

**Seth Nretia Essien**

# Analysis of Performative Language Use at the Nzema Tadiotional Courts in Ghana

**Master's Thesis**

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**UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

**SCHOOL OF GHANAIAN LANGUAGES**

**DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES (GRADUATE STUDIES)**

**ANALYSIS OF PERFORMATIVE LANGUAGE USE AT THE NZEMA  
TRADITIONAL COURTS**

**SETH NRETIA ESSIEN**

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines language use in the Nzema Traditional courts. It specifically identifies performative use of Nzema language using the Speech Act and the Discourse Analyses theory to analyse ten texts, which were recorded from various Chief Palaces in Elembele and Jomoro Districts. Having transcribed the text into written form and translated into English, the researcher applies two theories for the analyses and the findings obtained indicate that many people lack the concept of performative expressions of language, in which utterances constitute acts or doings. These usually put them into trouble among themselves, during which the case is settled at the traditional courts. Among such performative use of language that bring litigations are the most common ones such as; cursing a fellow, threatening, accusing someone, making false allegation. The study finally recommends that society should be educated by the elders on the implications of such uses of language so that members of the society become aware and avoid them.

Key words: Performative, locution, social actions

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to my wife, Mrs. Gladys Ursula Essien; my children; Elizabeth Koneba Essien, Irene Manye Essien, Seth Nretia Essien and Hannah Abenlema Essien; and to all who have interest in promoting the studies of Nzema.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS**

### **1.0 Introduction**

The thesis is set out to investigate language use in Nzema traditional courts. Language is used in many places such as the market, farm, school, shrine and the chief palace. It is also used in occasions and ceremonies such as funeral rites, marriage rites, puberty rites and naming rite. The meaning of the Nzema language used, like all others, depends on some factors such as the context, time and purpose.

### **1.1 Background to the study**

In the performative sense, language performs actions; so that what one says is actually an action performed. If, for instance, one says, 'I will kill you', the speaker has not just made an utterance but has further performed the action of 'killing' the person. The cultural implication among the Nzema is not only that one has threatened the listener but has killed him or her as well. At the traditional court, the social and cultural implications are considered and the appropriate sanction is meted against the culprit.

Traditional courts (also referred to as chiefs' courts) still form an important part of the administration of justice in many rural Africa including Ghana. (Gocking 1993). Nzema speakers use performative language at the traditional courts. The language of the court is invariably the local language of the disputants, with no risk of distortion through interpreting. This makes these courts attractive to their users and gives greater satisfaction to the participants in the process compared to regular courts where the language used is English and is not understood by the majority. Hence, the ruler, counsellors and litigants are well aware of the language they use and their meaning as well as what they intend to use them for.

The concept of doing things with language does not seem to be well-understood by the Nzema and its uses generate conflicts among them, leading to traditional court arbitration. For instance, some people curse their neighbours on the least provocation. This study investigates the type of language that results into conflicts among the people in the society and how they are handled at the Jomoro and Ellembele traditional courts. This thesis investigates language used to perform acts in the society and some of their implications at the traditional law courts of Nzema.

## **1.2 Location and linguistic features of the Nzema**

Annan (1994) records that the Nzema people occupy the south western part of the Western Region of Ghana. Nzema extends from Ahanta to the Ghana and Ivory Coast border. Annan (1994) adds that the people were part of the Ashanti Kingdom, who were moving from the Sahara desert as a result of famine and war with the nomads. The symbol of the group was a porcupine. That is why the Nzema have the same totem with the Ashanti and call themselves 'Kɔtɔkɔ'. On reaching the present Ashanti Kingdom, they continued with the Denkyira down south until they found a good place for independent settlement. Till date, Nzema speakers pay allegiance to the Ashanti King and call the Ashanti people 'brother' or 'sister' whenever they meet. They share common cultural similarities such as their language, food and matrilineal inheritance.

The people speak Nzema, a Kwa language, made up of five dialects, namely Ahomu, Ellembele, Jomoro and Etile and Evaloe. The district traditional courts of the people of Ellembele and Jomoro would be used in this study, because they are the dialects used for educational and research purposes. The various dialects do not, however, affect the performative use of language.

The grammar of the language is somewhat similar to Akan, though not the same. The Nzema language marks its plurals with {m-, n-} and a- as prefixes to the noun roots

with consideration to sound assimilation. A word beginning with /b/ for example, prefix it with {m-} to form its plural plural. Example, *bulale*, ‘metal’, would change to *mbulale*, ‘metals’. But *kila*, ‘mouse’, singular will become *ngila* or *ahila*, ‘mice’. Also, *kale*, ‘car’ becomes *ahale*, ‘cars’. Another plural marker is the suffixes *-ma*, as in *maanlema*, ‘citizens’, with the root word, *maanle*, country; and *Bakuma*, folks of Baku, ‘a town’ (*Bakunli*-singular). The infixes in the language for plural marking are /m/ and /n/ as in *sesemia*, ‘stools’ and *agyandee*, ‘properties’, which have their singular, *sesibia* and *agyadee* respectively. Nzema has compounding, borrowing, reduplication, blending and clipping as some common morphological processes.

Nzema has the canonical structure of a sentence as SVO as shown below:

1. *nrenyia ne ho do -le kale ne,*  
man DEF go.PST buy.PST car.SG. DEF.  
‘The man went to buy the car.’

Orthographically, the language joins verbs to the pronouns in subject position as in *yeva*, he or she has taken; *ye*, he or she and *va*, has taken. Hence, ‘*Yeva ezukoa yehodo kale*’

2. *Ye va ezukoa ye ho do kale*  
3SG take. PERF money 3SG. go.PST buy.PST car.  
‘He or she has taken money to buy a car.’

Nzema has postpositions. Example, *ekponle zo*, table on, which is ‘on a table’. The language has pre-modifiers, post-modifiers and predicators. Examples are in the following:

3. *raale kenlema,*  
woman beautiful.  
‘Beautiful woman.’

4. *ehyianli raale*

‘poor woman’

5. *ɔ- le kenlema*

3 SG. is beautiful

‘She is beautiful.’

The language uses /s/, /k<sup>w</sup>/ and /dʒ/ for the English alphabets ‘c’, ‘q’ and ‘j’ respectively. There are some few double consonants in the language that make it differ from Akan. Example, /kp/, voiceless labio-velar plosive, in a word like *kpakpa*, pawpaw, /gb/ voiced labio-velar plosive, in a word like *amgba*, ‘true’ and /ŋ/ for ‘nr’ in a word like *nrele*, a type of fish and *nretenrete*, mosquito. The common nasals /m/ and /n/ are syllabic only when they are followed by a plosive consonant; *n-ganee*, scent, *m-ba*, negation of *ba*, come and *n-da*, negation of *da*, sleep but not in *bane*, ba-ne or *sane*, sa-ne where they end the words. Other nasal diagraphs (orthographic) are ‘ny’ voiced alveo-palatal nasal affricate, ‘nw’ voiced alveolar-labial plosive, ‘nr’ and velaric-nasal. Another unique feature of the language is that the vowels sounds /i/, /ɪ/, /o/, /ʊ/ do not begin a word and consonants too do not end words except when the words are onomatopoeic or when they are.

### 1.3 Statement of the problem

Among some Nzema, performative language is not well-understood as a concept of language use. Many people are surprised when they are taken on by their words. If one threatens to kill another, he does it with impunity without realising its implication. The problem Nzema society faces is, therefore, the use of language to perform social acts without knowing it. The Nzema society expects one to be obliged to perform his or social role as expected. Consequently, after using language to perform such social acts like

promising, cursing, swearing and testifying, people have taken them for granted that they are ordinary ways of using language without considering their social implication. Hence, they fail to do what they must do and are taken on.

Language uses in cursing, threatening, imposing wrong identity, making unfulfilled promises, among others, bring conflicts among many people unknowingly. This mostly end up at the traditional court for arbitration which may attract payments of fines and embarrassment. People also find themselves in serious legal cases because of misuse of performative languages. People swear oath, threatens the life of others on the least provocation and even make promises thinking that they just said them and could go free until the law catches up with them. Hence, lack of knowledge about the wrong use of language and its implicative consequences make many people, especially the youth, fall victims to the norms of tradition and cause them to face the full rigour of the laws of the land. Many people say things, which affects other others in many ways and make the affected person summon them at the traditional courts; these are the reasons why some language use in the performative bring problems among the Nzema people. This problem is the focus of this study so as to analyse the language that causes the conflict and educate people on performative language.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study.**

The purpose of this study is to find out how performative language occurs in the discourse of Nzema traditional courts, the effect of performative language, its implications at the traditional courts and why words spoken by people are used against them when they fail to do what they intended to do, as in promises.

In addition, this work would study the various categories of performative use of language at the traditional court to identify the types that are common among the people.



In this regard, effort would be made to study how language use in the performative form influence or affect judgement during arbitration.

### **1.5 The Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. investigate some of performative language used in the Nzema traditional courts arbitration.
2. identify the problems associated with performative use of language at the Nzema traditional courts.
3. categorise performative language in the traditional court arbitration.

### **1.6 Research questions**

The following questions guided the researcher in his investigation;

1. what type of performative expressions is used in the society and brought to the Nzema traditional courts for arbitration?
2. what are the problems associated with performative use of language at the Nzema traditional courts?
3. how can the problems associated with performative language be solved?

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The study will add to the existing literature on performativity in linguistics. Also, Nzema lacks sufficient study materials and it is hoped that this will add up to the few materials available in order to improve upon the study of Nzema and linguistics in general. Performativity is not a new concept in linguistic. It has been widely researched on since Austin (1962) first used it in his lecture. However, no work has been done about it in the Nzema language. This work, therefore, tries to examine performative language of Nzema as part of traditional courts discourses.

More importantly, this study will enlighten people in society on the consequences of abusive use of performative expressions with regard to the culture of the people. This will let a person avoid such utterances and rather use those that promote peace and cordiality among them. In the end, there will be peace needed for societal unity and national development.

### **1.8 Limitation**

Among the impediments on the progress of work included finance. Funds were needed for internet browsing to seek information. Money was also needed to travel to and from place to place to collect data for the study. Printing, photocopying and binding also required much money to do.

Limited time was also a hindrance. Firstly, adequate time was needed for a thorough study on the subject in order to produce quality work that will meet the standard of the university. Time, too, was needed for the data collection since it must be collected in a natural setting when the elders are having their normal court arbitration. This also meant that more time was used to read on more materials in order to understand the concept well just as more time was used for the data analysis, especially the concept of performative being complex . These and other minor factors were among the challenges that faced the researcher but quality of the work was not compromised.

### **1. 9 Delimitation**

The research examines performative language used in Nzema traditional court. The researcher would have wished to extend his research work to all the three districts of the Nzema land so that his findings could have been described as a general problem in the municipality but this work was centred on Ellembele and Jomoro districts only due to proximity and dialectal similarities.

Again, this study did not cover all the various language use in the traditional court but looks at the various ways by which language is used to do things or to perform social acts at the traditional court between complainants and defenders. The Speech Act and Discourse Analysis theories were used for the analyses.

Lastly, people's use of language to perform social acts can be seen in the law courts, home and other places but this work focused on its use at the traditional court so as to give a maximum attention to the study and make an in-depth analysis.

### **1. 10 Organisation of the Study**

Chapter 1 gives the introduction and background of the study. Chapter 2 organises related literature on the topic together with literature on Speech Act Theory and Discourse Analysis Theory, grounding them into the work. Chapter 3 describes the methodology for the study in terms of data collection, population and data presentation. Chapter 4 covers data analyses and interpretations. Chapter 5 gives a discussion on the findings and Chapter 6 is a summary of findings, conclusion, recommendations, followed by the reference and appendix.

### **1.11 Chapter summary**

This work set out to identify language use by the Nzema in the performative way and how some result into conflicts among the people of Nzema. Its purpose is to find out how performative language use occurs among the people and which categories of them appear at the traditional court for arbitration. It seeks answers to questions like: what type of performative expressions are brought to the traditional court for arbitration, why are some performative language are offensive and which of the language use as performatives are common at the law court.

Among the significance of the study include the fact that it will improve on the study of Nzema and linguistics in general and it will analyse some performative language

uses for a better understanding among the people. This will reduce wrong use of performative language and promote peace among the people and develop appreciative use of language.

Though there are a number of limitations like lack of time and finance, it is expected that the work will solve the problems identified, it will be completed within the time allocated for it and also meet the standard of the university.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter consists of the concept and definition of performative language, a review of related literature on the nature of performative language uses and types of performative. This would be followed by a discussion on the Speech Acts theory and the Discourse Analysis theory.

#### **2.1 The concept of performative language**

Performativity or performative utterance according to Austin (1962; 1992) is a term for the capacity of speech and communication not simply to communicate but rather to act or consummate an action, or to construct and perform an identity. In other words, Austin (1992) tries to state that what one says with performative language constitutes what he or she has done or intends to do. A common example is the act of saying ‘I pronounce you man and wife’ by a licensed minister before two people who are prepared to wed (or ‘I do’ by one of those people upon are being asked whether they take their partner in marriage). An umpire calling a strike, a judge pronouncing a verdict, or a union boss declaring a strike are all examples of performative speech. All these are actual actions that have taken place as a result of the pronouncements made; two people have been married by the minister, couples have accepted to be married when they said ‘I do’ in their turns, the umpire has caused a strike to occur or one has been accused guilty and another exonerated by the verdict of the judge. In performative, therefore, communication is action.

Originally, the term derives from the seminal work in speech act theory by philosopher Austin, who did not use the word ‘performativity,’ but did, beginning in the