG.PERF-break 3SG.POSS hand
'She has broken her hand'
44. Ye-hɔ amozi
3SG-PERF.go far away
'She has gone far from home'.
45. Ye n-yɔvolɔ ne mɔ ɔ-ra
3SG PL-visitor DEF PL PERF-come
'Her visitors have arrived'.
46. ɔ-lɔ-tua ye siane kakɔ
3SG-PROG-pay 3SG.POSS month debt
'She is paying her monthly debt'.

The expressions in (43-46) are intended to mitigate inconveniences when talking about menstruation. In (43), for instance, a woman in her menstrual period is rather described as having broken her hand (for the purpose of making a 'fair' and 'polite' speech). In the olden days, menstruating women were seen to be unclean, and so they were sometimes not permitted to cook (especially for their husbands). Therefore, such women were said to have 'broken their hands' so that people would not easily know why they were not going to the kitchen to prepare meals. The Nzema also refer to a menstruating woman as someone who has 'gone far from home' as expressed in (44). This indicates that the woman (in that state) is somewhat isolated and prevented from certain duties in the home, including cooking. In (45), the flow of blood (which occurs monthly) is described by the Nzema as a stranger who comes to visit the woman periodically. In (46), the period of menstruating is considered as a kind of debt that is paid by the woman in such circumstance. Once the month ends (that is, the time for her menses is due), the woman must pay her monthly debt, and that is the process of menstruating. All the foregoing examples, which are culturally established, are euphemistic means of discussing sexuality and its related matters within the socio-cultural milieu of the people of Nzema.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the euphemistic-metaphoric ways of mentioning certain words that are deemed unmentionable in the context of discussing sexuality among the Nzema; basing the analysis on the notions of Goddard's (2006) Ethno-pragmatic paradigm. The paper has brought to the fore various sexual discourse categories and how the Nzema employ convenient means to discuss them; indicating that Nzema communication about sex and its related issues are 'context-dependent'. The paper found that the Nzema euphemistically describe the male sexual organ as 'a stick/tree', 'a pestle', 'a gun' and 'a match', while conceptualising the female sexual organ as 'property', 'mortar', 'palace', 'Bible/book' and 'ɔba'. It demonstrated that the Nzema as part of their culture do not 'freely' utter vulgar words; especially those related to sexuality and menstruation; instead, they resort to culturally established euphemistic strategies as 'a face-saving mechanism' and to mitigate the discomforts and embarrassments that might be caused when a listener hears such obscene utterances. Among other interesting observations, as the discussions showcased, was that the youth (young men) besides the traditionally recognised sexual euphemisms, had constructed what I refer to in this paper as 'recent euphemistic-

metaphors' in describing the act of sex; perceiving the activity as a means of piercing an object, driving a vehicle and reading a text. The findings further explicated that the Nzema endeavour to escape the mentioning of fualb 'menstruation' because it is perceived to be filthy and an eyesore; in essence, they 'beautify' it by describing it as a stranger/visitor, a way of paying monthly debt, among others. Ndlovu (2018: 133) rightly postulates that: "In Africa, words for sex, penis, vagina, anus, buttocks, and such terminologies are tabooed; rather, euphemisms are created for them". It is evident from the findings of this research that Nzema traditional values and attitudes regarding the mention of sexual organs are highly supportive of Ndlovu's assertion. Overall, it is revealed that one's understanding of sexual discourse among the Nzema requires a fair knowledge of their cultural etiquettes regarding their linguistic choices on sexuality.

Appendix

Abbreviations Used

PSN	Personal name
1SG	1st person singular
2SG	2nd person singular
3SG	3rd person singular
1PL	1st person plural
3PL	3rd person plural
NEG	Negative marker
DEF	Definite article
COND	Conditional marker
CON.PT	Conditional particle
CDET	Clausal determiner
PERF	Perfect marker
POSS	Possessive marker
EMPH	Emphatic
CONJ	Conjunction
HAB	Habitual marker
FUT	Future marker
PROG	Progressive marker
IMP	Imperative
DEM	Demonstrative pronoun
PL	Plural marker
COMP	Complementiser
FOC	Focus marker
COP	Copula verb

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