

Linguistic Expressions of “Welcome” Among Ghanaian Ethnolinguistic Groups

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Abstract

Despite Ghana’s rich linguistic diversity, the most common linguistic expression of welcome, especially in Southern Ghana, remains Akwaaba, and to some extent Woezor, thereby rendering several other expressions of welcome relatively unknown. Against this backdrop, this study explores various linguistic expressions of welcome across Southern and Northern Ghana to highlight lesser-known or underused expressions used to welcome visitors and relatives into Ghanaian homes and tourist sites. Using the social identity theory and subjectivism, we investigated how selected tribes in Ghana express welcome in their native languages, the values and identities these expressions espouse, as well as their importance to the Ghanaian society and the global world, to foreground cultural nuances in Ghanaian welcome expressions. The analysis reveals that welcome expressions are central to Ghanaian social life, functioning as cultural mechanisms that cultivate hospitality, culturally-appropriate respect, strengthen community bonds, and affirm Ghanaian cultural identity. Considering the socio-cultural significance of welcome expressions within Ghanaian society, the findings suggest that the use of lesser-known expressions of welcome should not be confined to specific communities of practice but extended to tourist sites within and beyond the communities as a strategy to sustain, protect, and promote the indigenous languages in which these expressions occur.

Keywords: Welcome, linguistic expressions, Ghanaian culture, ethnolinguistic

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Background of the Study

According to Sekyi-Baidoo (2002), ethnographers, sociolinguists, and pragmatists have acknowledged that greetings have functions beyond the phatic. According to Ango (2019), identities are formed either linguistically or historically, existing only inside language and representation, and can be assigned socially, culturally, or institutionally. Loss of a language is similar to losing a portion of culture since language is a marker of cultural identity that shapes how people view themselves and others (Kramsch, 1998). According to Taiwo (2019), language communicates the user's beliefs, values, and habits, and as culture and identity are closely related, language's impact on them cannot be understated. Since language embodies group identities, people who belong to the same culture and, to some extent, speak the same language have similar concepts, methods for creating meaning, and methods for understanding it. Interethnic youth councils should be established, language on government buildings should be rotated pragmatically, and local governance structures should be reinforced to

ensure that each chief's voice is heard without elevating any of them above the republic. The sociolinguistic aspects of the problem must be considered because routine phrases have a variety of social and cultural origins. Ogujioba (2018) observes that human civilizations have a diversity of linguistic traits such as monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism, each of which poses particular challenges. Considering the myriad of issues with language policy, attitude, and choice, bi/multilingual societies tend to have more language implementation challenges compared to monolingual societies. This is supported by Adegbija's (1994) claim that language characteristics frequently jeopardise the implementation of multilingual policies because people, particularly members of minority groups, associate prestige with dominant languages. Therefore, when one language—typically the dominant language is favoured over minority languages, disputes may occur both domestically and globally.

Ahmad and Boucif (2019) define greeting as a gesture or form of polite expression employed to welcome another person. Greetings are globally recognized as an integral part of societal norms, and in several African societies, Obeng (1987) highlights that it is often more elaborate than in Western societies, such that failure to greet elders may lead to social sanction. Thus, greetings, inherently ingrained in social lives, are not only recognized globally as polite makers, but also as tools for acknowledging presence, initiating communication, as well as maintaining social harmony or strengthening bonds amongst people. The purposes that greetings serve are context-specific, influenced by factors such as level of familiarity between participants, time of the day, or the specifics of the encounter.

In sociolinguistics and education, the relationship between language and identity has long been a fascinating subject. Particularly in a multilingual nation like Ghana, where people exhibit a variety of cultures and languages, this interaction becomes more complex as people move between multiple identities, selecting the appropriate one for each circumstance.

Until recent controversies concerning their usage and dominance, “Akwaaba” in Twi and “Woezor” in Ewe were expressions which were widely used, and to an extent, accepted as Ghana’s official, and internationally recognized expressions to welcome citizens and visitors into the country through its airports and land borders as well as other monumental tourists’ sites across the length and breadth of Ghana. The Ga People, the indigenous residents of Ghana's capital, the Greater Accra Region, are primarily responsible for these outcries. They believe that the use of expressions that do not reflect the indigenous language in the country's main airport and other large structures on "their land" constitutes subtle forms of disrespect, which they strongly oppose.

In light of this, the purpose of this study is to explore the subtleties of greetings in multilingualism and how Ghanaians construct and modify their identities in the many ethnic languages.

Statement of the Problem

Nii Tackie Teiku Tsuru II, the Ga Mantse, publicly stated his wish for the Greater Accra Region to be renamed the "Ga-Dangme Region" earlier in 2024. He presented this proposal to Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, the president at the time. The president objected to the demands in a light-hearted statement, emphasising that the office alone has the power to make such adjustments, although the exchange brought to light deeper sociolinguistic and cultural difficulties.

Although Ghana has over 80 languages, UNESCO (2010) lists only 11 that are officially used in education. Despite this linguistic plurality, Ghana’s public spaces and state institutions predominantly rely on a narrow set of welcome expressions, particularly the Akan expression, Akwaaba. Many have criticized this practice, stressing that it disregards Ghana’s rich linguistic expressions of greetings among other ethnic groups and raises concerns about inclusivity, representation, and cultural identity in official domains. Amidst ongoing social media debates, many citizens and stakeholders have called for changes in the welcome greetings displayed at state facilities in Ghana, shifting from a dominant expression like “Akwaaba” to other alternatives of welcome expressions deduced from the languages of other ethnic groups. Considering Ghana’s rich linguistic diversity, there is a compelling need to reflect this diversity through the use of varied welcome greetings at state facilities. Such greetings would not only promote and affirm inclusivity but also represent the ethnicity and identity of the communities in which these facilities are located. Although Woezor, an Ewe word, and "Akwaaba," an Akan term, are well-known and acknowledged, there are other ways to show welcome in Ghana's multilingual society. The aforementioned problems under-represent Ghana's diversified identities, perpetuate linguistic hierarchy, and marginalise minority ethnolinguistic communities. Therefore, this study investigates the many ways that Ghana's ethnolinguistic groups express welcome and looks at how these linguistic forms represent the identities and cultural values of their individual communities.

Research Questions

- How do different Ghanaian ethnic groups express “welcome” in their indigenous languages?
- What are the significances of “welcome” greetings in the Ghanaian society?

Significance of the Study

This study will bring to bear modes of welcome expressions that respective Ghanaian ethnic groups employ to welcome others.

It will encourage inclusivity, peaceful cohabitation, and integration amongst Ghanaians and people of various nations if one is aware of the welcome expressions used in Ghanaian culture.

Theoretical Perspective and Literature Review

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner created the Social Identity Theory (SIT) paradigm in the 1970s. The hypothesis was created to understand how people form and maintain social identities. People get some of their identities from their social groupings. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the relationship between group membership, self-concept, and intergroup relations is highlighted. Similar to this, Ashforth and Mael (1989) define social identity as a sense of unity or belonging to a community, to which a great deal of importance and feeling is ascribed. SIT strikes a balance between two motivations, which Brewer (1991) divides into two categories: difference (preserving individuality) and inclusion (belonging to a group). The fundamental tenets of SIT are:

- Social categorization, which focuses on how people categorize themselves and others into respective groups of identity.
- Social identification, which focuses on how individuals adopt the identity of the respective groups they belong to and internalize the values and norms.
- Social comparison where emphasis is placed on how groups compare themselves with others to maintain positive self-esteem. (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The theory also examines the psychological processes behind the formation and maintenance of groups, focusing on the psychological bonds people experience when they identify with a group. It has been criticised, meanwhile, for neglecting to account for how people affect these processes. However, some argue that the theory focuses only on social comparison and shared ethnic group membership, ignoring other factors that can further impact an individual's identity, such as culture, personal experience, and shared group membership.

Greetings

One of the commonest linguistic interactional routines among Ghanaians is greeting. "Greetings constitute the vital 'oil' of meetings of all forms and a reassuring reinforcement of human sociability and social order," Schottman (1995, p. 489). "Greeting formulas broadly serve as an effective function of establishing non-threatening contact and rapport, but their precise substance is clearly culture specific," Holmes (2005, p. 308). In African societies, greeting is a customary approach to initiate a conversation. In many cases, the younger person is expected to greet the elderly; the smaller group is expected to do the same to the larger group; the walking person is expected to greet the seated person; and so on. These are some socio-cultural principles for welcoming people in general.

Ethnography of communication

Speaking ethnography focuses on the ethnographic recording and analysis of language use in social contexts (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Gumperz, 1968; Hymes, 1962, 1972). Ethnography is the systematic, qualitative study of culture, including the cultural underpinnings of language competency and communicative context (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1995). Ethnography of communication is the study of communication within the framework of social and cultural norms and beliefs (Hymes, 1962). Hymes (1964) defined ethnography of communication as the numerous facets of a technique for understanding a language from an anthropological perspective. In 1964,

Hymes broadened the term "ethnography of speech" to include non-verbal and non-vocal aspects of communication.

Ethnic Groups in Ghana

The region that is now Ghana was home to nation-states that were divided along ethnic lines before Islam spread and Europeans arrived there in the fourteenth century. More importantly, the study of Ghana's prehistory was derived from interdisciplinary studies including archaeology, oral traditions, ethnography, linguistics, art history, and associated scientific methodologies because a large portion of the country's early history was not recorded in writing (GSS, 2023).

The nation-states that comprise modern-day Ghana were divided into three major zones before colonisation: States like Dagomba, Mamprusi, and Mossi inhabit the Northern Zone, which leaned towards trans-Saharan trade; states like Asante, Denkyira, and Akyem inhabit the Forest Zone, which is known for its dense population; and states like Ga-Dangme, Ewes, and Fantes inhabit the Coastal Zone because of their early contact with Europeans, fishing, and trade (Wilks, 1989; Adu-Boahen, 2000).

Arhin (1975) says that Ghana's ethnic and linguistic classification affected its categorization into Forest, Northern, and Coastal zones. Once more, these divides led to the splitting of Ghanaian languages into two primary families: Gur and Kwa. Akan, Ga-Adangme, and Ewe are further divisions of the Kwa family (Arhin, 1975). The Gur languages were separated into three groups by Kropp Dakubu (1988): Gurma, Gurunisi/Grusi, and Mole-Dagbani.

Table 1.0 Ethnolinguistic subdivision of Ghana

Language Family	Subgroups	Examples of ethnic groups/languages
Kwa	Akan	Asante, Akyem, Fante, Bono, Guan, Akwapem
	Ga-Dangme	Ga, Ada, krobo, shai
	Ewe	Anlo, Tongu, Peki, Ho,
Gur	Mole-Dagbani	Dagbani, Mampruli, Nanuni, Hanga, Moosi
	Grusi/Gurunisi	Kasem, Sisaala, Farefare
	Gurma	Bimoba, Kokomba, Bassari

(Arhin, 1975; Kropp Dakubu, 1988)

Methodology

The study adopts subjectivism as it incorporates the assumption that social reality is made from the people's and social actors' views and the ensuing actions. According to Bryman (2012), subjectivism focuses on social phenomena and how individuals interpret them. According to subjectivism, people create meaning by interacting with space and time. Subjectivism is employed in this study to comprehend the context in which several welcome greetings in Ghanaian society are investigated. The inductive approach is used to investigate the issue by means of observation and critical analysis. By examining how different ethnic groups in Ghana express "welcome" in their native tongues, the cultural values and identities it conveys, and its importance to Ghanaian society and the wider world, the researchers hope to identify patterns and make broad conclusions. Because it enables the researchers to evaluate the results and develop a deeper comprehension of the phenomenon, a qualitative research design is suitable for this study. The qualitative research approach, according to Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009), is a type of qualitative method that employs observations, interviews, or the analysis of some types of texts which include spoken words (people's stories, conversations, or speeches), visual representations (photos, films, video, visual art), written texts (historical documents, newspaper articles, reports, books, prose, drama or poetry), artefacts of culture among others. Using purposive sampling techniques, ten (10) ethnic groups (tribes) are selected to serve as our data. For this paper, the choice of the ten (10) ethnic groups is necessitated by the desire to conduct a detailed analysis. Within a 'transfer-conduit' perspective, Reddy (1993) indicates that text analysis aims at providing expert tools such as literary criticism, philology, or content analysis to decode the texts which would otherwise be inaccessible to a simple reader. For this study, textual analysis is used to analyze the various selected welcome greetings from the various ethnic group which involves interpretive

analysis of the texts. In this sense, text analysis is subsumed under the notion of the principles of qualitative research as defined by Flick (2018, p. 7) based on the following principles:

- “Social reality is understood as a shared product that makes sense to community members.
- This sense is not a fact to be discovered, but an unfolding reflexive process.
- ‘Objective’ circumstances are relevant to a life-world through subjective meanings.
- The communicative nature of social reality permits the reconstruction of constructions of social reality to become the starting point for research.”

Table 2.0 Analysis and Discussions

Expression of “welcome” among Ghanaian tribes in their indigenous languages

Language/Region	Phrase(s) for welcome	People
Akan (Twi/Fante)	Akwaaba	Akan
Ewe	Woesor	Ewe
Ga/Dangme	Oobake, Mohee	Ga/Dangme
Dagbani	Maraaba, kenken	Dagomba
Mampruli	Jaaah-ree, kenken	Mamprusi
Frafra/Gurune	Zaare	Frafra
Waale/Dagaare	Waabo Yaane	Waala, Dagaaba
Kasem	Dɛ Zaane	Kassena
Nankani	Aani Nsaan	Nankani
Kasem	I ko wer	Kassena

(Arhin, 1975; Kropp Dakubu, 1988; Bodomo, 1997)

The table above represents the various linguistic expressions of welcome among Ghanaian language users. In the southern part of the country, which primarily consists of Akan-speaking regions, Ga/Dangbe speakers, and Ewe speakers, the linguistic expressions of welcome are predominantly Akwaaba within the Akan-speaking areas, Woesor among the Ewe speakers, whereas Mohee and Oobake are used by Ga-Dangme speakers. In the Greater Accra Region, which is native to Ga-Dangme speakers, Akwaaba is the most common linguistic expression of welcome, and this phenomenon can be attributed to the cosmopolitan nature of the region as well as the preponderance of native Akan speakers within Ghana’s capital city. Because it is frequently used as a sign throughout the nation’s main international airport, government buildings, memorials, and tourist attractions located inside Ghana’s capital, the phrase is mostly used to greet both Ghanaians and foreigners. However, Oobake appears to be largely obscure to many Ghanaians, including the Ga people who use it, despite being a linguistic expression of welcome used by the local population of Accra. This came to light during the social media controversy that was previously discussed in the study. However, social media users revealed that Mohee, another linguistic phrase employed by the Dangmes of Accra, seems to be prevalent between the two throughout the conversations on the topic.

Once more, the inhabitants of the Volta Region in southern Ghana use Woesor as a greeting. Woesor is mostly used in the Volta Region to greet family members, strangers, and the signage at the entrances of tourist destinations located within the region, in contrast to Oobake and Mohee, which are rarely known by native Ga speakers, particularly among the younger generation.

The Akan-speaking Regions including Ashanti, Eastern, Bono, Ahafo, Western, Western North, and Central regions of southern Ghana, are dominated by Akwaaba. As a result, the phrase is only used as signage at banks to greet guests, at the gates of tourist destinations, and at other large buildings to greet both domestic and foreign visitors. It is also used in houses to greet family members and outsiders.

However, given the linguistically diverse nature of the Northern part of Ghana due to the number of tribes within that part of Ghana, the number of linguistic expressions of welcome outnumber those of the southern part by a wide margin. As established earlier in this paper, Akwaaba is predominantly used among the Akan-speaking tribes in Southern Ghana, whereas Oobake/Mohee and Woesor are used by Ga-Dangmes and Ewes, respectively. In the Northern part, precisely the Northern Region, Maaraba, also pronounced Amaraaba, is used as a linguistic

expression of welcome by the Dagbani, also known as Dagombas. This form of linguistic expression of welcome is mainly used by the people of Yendi, Savelugu, Gushegu, and Karega (Blench, 2004).

In the North-East Region, Jaare, another linguistic expression of welcome, is used by the Mamprusis, also known as Mamprusi or Mamprugu, which is typically characterized by towns and villages such as Gambabga, Nalerigu, Walewale just to mention a few.

Also, in the Upper East Region, characterized by tribes such as Frafra, Kassena, Buli, and Kusasi, and major towns such as Bolgatanga, Navrongo, Bongo, and Bawku, Zaare is used as the main linguistic expression of welcome. In a similar vein, 'De zaane, or De Zaanee, and I ko wer are other forms of expressions of welcome used by the Kassena people of the Upper East Region and characterized by towns such as Paga, Navrongo, and Chiana. Finally, still within parts of the Upper East region, particularly towns around Mirigu, Sirigu, and Sandema, which are inhabited by the Nankani people, the expression 'Aani Nsaan' is used to greet or receive guests warmly.

In the Upper West Region, which consists of towns such as Wa, Lawra, Nandom, and surrounding areas and occupied by the Dagaara and Waala people, the expression 'Waabo yaani or Waabo yaana' is used to welcome guests. In these realizations, 'Waabo' means welcome, whereas the 'yaani' or 'yaano' adds emphasis to the greeting.

In the Upper East, Zaare is realized in real interaction as 'Zaare Laafi', which literally translates to 'Welcome, Are you well?' or Zaare! Bo ni yeri?' which also translates to 'Welcome! How is home?'

In the Upper East, the Kusasi tribe of Bawku and its environs, 'Ken ken' is the welcome greeting. This is mostly directed to friendly strangers; it is the same greeting offered to a member of the home who has returned from a journey, market, work, or farm. The expectations are a response of goodwill.

In the same vein, the Sissalas from the Upper East Region, specifically, Tumu and its environs, have 'nlɔn nlɔn' for singular and 'balɔ balɔ' for plurality as their welcome greetings. It is a tradition to serve the arriving person(s) with a drink, especially 'pito', a locally brewed drink, before any conversation can begin.

In the Northern Region, where the Konkomba tribe have their highest settlers, 'ani nsan' is said to welcome someone in general and 'ni ni nsan' for plurality. Water is traditionally offered even before the mission is established. But 'nsan' is replaced with a specific noun in the case of a specific case. Like 'ligor' for journey, 'kinyong' for market, 'kisaak' for farm, etc., to welcome one from such places.

In the Upper East region, where the Kasena tribe have their highest settlers, 'azaanim' is said to welcome someone in general and 'dezaani abam' for plurality. Water is traditionally offered even before the mission is established. But 'azaanim' is replaced with a specific noun in the case of a specific case. Like 'twanga' for journey, 'yaga' for market, 'kara' for farm, etc., to welcome one from such places.

Thus far, the table and studies presented above have examined the different language terms utilized in Ghana's northern and southern regions. The number of linguistic terms used to greet individuals is indicative of the linguistic richness of Ghana's northern region, as demonstrated by the analysis. The second study question is to investigate the identities and values represented in these welcoming expressions among the different tribes in Ghana's northern and southern regions.

The significance of "welcome" greetings in the Ghanaian society

Hospitality and communalism

In Ghanaian society, a "welcome" greeting encapsulated by the Akan word Akwaaba is much more than just a polite gesture; it is an important cultural statement that upholds hospitality, respect, and communal values. The fundamental tenet of Ubuntu is "I am because we are," which denotes that a new member of the community is accepted right away. According to Bach (1979), welcomes are a means of establishing contact or expressing joy. The welcome greetings treat guests like members of the family: greeting guests is a sacred obligation in Ghanaian culture, which is based on a strong feeling of community. By transforming a stranger into an honorary member of the community, the Akwaaba welcome promotes a feeling of solidarity and belonging. This hospitality includes providing guests with food, beverages, and attentive service, even if they are not invited. It is considered disrespectful to the host to decline these offerings. The act of welcoming strengthens social relationships within and across groups. It is a shared responsibility that fosters respect and harmony among people. Greeting people is the cornerstone of creating and maintaining social bonds. Greetings are a way to reaffirm group identity and unity because Ghanaian society is communal. It is customary to start a discussion

and ask if someone is family in order to demonstrate concern and foster social ties. According to Schottman (1995), welcomes are a vital component of all interactions and a comforting affirmation of social order and human friendliness.

Etiquette and deference

Greetings are an essential aspect of Ghanaian manners and a way to show respect, especially for senior citizens. A proper welcome recognises the person's presence and demonstrates kindness. The regulations for welcoming are specific and restricted. For example, in Ghana, official handshakes and greetings are given with the right hand because the left is considered filthy. In Ghana, launching a business immediately is frowned upon. Greetings and polite conversations about family and health should always come first, even when conducting routine business. According to Felecan (2015), greetings are a communication behaviour that speakers utilise to convey their attitudes and feelings towards the addressee.

Cultural and national identity

In particular, "Akwaaba" has evolved into a cultural brand that conveys to the globe Ghana's image of warmth, friendliness, and tranquility. This message of national invitation is used in tourism campaigns to promote Ghana. The custom of greeting guests is a reflection of ideals that have been passed down through the ages, as Fieg and Mortlock (1989) consider greetings as a speech event with pragmatic meaning, and the meaning in turn is affected by cultural perspectives. It displays the rich customs of the country and is a source of cultural pride. Appropriate greetings create a human connection and acknowledge the existence of the other person. It is considered impolite in Ghanaian society to enter a room or public area without saying hello to those who are already there. A greeting shows that one is present and intends to interact with the community reasonably. Malkawi and Rababa'h (2014) assert that greetings have a mark of social and ethnic identity.

Strengthening moral principles

Ghanaians are renowned for their friendliness, warmth, and charity, all of which are exhibited on a regular basis through friendly greetings. Traditional leaders often act as guardians of social harmony, and greeting and welcoming practices, such as bowing to a chief, reinforce the community's moral purity and respect for authority. According to Agyekum (2008), greetings are expressive speech acts carried out in accordance with sociocultural standards.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study corroborates claims that Ghana is a linguistically diverse country as apparent in the various expressions of welcome across respective tribes in Southern and Northern Ghana. Whereas Akwaaba and Woezor are predominantly used across the southern part of Ghana as the two major linguistic expressions of welcome, the Northern part of Ghana, however, has diverse expressions used to welcome people, as evident in Table 2.0 above.

Additionally, the study confirms that greetings of welcome transcend mere exchange of polite gestures, but also hold utmost significance within the Ghanaian society because they are vehicles through which people express hospitality and affection, show respect, promote cultural and national identity, as well as means through which moral principles are consolidated.

Therefore, these diverse linguistic expressions of welcome used among various Ghanaian tribes must be represented even across all major tourist destinations in Ghana as a means, not only to promote Ghana's major languages, but also to protect Ghana's indigenous languages, which are relatively unknown outside of the jurisdictions in which they are used.

By focusing on the various linguistic expressions of welcome, and the significances these expressions espouse within respective Ghanaian societies, this study contributes to existing sociolinguistic knowledge on greetings among Africans in general and Ghanaians in particular, and thus, emphasizes how language is used promote cultures and protect identity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study proposes that Ghana's linguistic expressions of welcome convey profound meanings; hence, efforts should be made to document the relatively unknown ones as a means of protecting and promoting such languages. Additionally, it suggests that these expressions of welcome should be evenly represented at various tourist destinations to receive both local and foreign tourists. Future research could explore a comparative study

that focuses on welcome linguistic expressions across different Ghanaian ethnic groups or tribes, and how these expressions influence Ghanaian cultural norms, hospitality, and interpersonal communication.

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