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Article

Exploring Euphemisms as Taboo Avoidance Strategies in the Mabia Languages

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of euphemisms in mitigating prohibited expressions in three Mabia (Gur) languages: Dagbani, Farefare (also known as Gurenɛ) and Kusaal. In the daily interactions of the Mabia people, they avoid using certain expressions, which are unmentionable in most contexts. These include the expressions for snakes and snakebite, sexual intercourse and genitalia, and death. The mention of the explicit terms for these expressions is face-threatening in Mabia society and can incur various forms of negative social consequences. Thus, instead of using these taboo expressions, speakers employ euphemisms as taboo-avoidance strategies; these euphemistic expressions oil social cohesion and indicate speakers' communicative competence. The data used in this study were mainly gathered from primary sources. However, we augmented some of the primary data of Dagbani with some secondary sources drawn from N. A. Salifu's (2012) PhD thesis. We employ politeness theory and ethnography of communication as analytical lenses.

Keywords: Mabia languages; social cohesion; face-threatening acts; positive face; unmentionable; politeness

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1. Introduction

This article provides a systematic study of the use of euphemistic expressions in managing some socially unmentionable concepts in three Mabia cultures, drawing data from Dagbani, Kusaal and Farefare (also known as Gurenɛ) employing the theoretical lenses of politeness theory and ethnography of communication. These languages are found in the northern part of Ghana and are classified as Mabia Languages (Bodomo 2020). Dagbani is spoken only in Ghana, whilst Farefare and Kusaal are also spoken in Burkina Faso, and some speakers of Kusaal can be found in the northern part of Togo as well as some parts of Ivory Coast. The study examines the avoidance of unmentionable words or expressions for snakes and snakebites, sexual intercourse and genitalia, and death. We show that euphemisms are employed instead of the taboo word to discuss these topics in a less offensive manner in social interaction. Since the emergence of the concept of communicative competence (Hymes 1972), knowledge of the cultural underpinnings of language (the "dos and don'ts") has been considered a key component of communicative competence in the daily interaction of language users. This article discusses the cultural negotiations used for the linguistic management of certain topics to avoid expressions that are regarded as prohibited among speakers of the selected Mabia languages of northern Ghana. We explore these "verbal taboos," where certain linguistic expressions are considered socially inappropriate and are thus not to be mentioned explicitly in normal social discourse contexts. Euphemisms are thus used as polite ways of alluding to these prohibited linguistic expressions and of demonstrating good communicative competence. These euphemistic expressions are also face-saving mechanisms not only for the speaker but also the other participants in discourse. Although the Mabia languages have received attention from both native and expatriate linguists in recent times, verbal taboos have not been investigated in these languages. This article is therefore important as it fills a research gap in an essential sociolinguistic area. The empirical data are presented using the theoretical tenets of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and of the ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; 1972).[1]

Since our topic deals with language use in context, some cultural background on the languages concerned will be helpful in appreciating the later discussion on why certain words or expressions are culturally inappropriate among their speakers.

Traditionally, the Dagbamba, the Farefari, and the Kusaas are patriarchal societies where the men hold positions of power and wield control and dominance over their female counterparts in most aspects of the culture, traditions, and formal speech settings. The woman's role is mainly domestic as she cooks and takes care of the children and the household. The men, on the other hand, are responsible for taking all decisions that affect the life of the family. They provide for both the financial and material needs of

1 We are grateful to the participants of the Virtual Annual Conference on African Linguistics (ACAL 53) at the Department of Linguistics at the University of California San Diego held from April 7–9, 2022, for their input. We are also indebted to Paul Schaefer for checking the manuscript for language.

the household. Although women may engage in farming and other economic activities, the men control all assets, including land, and have the power to sell these with little or no consultation with the women. Similarly, male children are regarded as more important assets to the family than female children, as the latter are expected to be married off to other families and leave their family of origin, while the former are, conversely, expected to marry and bring other people into the family of origin. Today, because of deliberate policies and discussions of gender issues in Ghana, there have been some changes to women's roles in these societies and their voices are gradually being heard in discussions that affect the family, society and the nation as a whole.

Traditional political authority is vested in the chief, whose authority is exercised in conjunction with the *Tindana* or "earth priest," who is the custodian of a particular section of the land. Among the Dagbamba, the chiefly authority is vested in the *Yaa-Naa* (paramount chief of Dagbon), based in the traditional capital, Yendi; among the Kusaas, it is held by the *Zugra'an* or paramount chief of Kusaug,[2] who resides in Bawku. These two paramount chiefs, the *Yaa-Naa* and the *Zugra'an*, play crucial roles in all traditional and political enterprises of the Dagbamba and the Kusaas respectively, in conjunction with the divisional chiefs (sub-chiefs) who assist them in the execution of their traditional responsibilities. Chieftaincy among the Farefari was introduced recently in the first quarter of the 20th century; in earlier times, the *Tindana* used to bear responsibility for the people, though without the governing role of the chiefs. As a result, chieftaincy is less centralised among the Farefari than in the other groups, and they have several independent chieftaincy areas. Among the people of all three societies, traditional African religion is still significant in social organisation and the *Tindana* remains a major force who attracts great deal of importance.

The objectives of the article are to:

(i) identify the verbal expressions that are not encouraged in the daily interaction of speakers of these Mabia languages;
(ii) show that knowledge of these verbal taboos is a crucial characteristic of discourse management;
(iii) argue that euphemisms are employed in these languages as a politeness strategy to allude to these otherwise socially unacceptable expressions;
(iv) show that failure to employ the appropriate euphemistic device is not mere defiance of polite behaviour, but triggers a face-threatening situation; and, finally,
(v) explain that observance of the use of euphemistic expressions oils social cohesion among language users.

The research questions that underpin this study are:

2 The Kusaal traditional area.

(i) What verbal expressions do speakers of the selected language treat as taboo expressions and as such discourage people from using them?
(ii) What contribution does knowledge of verbal taboos add to discourse management in the Mabia languages?

This article is structured as follows. In section 2, we outline the methodology that guided this study and section 3 provides a literature review on verbal taboos and euphemisms. In section 4, we present the theoretical framework of the analysis; in section 5 we discuss the verbal taboos and the strategies for their avoidance in these languages; and in section 6, we present a summary of the key findings and make recommendations for future research.

2. Methodology

This research uses the ethnographic research approach since the work is qualitative. The data used in this study were mainly gathered from primary sources. However, some of the Dagbani secondary sources were also drawn from Salifu (2012). Primary data for the three selected languages were gathered through direct elicitation via semi-structured interviews with native speakers of the three respective languages. Three native language consultants for each language were contacted. We used people who were 50 years and above because of their accumulated in-depth knowledge and experiences of the languages and cultures of the people. The consultants were asked to provide some taboo expressions and their respective, matching euphemistic expressions according to the following specific themes: snake and snakebite expressions, sex and sexual organs, and death-related expressions.

The data from these interviews were recorded and transcribed. As native speakers of the languages under study, our daily experiences and interactions in the language communities have exposed us to natural speech contexts where some of these expressions are used. These expressions have also become part of our linguistic repertoires. Additionally, some of these expressions are taken from folktales, which further provide natural contextual situations appropriate for their use. Ethical clearance was obtained for the project "Documenting the Folktales of the Kusaas through Stories and Illustrations" (Abubakari 2022), during which some of the data for Kusaal were also obtained from the stories that were narrated. The discussion and analysis of the data in this study benefit from both our insider and the outsider perspectives because our native speaker intuitions contribute to offering a balanced account of the situation (see Levon 2013, 196; Abubakari 2020, 26).

3. Literature Review on Verbal Taboo and Euphemism

The word "taboo" is a loan word from Tonga *tabu*, which is also a variant of the more general Polynesian word *tape* and the Hawaian *kapu* (Agyekum 1996; 2010). The term "taboo" describes certain utterances or behaviours specific to a particular language and

culture which a speaker is expected to avoid in a communicative context. Different linguists offer various definitions of the term "taboo," although their communicative function and usage are similar cross-linguistically. We provide a few definitions to illustrate this below.

According to Allan and Burridge (2006, 11), taboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. Thus, there is a ban on words regarded as taboo since such words are considered dangerous and important in society. Farb (1973, 91) remarks that "any word is an innocent collection of sound until a community surrounds it with connotations and then decrees that it cannot be used in certain speech." We deduce that a taboo is a cultural and social construction as it is a given speech community which dictates the appropriateness or otherwise of the use of a particular word or linguistic expression. The prohibition or avoidance of these expressions in public could be for cultural, social, spiritual, or religious reasons. Knowledge of verbal taboos is important, because failing to recognise verbal taboo acts may lead to various social consequences which may require apologies or other corrective actions.

Agyekum (2010, 7) suggests a helpful distinction between taboo words and taboo acts; considering the example of *mogyafra* (incest) in Akan, he explains that it is not a taboo to pronounce the term *mogyafra* itself, but the act to which it refers is a taboo in Akan society, and, in fact, in most societies. Verbal taboos, as defined by Agyekum (2010), are terms that speakers avoid using because they are deemed inappropriate, repulsive, or indecent for use in everyday conversation. Every speaker, regardless of age, nationality, or place of origin, has an obligation to follow this norm. This means that, in order to speak Akan fluently, every developing child and non-native person who enters the Akan culture must acquire and internalise the word-taboo usage. Agyekum (2010) notes that among the Akan, some standards of communication are acceptable while others are not.

Taboo words or actions can be alluded to by euphemistic devices that are used to minimise face-threatening acts in discourse. Euphemisms, according to Agyekum (2002, 372), act as a kind of "shield against the offensive nature of taboo expressions." He explains that the Akan view euphemisms as verbal arts that they use to enliven discourse in order to demonstrate communicative proficiency and linguistic etiquette. He adds that the Akan are quite uncomfortable talking about death and as such, they avoid discussing it and, when they have to do so, they employ euphemistic terms in their discourse. It is the belief of the Akan that mentioning the word *owuo* (death) invites it to join the living. Therefore, to lessen the agony and terror it causes in the living, people prefer to use euphemisms when describing their existence after death. The euphemistic phrase for death used in Akan is shrouded in a reassuring metaphor to soothe bereaved family members.

Farghal (1995) states that euphemisms are employed to reduce the negative effects of taboo words and achieve a higher degree of politeness. Farghal (2005, 1) believes that euphemism is a linguistic politeness strategy by means of which an offensive or harmful word or phrase is replaced with one that represents a less direct expression or carries a positive attitude. According to him, words with negative meanings are linked to society members' unfavourable attitudes, rather than to the conceptual or descriptive meaning of the terms themselves. He refers to these "attitudinal dimensions" as the connection between words and attitudes. He believes that many Arabic dialects have developed a variety of terms to avoid what are known as circumlocutions. For instance, *ʔiʕtida:ʔ ʒinsi* or *fla:nɑ lɑʕbu bi:hɑ* or *fla:nɑ χəşro:hæ* (sexual assault) for *iɣtişa:b* (rape), *χija:nɑ zɑwʒijja* (infidelity) and *şabu:ha mʕɑ wa:ħəd* (they found her with another man) referring to *əzzina* (adultery), and *wəld lɑħra:m llæh jəħfaḍna* instead of *farχ* (illegitimate child) (Farghal 2005, 62). Farghal (2005, 62) further states that such terms "spell out the meaning of their negative counterparts in a more acceptable way."

Kaosa-Ad (2009) claims that euphemisms are frequently employed in social situations as a way to avoid upsetting others and to behave politely. Euphemisms, he continues, are employed to avoid taboo terms, foster social decorum, and prevent offending other people. Since using taboo words is often frowned upon and discouraged in most communities, some people think that euphemisms can shield them from bad luck. Every level of society uses euphemisms. When talking to their employers, members of the working class often use euphemisms. They do this to demonstrate their courtesy, respect and humility. Since it is accepted as a social standard that upper-class people employ carefully chosen language, they frequently demonstrate and protect their social rank through the use of euphemisms.

Allan and Burridge (1991, 23) consider euphemism as a phenomenon that is closely related to the norms of a particular society and the politeness techniques employed by its members. It is a term that is used as an alternative to a disliked expression in order to avoid potential loss of face, either by oneself, the audience or a third party. According to Allan and Burridge (1991, 237–238), a taboo word in modern English is avoided—that is, censored out of use on a specific occasion—not because the speaker fears losing face by offending the audience's sensibilities, but rather because it is avoided (unless one is a child). There are varied definitions for euphemism but we work with Cameron's (1995, 73), who defines euphemism as "a term used deliberately to avoid or soften the negative associations of words that deal directly with taboo subjects."

Taluah (2019, 155–158) observes that in Kasem, taboos connected to the supernatural are typically phrases or expressions seen to be too reverent or demeaning to be mentioned without justification. They include the words *Wɛ* for "God," *Tangbənə* for "gods," *Chulı* for "totems" which frequently take the form of plants like the baobab, kapok trees, and sacred groves, fauna like the leopard, lion, and python, as well as other animals and natural elements like mountains, and last but not least, *chırə* for "the dead." To him, although it is not uncommon to mention these words or concepts in normal

Kasem discourse, what is forbidden in a Kasena context in particular is the invocation of these spiritual words in a *sɔlə* (curse)*, dvvrɪ* (swear) and *nɪ* (an oath), generally referred to in Kasem as *n tɪŋ nɪ* (to take an oath). The verb *du* (swear) itself is forbidden as its ramifications can be devastating.

According to Taluah (2019, 151–158), it is generally prohibited to be explicit about sex or sex-related activities in Kasem. In Kasem speech, talking about sex or sexual organs in particular is frowned upon. The consequences of linguistic taboos connected with references to body parts and bodily functions in unsuitable discourse contexts include anxiety, shame, profanity, and vulgarity. For instance, the verb *dzʋm* (fuck) and the noun *mampʋlɔ* (vagina) are the most sensitive tabooed words in this category. Due to the utter shame they produce for the speaker in particular and the listeners in general, these two words are rarely used in conversation. As a result, sexual behaviours or the female genitalia are referred to by means of understatement as in *n pɛm dɪ* (to sleep with) to refer to sexual intercourse for humans and *di* (climb), the verb to express sexual intercourse amongst animals. The female genitalia are simply referred to as *yɪgə,* a polysemous word that means "face" or "front." Taluah goes further to suggest that other sexual words associated with the male gender such as *pɛm* (penis) and *manchalə* (testis) and other female sexual associations like *bɛnə* **(**buttocks) and *yɪlə* (breast) are subject to much fewer restrictions as far as linguistic taboos are concerned. In addition, words such as *lɪleirʋ* (saliva), *fiə* (urine) and *lʋluŋʋ* (sweat) are not deemed serious linguistic taboos and can be heard in many discourse situations. Anyone may mention these at any time without qualms. However, certain other human excretions such as *benʋ* (faeces), *mʋmeirʋ* (phlegm) and *zarɛm* (menstruation) are not mentioned, especially in certain contexts, of which mealtimes are the most important. These words are repulsive and tend to evoke disgusting images.

Allan (2018, 21) shows that euphemisms can be created by a variety of methods, such as by using hyperbole (e.g., "hot seat"), understatement ("anatomically correct doll"), technical jargon ("faeces" for "shit"), synecdoche ("down there" for "genitals") or metonymy ("tit" instead of "breast"). Allan (2018, 21) also asserts that there are three types of euphemisms: those used as street jargon; those that obscure the banned term to the point where it is not discernible; and those that are as insulting as the prohibited word. Allan's second type of euphemism, which completely obscures or blurs the taboo word by diverting the listener's attention from the actual phrase, is typically more prevalent than the others. To this extent, euphemisms express and symbolise the creativity and inventiveness of the community.

Fakuade et al. (2018) are of the view that Igbo has three main linguistic taboos: taboos relating to morality, taboos relating to adoration, and taboos relating to decorum. Of the three, the taboos that are connected to morality are those that concern sex and sex organs, as follows: *nkeiru* (the front) for *ara* (breast); *ukwu* (hip) for *ike* (buttocks); *ihe o ji bụrụ nwoke* (what makes him a man) for *amu* (penis); *ihe o ji bụrụ nwaanyị* (what makes her a woman) for *ọtụ* (vagina); *ọgọdọ* (loin cloth) for *akpa amụ* (scrotum), *abụba*

(feather) for *aji ike* (pubic hair); *ịrịda* (to come down) for *ịmụ nwa* (child delivery); *ịhụ ọnwa* (to see the moon) for *nsọ* (menstruation); *ahụ mgbanwe* (body change) for *ime* (to be pregnant); and *inwe mmekọ* (to have an affair with someone) for *ịra* (to have sex). All these are intended to save the face of the speaker and listener in order for them not to be seen as immoral or disrespectful persons in society. One depends on these euphemisms to be able to say what is intended without malice. Our study examines a number of euphemisms that are used to refer to taboo subjects in the socio-cultural context of the speakers of the Mabia languages of Ghana.

4. Theoretical Framework

We employ two theoretical approaches to discuss the data, namely politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) and ethnography of communication (Gumperz and Hymes 1964; 1972). Both theories serve as appropriate theoretical lenses through which our analysis can be pursued. We opted for these theories as participants in speech interactions require knowledge and understanding of their cultures as expressed and transmitted through language (cf. Bonvillain 2003). Thus, the words or expressions that are discussed in this article as verbal taboos and which require euphemistic expressions to present them to avoid social criticisms (a threat to one's positive face) might not be seen as such in another culture. All cultures provide rules for appropriate communicative interaction, defining behaviours that should occur or may not occur in specific contexts.

The concept of "face" is central to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Face has two associated desires, "negative face" and "positive face." Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness as "redressive" actions taken to counterbalance the potentially disruptive effect of face threatening acts (FTAs hereafter), and face as "the public self-image that every [community] member wants to claim for himself" (1987, 61). For instance, in their daily interaction, the avoidance of words such as *yoli* (penis) and *pani* (vagina) in Dagbani, *yo'ore* (penis) and *pene* (vagina) in Farefare, and *yu'or* (penis) and *pɛn* (vagina) in Kusaal is a politeness strategy. The use of these words in their explicit form does not present the speakers as people who will be polite to their interlocutors. To present oneself as being aware of the social expectations in daily interaction, there are euphemistic expressions that are used to minimise the use of these prohibited expressions.

Since face is a very important concept in our daily interaction with others, we are expected to be conscious of the social perspective on and consideration of our diction, the reason for which the use of euphemistic expressions becomes instrumental in our discourse. Thus, the use of certain tabooed words such as those for genitals, snakes or snakebite is seen as linguistic behaviour that has a potential for presenting one in a negative light in discourse and is regarded as a "face-threatening act" (FTA). Thus, interactants endeavour to avoid acts that might be face-threatening to them and to other interlocutors. This enables them to maintain positive face.

The second theory employed in this article is ethnography of communication (EoC) as proposed by Dell Hymes in the 1960s. Its basic tenet is that speech behaviour should be studied in its broadest cultural and social context in order to discover culturally relevant features of variations. This theory was instrumentalised by Hymes (1962) in providing a new approach to the study of language that would integrate culture, language, and social life. EoC entails the description of all explicit and implicit norms for communication, detailing aspects of verbal, nonverbal, and social parameters of interaction. Hymes (1974, 9) indicates "the starting point is the ethnographic analysis of the communicative conduct of a community." According to the orientation of EoC, language is seen as a crucial and fundamental component of social life and cultural activities (Noy 2017, 1). This theory is deemed relevant for our discussion because the use of taboo forms or words in their explicit form comes with some consequences in the Mabia social setup.

The adoption of this theoretical orientation is an attempt to understand and appreciate the unique cultural and contextual components of communication, assuming the perspectives of both culture and communication while attempting to investigate real-world communication events and occasions. The goal of Hymes's (1962) demand for a new method of language study was to integrate culture, language, and social life. This theoretical paradigm has been instrumental in triggering a typological shift in the study of language from the formal aspects, like syntax or grammar, towards a field that allows linguists to explore how language is actually used in the context of culture, as well as the implications that come with the use of particular words or utterances in society. Language is considered in EoC as a socially constructed cultural element that is essential to much of culture, as Saville-Troike (2003) states. Carbaugh (2008) also observes that EoC is an approach that primarily aims to study the practical use of language in society. This includes the everyday usage of language in various spheres such as homes, the media, politics, education, and online. It seeks to discover how social attitudes influence or work alongside language in various contexts. For instance, EoC is able to account for why verbal taboos are banned in the Mabia linguistic communities and why there are more acceptable ways of presenting specific topics that society would have ordinarily frowned upon. Carbaugh (2008, 1) notes that there are three components to the ethnography of communication method, which are requirements when conducting ethnography: "(1) the linguistic resources people use in context, not just grammar in the traditional sense but also the socially situated uses and meanings of words, their relations, and sequential forms of expression; (2) the various communication media and their comparative analysis, such as online 'messaging' and how it compares to face-to-face messaging; (3) the way verbal and nonverbal signs create and reveal social codes of identity, relationships, emotions, place, and time. Reports about these and other dynamics tend to concentrate on particular ways a medium of communication is used." This is consistent with the SPEAKING grid proposed by Hymes, as stated by Noy (2017).

In order to help communication ethnographers frame their investigation of speech acts and occurrences, Hymes suggests the SPEAKING grid. Even while the SPEAKING grid is by no means his most significant contribution to sociolinguistics, it is perhaps Hymes's best-known legacy. The SPEAKING grid has been widely used in EoC. The SPEAKING mnemonic consists of the following eight parts: S stands for the setting, which includes the time and location as well as the situation's physical characteristics, such as the classroom's furniture arrangement; P for participant identification, which includes details about their age, sex, and relationship to other participants as well as their social standing; E for events, which encompass both the event's purpose and the attendees' own personal objectives; A is the act, sequence, or arrangement of speaking actions within a speech event as well as the topic(s) addressed; K is the key, the expression of anything verbally or in writing; I stands for instruments or the linguistic code, including language, dialect, variation, and channel (such as speech or writing); N stands for norm or the accepted socio-cultural norms of communication and interpretation; and G stands for genre or kind of event, such as a speech or poetry (Johnstone and Marcellino 2010, 61; Noy 2017, 4).

5. Illustrating Euphemisms in the Mabia Languages of Ghana

In this section, we discuss some of the verbal acts that are considered as "unmentionables" in the three Mabia languages of Ghana under discussion: their use in their overt forms are signals of impolite communicative behaviour and typically attract some form of social sanction. We then suggest how these verbal acts are managed using taboo avoidance strategies (euphemistic expressions). Ethnographically, Mabia languages and cultures provide the appropriate cultural contexts or settings where the euphemisms used for snakebite, sexual organs and intercourse, and death apply. Cultures that hold views different from what is held by speakers of these languages may not employ euphemisms as cultural keys in expressing these kinds of events. Again, these expressions will apply only when both interlocutors (participants) have cultural understanding of the language, which serves as the instrument for communication and which can be decoded by both participants in the speech act. The expressions can only be used in genres where such incidents occur; thus, the event must be one that discusses snakebite, sexual organs and intercourse, and death. This follows the cultural norms of speakers of the languages, the absence of which marks an individual as impolite and uncultured. Generally, the setting, participants, events, (speech) act, keys, instrument, norm and genre—SPEAKING (Hymes 1962)—play critical roles in determining the use of euphemisms in Mabia languages and cultures and more specifically in discussions concerning snakebite, sexual organs and intercourse, and death as detailed in the following subsections.

5.1. Snake and Snakebite as Verbal Taboo

Among speakers of the Mabia languages of Ghana, overt mention of snakes or snakebite is a verbal taboo and thus these topics must be referred to using euphemistic expressions. In "plain language," the terms for "snakebite" are *waaf dummug*, *wagidimli* and

bumbe'o duŋa in Kusaal, Dagbani and Farefare, respectively. We must note that snakes have a special place in the socio-cultural orientation of the speakers of these Mabia languages because they are totemic animals and attributes of the gods and shrines which occupy important positions in their religious and social lives (Abubakari 2021; Abubakari and Issah 2022). We assume that the special place that these reptiles occupy in the social setup of the people could be a factor in the taboo of directly mentioning their name when it becomes a source of misfortune in society. When snakebite must be alluded to, various euphemisms are used as keys to code what is to be said in attempts not to threaten the positive face of the interlocutors. We illustrate the euphemistic expressions that are employed in coding snakebite in Farefare, Kusaal, and Dagbani in (1), (2) and (3) respectively.

(1) (a) *A* *nɛ* *la* *tiŋa* GUR
3SG step.PFV FOC ground
"S/he stepped on the ground"

(b) *Muɔ* *sĩɛ*
grass tear
"The grass is torn"

(2) (a) *Nwiigi* *gɛnd* *o* KUS
rope tie 3SG
"A rope has tied him/her"

(b) *Tɛŋi* *si'isi* *o*
ground touch 3SG
"The ground has touched him/her"

(3) (a) *O* *tuu* *la* *tiŋa* DAB
3SG hit.PFV FOC ground
"S/he has stepped on the ground"

(b) *O* *chirigi* *la* *mia*
3SG meet.PFV FOC ground
"S/he has met a rope"

(c) *Mɔɣu* *n* *ŋmaai* *o*
grass FOC cut.PFV 3SG
"Grass has cut him/her"

In examples (1)–(3), it is evident that the overt expressions for snakebite, which are unmentionable, are avoided, and euphemistic expressions are used instead. It is worth noting that the use of "land" as a reference to "snake" runs across all three these Mabia languages. The use of these toned-down expressions is not only to show politeness to other interlocutors but is also a mark of good communicative competence in the speech communities in question and in conformity with the cultural norms of the interlocutors (participants). Allan and Burridge (1991, 11) explain that euphemisms are "used as an

alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one's own face, or, through giving offence, that of the audience, or of some third party." They further contend that euphemistic expressions are meant "to use language like a shield against the feared, the disliked, the unpleasant" (Allan and Burridge 1991, 222). The explicit terms for snakes and snakebite are feared expressions in the Mabia culture and so the euphemisms serve as alternative ways of alluding to them. Additional euphemistic expressions employed as a face-saving strategy and a marker of politeness with reference to snakebite among the Mabia include the following examples, (4) for Farefare, (5) for Kusaal, and (6) for Dagbani.

(4) (a) *A nɛ la gu'usi* GUR
3SG step FOC ground
"S/he has stepped on thorns"

(b) *Tiŋa bunvuula n dum e*
ground-crawling thing FOC bite.PFV 3SG
"A ground crawling thing bit him"

(5) (a) *Bʋnsi'eli si'is o* KUS
something touch 3SG
"Something touched him/her"

(b) *O kidig nɛ o tiara*
3SG meet FOC 3SG peer
"S/he met his/her type"

(6) (a) *Buŋ n shihi o* DAB
something FOC touch.PFV 3SG
"Something has touched him/her"

(b) *O nola tiŋa*
3SG step.PFV ground
"S/he has stepped on the ground"

As noted, in addition to snakebite, the snake itself is not spoken of directly, as the actual word for "snake" is considered unmentionable: *wahu* in Dagbani, *waafu* in Farefare, and *waaf* in Kusaal. Instead, euphemistic expressions are used to refer to the snake, such as *búŋ* (thing)*, tiŋa* (land)*,* or *tinvurigu* (land-crawler) for Dagbani; *bunvuudir* (thing that crawls) or *bunsi'el* (something) for Kusaal; and *tiŋa bunvuula* (land thing that crawls) for Farefare. Thus, in managing the verbal taboos in a discourse setting, speakers of the Mabia languages employ varied expressions. We consider these expressions to be taboo avoidance techniques (TATs) which the speakers of these languages use to manage verbal taboos in a discourse setting so as to avoid using the plain-language expressions that their societies frown upon. This is in line with Wardhaugh's (2010, 249) claim that euphemisms are used to avoid mentioning certain matters directly and present otherwise unpleasant statements or issues that are not culturally acceptable.

These euphemistic expressions are meant to ensure that neither the speaker, hearer, nor any third party within the discourse setting loses their face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Metts and Grohskopf (2003) are of the view that face is an essential aspect of social interaction, which must be taken note of to avoid threatening the positive face of others or getting one's positive face threatened.

There are other cultures that have euphemistic expressions for "snake." Barus (2020) reports a similar situation for Karo, an Austronesian language spoken in Indonesia. He observes that the mention of *nipe* (snake) is usually considered a verbal taboo and, instead, euphemistic expressions such as *waren* (creeping grass) and *si gedang gendit* (the long belt) are used as taboo avoidance strategies for explicit mention of the term. Barus claims that use of these euphemisms is considered culturally refined and suggests that the euphemism *waren* is used because the snake creeps like grass in the forest, and *si gedang gendit* is used because of the snake's physical shape is similar to a *gendit* (belt) (Barus 2020, 106).

5.2 Sexual Organs and Intercourse

The sex organs and sexual intercourse are also unmentionables in the Mabia languages and cultures under discussion. The explicit terms for the genital organs are *yoli* (penis) and *pani* (vagina) in Dagbani, *yo'ore* and *pene* in Farefare, and as *yu'or* and *pɛn* in Kusaal. It is considered impolite and a mark of communicative incompetence to use these explicit expressions in social discourse. Thus, several euphemistic expressions are used in the Mabia languages to code these body parts in every speech act and setting where these expressions are alluded to. Participants in every speech situation or event must conform to the social norms or risk being referred to as impolite and uncultured. These euphemistic expressions, unlike the plain words, neither threaten the face of the interlocutors nor present the person using them as communicatively incompetent. Some of the expressions used are shown in (7) for Kusaal, (8) for Farefare and (9) for Dagbani.

(7)	(a)	*tuon*	"front"	KUS
	(b)	*davlim*	"manhood"	
	(c)	*bʋpʋ'alim*	"womanhood"	
(8)	(a)	*nɛŋan*	"front"	GUR
	(b)	*budaanɛ*	"manhood"	
	(c)	*pɔgesum*	"womanhood"	
(9)	(a)	*tooni*	"front"	DAB
	(b)	*dabilim*	"manliness or manhood"	
	(c)	*paɣatali*	"womanhood"	

There is remarkable consistency in euphemistic expression across the three languages: In each of them, the organs are conceptualised as either being one's manhood (for the male genital organs) or being one's womanhood (for the female organs), or referred to by their location, the "front." These euphemisms are metaphorical expressions, "the use

of language to refer to something other than what it was originally applied to, or what it 'literally' means, in order to suggest some resemblance or make a connection between the two things" (Knowles and Moon 2006, 2).

There are other "less explicit" euphemisms for sexual organs in Dagbani, as in (10) taken from Salifu's (2012, 108–109) exploration of verbal indirection in Dagbani:

(10)	(a)	*jiligu*	"tendon"	DAB
	(b)	*kpaa*	"cudgel"	
	(c)	*karante*	"cutlass"	
	(d)	*tiliga*	"pestle"	
	(e)	*pienkpaa*	"large needle"	
	(f)	*shɛriga*	"needle"	
	(g)	*toli*	"mortar"	

Salifu (2012) explains that (10a–f) are euphemistic expressions that refer to the male genital organ, whereas (10g) refers to the female genital organ. We contend that the explicit expressions for sex organs are not used because they are considered indecent, and explicit mention would pose a threat to the positive face of the people engaged in the discourse. Since face is crucial in interaction and is to be maintained, the interlocutors employ these euphemistic terms as indirection to be able to refer to these organs in a culturally accepted manner. The use of the euphemisms portrays the interlocutors as being communicatively competent and allows them to avoid face threatening acts by not using the indecent words in discourse.

Closely linked to the ban on explicit mention of sex organs is the avoidance of explicit terms for sexual intercourse, which is considered sacred and not to be talked of directly in society. The explicit terms for sexual intercourse are *nyɛbbu* for Dagbani, *nyɛbega* for Farefare, and *nyɛnbʋg* for Kusaal. These expressions can be roughly translated as "fucking" in English. Speakers of the Mabia languages have developed euphemistic expressions to use in social discourse to allude to sexual activity. In (11)–(13) below, we exemplify the euphemisms that are used for expressing sexual acts in Dagbani, Farefare and Kusaal, respectively.

(11)	(a)	*paam*	"to reach"	KUS
	(b)	*san'am*	"to spoil"	
	(c)	*digin/gban'an*	"to lie down with"	
	(d)	*baŋ*	"to know"	

(12)	(a)	*gã'arɛ*	"to lie down with"	GUR
	(b)	*paɛ*	"to reach"	
	(c)	*nɛ*	"to step on"	
	(d)	*mi*	"to know"	
	(e)	*kalum*	"to touch"	

(13)	(a)	*goli*	"to hang on to"	DAB
	(b)	*laɣi*	"to unite with"	
	(c)	*baŋ (daashili)*	"to know (secret of)"	
	(d)	*mali*	"to have someone"	
	(e)	*zaŋ n-dɔni*	"to lie with someone"	
	(f)	*paagi*	"to meet/encounter someone"	
	(g)	*furigi ŋarima*	"to pick blackberries"	
	(h)	*bo*	"to find/seek"	
	(i)	*doni*	"to lie with"	

These euphemistic expressions are exemplified in the examples in (14) below for each of the languages that are being investigated.

(14) (a) *O zaŋ o mi dɔni* DAB
3SG take.PFV 3SG FOC lie down
"He has used her to lie down"

(b) *O laɣi mi o*
3SG unite.PFV FOC 3SG
"He has united with her"

(c) *Ba paɛ taaba mɛ* GUR
3PL touch.PFV each other FOC
"They have reached each other"

(d) *A nɛ la a suŋɔ puan*
3SG step.PFV FOC 3SG mat inside
"He stepped on her mat"

(e) *digin nɛ o* KUS
lie FOC 3SG
"To sleep with her"

(f) *baŋ o*
know 3SG
"To know her"

The data presented in (11–14) illustrate the use of euphemistic expressions to avoid the verbal taboo of explicit mention of sexual encounters. Thus, face is saved, confirming Fernández's (2006) assertion that euphemistic expressions are employed "to mitigate the potential dangers of certain taboo words or phrases considered too blunt or offensive for a given social situation."

Salifu's (2012) work on indirection in Dagbani confirms that discussion of sex without using euphemistic expressions is considered indecent in the Dagbani culture. Salifu (2012, 108–110) further provides an extensive list of additional euphemistic expressions for sexual activity among the Dagbamba, as shown in (15):

(15)	(a)	*fɛb o jiligu*	"whip or lash her with a tendon"
	(b)	*luhi o kpaa*	"hit or strike her with a cudgel"
	(c)	*kuhi o kpaa/sheriga*	"prick her with a nail/needle"
	(d)	*sa o kpaa*	"plant a nail (in her with force)"
	(e)	*luhi o tiliga*	"pound her with a pestle"
	(f)	*che o karante*	"slash her with a cutlass"
	(g)	*gaagi o zuli*	"ungirdle (lift up) her tail"
	(h)	*fɛbi o lani*	"whip or lash her with the testis"
	(i)	*che o kom*	"splash/spray her with water"
	(j)	*kabbi o*	"break her"

So far, we have shown that various linguistic expressions are employed in talking about socially offensive topics. We further suggested that metaphorical terminology is employed to avoid mentioning items considered indecent in explicit language. The use of the euphemistic expressions, which are less explicit than the "direct words," is motivated by the need to avoid face threatening acts in discourse and show politeness.

A close semantic examination of the euphemistic expressions employed to denote sexual activity indicates that the socio-cultural aspirations of the Mabia people are embedded in these words. For instance, the semantics of these verbs represent a sense of ferocity against the women, and the men are the agents of the actions, whereas the women are the patients. Sexual activity is conceptualised as breaking, whipping, splashing, pounding, stepping on, and spoiling, among other metaphors. We note that, cross-linguistically, euphemisms for sexual intercourse and male sexual organs are conceptualised as weapons, eating or violence, as established by many scholars (Agyekum 1996; Baker 1975; Haste 1994; Hines 2000; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, 222) demonstrate that in Chagga, a language from the Mount Kilimanjaro region in Tanzania, eating metaphors are prototypical ways of speaking about sexual attraction towards the opposite sex, mainly from the perspective of the male gender. Agyekum (1996) also shows that in Akan sex is conceptualised as delicious food to be eaten by men, "whilst the male organ is depicted as a weapon—a gun, club, stick or arrow" (Agyekum 1996, 164).

This section has explored the euphemistic expressions for sexual organs and sexual activities in three Mabia languages. We have shown that speakers of these languages employ euphemisms to avoid speaking explicitly about "unmentionable" sexual organs and intercourse.

5.3 Death Euphemisms in Dagbani, Farefare and Kusaal

Talking about death in Mabia societies also requires euphemistic devices. In many cultures across the globe, death is associated with discomfort, fear and sadness. Owing to the apprehension that accompanies death, many cultures restrict their language users from plainly talking about it. Allan and Burridge (1991) note that death is a "fear-based taboo" and further explain that death brings in its wake varied forms of fear, including the fear of the loss of loved ones, the fear of what happens after death, and fear of evil

spirits. Consequently, it is common across many world cultures to employ euphemisms when speaking about death. The fear of death, and a cultural ban on plainly speaking about it, is prevalent among the Mabia cultures. In the cosmology of the Dagbamba, Kusaas and Farefari, death is part of the cycle of man's existence through which one returns to the ancestral home, depending on how worthily one has lived one's life on this earth. Generally, death is understood as a natural occurrence, particularly at an advanced age, and it may call for celebration or mourning, depending on the age of the deceased. However, in the Mabia cultures, death is hardly ever considered truly "natural," as some party can always be held responsible for the death of another.

In plain language, the expressions for "die" are *ki* in Farefare, *kpi* in Dagbani, and *kpi* in Kusaal. However, since these direct expressions are not considered appropriate in most contexts, several euphemistic terms are employed in talking about death. Variables such as social status and age determine the choice of one euphemistic expression in favour of another. Some metaphors for death are illustrated in (16) for Dagbani, (17) for Kusaal and (18) for Farefare.

(16)	(a)	*tiŋa n-vurigi*	"ground has broken"	DAG
	(b)	*zaŋ nuu n-dihi buya tiŋa*	"to use a hand to break the ground"	
	(c)	*kom bɔriya*	"the water has muddied"	
	(d)	*zo ka che nam sama*	"to run and leave the chiefdom's debts"	
	(e)	*che vuya ka siɣiri kpiimba*	"to take leave of the living and join the dead"	
	(f)	*dɔni nulɛbili*	"to lie on the wrong palm"	

(17)	(a)	*Na'ab doueya*	"chief has left (us)"	KUS
	(b)	*Ti-tita'ar la vʊoɛn-ya*	"the big tree has uprooted"	
	(c)	*O digin o nu'ug zug*	"he slept on his hand"	
	(d)	*Zoore la sirege mɛ*	"the hill has broken down"	

(18)	(a)	*kiŋɛ la Nayiri*	"gone to the Nayiri palace[3]"	GUR
	(b)	*kiŋɛ la sore*	"gone on a journey"	
	(c)	*tikãtɛ n lui*	"a big tree has fallen"	
	(d)	*ɔɔrɔ la n basɛ e*	"his cold has left him"	

In the event of death, the expressions in (16)–(18) are keys used by participants to code the death of people of high social standing in the Mabia cultures, further reflecting the structured nature of Mabia society. The chiefs are typically considered to be of high social standing among Mabia speakers. The sociolinguistic literature commonly notes that social class or position is a factor in using specific linguistic varieties (cf. Bonvillain 2003). The Dagbamba appear to have a more extensive inventory of linguistic expressions for death, and we interpret this to be associated with having a more refined social hierarchy. Note that in Farefare, the euphemism *kiŋɛ la Nayiri* (gone to the Nayiri palace) is an allusion to the installation processes of their chiefs. The Farefare chiefs are installed or "enskinned" at the Nayiri, and it is only upon the passing on of a chief that

3 *Nayiri* refers to the palace of the overlord of Mamprugu.

the palace can be visited for the next one to be enskinned. All these cultures reflect the social power and authority that chiefs have, and these are captured in the euphemistic expressions that are used to announce their death, as in (15a) for Dagbani, (16b) for Kusaal and (17a) for Farefare.

In addition to the euphemistic expressions in (16)–(18), other expressions are used to refer to the death of ordinary people, as in (19)–(21) below:

(19)	(a)	*tigɛ sagebɔ*	"satisfied with TZ (food)[4]"	GUR
	(b)	*gã deon*	"lying inside the house"	
	(c)	*sige dapoore*	"go to the back of the house"	
	(d)	*basɛ tu*	"left us"	
	(e)	*nyɛlegɛ kaam sige tiŋa*	"melt into oil to the ground"	
	(f)	*bure poore basɛ tu*	"turn his back on us"	
	(g)	*kiŋɛ la va'ami ka lebe na*	"go to farm and not return"	
	(h)	*kiŋɛ la sore*	"go on a journey"	

(20)	(a)	*digi dɔɔgin*	"lying in the room"	KUS
	(b)	*tigi sa'ab*	"satisfied with TZ (food)"	
	(c)	*ban'as la san'am*	"the sickness has got out of control"	
	(d)	*vikiya*	"uprooted"	
	(e)	*kuliya*	"gone home"	
	(f)	*maal kaelim*	"become non-existent"	
	(g)	*sɔs sour*	"beg for a road to travel"	
	(h)	*mi'enɛ nɔɔr*	"twist the mouth"	

(21)	(a)	*faai siɣi*	"has sneaked and gone down"	DAB
	(b)	*kani*	"not there (any longer)"	
	(c)	*di sayim n-sayi*	"eaten TZ (food) and is satisfied"	
	(d)	*daŋ tooni*	"he/she has gone front"	
	(e)	*lebi Naawuni dini*	"become God's own"	
	(f)	*di sagim tiɣi*	"eaten TZ (food) and is satisfied"	

Again, we note that the euphemism "eaten TZ (staple food) to satisfaction" runs across all the Mabia cultures. The assumption is that the person who has died can no longer eat, since death marks the exit from the physical world into the spiritual world. All these expressions are markers of good communicative competence in Mabia societies. Using these expressions reduces the negative effects of explicitly mentioning death in these cultures and thus ensures that the face of the interlocutors is not threatened. In the context of politeness theory, such euphemisms are crucial in managing discourse and avoiding hurting the feelings of others; the euphemisms help to communicate what would otherwise have been culturally unacceptable within social interactions of the Mabia people.

4 *TZ* (*Tuo Zaafi*) is a staple food that is made from maize or millet and eaten with soup or sauce. It is the commonest traditional food in the Mabia cultures of northern Ghana.

When death is triggered by illness, the Dagbamba have a way of expressing it euphemistically by saying that *dɔro maa n-nyaŋ o* (the sickness has defeated him or her). Similar expressions exist in Kusaal, *ban'as/tɔɔgla la ma'ae nɛ* (the sickness has got out of control) and in Farefare, *la ka ze'ele* (the sickness did not go well). In all these expressions, death is conceptualised as war and is seen to have defeated someone who dies because of ill health.

Finally, there are euphemisms used when infants die in the Mabia culture, as illustrated in (22) where the death of an infant is seen as "a return to God, the Maker." This use of euphemisms reflects the belief of the Mabia people that children are gifts from God, and so children who die only return to God.

(22)	(a)	*lebe la yinum*	"return to God"	KUS
	(b)	*labi mi*	"return to the Maker"	DAB
	(c)	*lebe mɛ*	"return to God"	GUR

From the euphemistic expressions above, we can conclude that the euphemistic devices used in Mabia languages to refer to death are (i) sensitive to the age of the deceased and (ii) reflect the social status of the deceased. Furthermore, the euphemisms portray the deceased as resting, embarking on a journey, sleeping, or being no more. In addition, posture and food satisfaction are also domains of the death euphemisms in the Mabia culture (documented elsewhere for the Kusaas by Musah and Atibiri [2020]).

It appears that, in the Mabia culture, death is conceptualised as loss, the end, sleep, a journey, and having eaten TZ to satisfaction, all metaphorical domains quite similar to those established for Akan and Hebrew by Owiredu (2020). Each of these metaphorical domains is presented by using euphemistic devices that make an otherwise fearful social topic acceptable in discourse. This explains why Linfoot-Ham (2005, 228) is of the view that one crucial social benefit of euphemisms is that they make it possible to discuss taboo subjects without offending other interlocutors.

6. Conclusion

We have examined the euphemistic expressions employed in Dagbani, Farefare and Kusaal as communicative devices for averting face threats in discussing topics that are unacceptable to mention by means of explicit terminology. We have shown that there are varied euphemistic expressions (indirection strategies) used to allude to sensitive topics such as sexual organs and intercourse, death, and snakes and snakebite. We have shown that the Mabia cultures share some similarities but also differ from one another in the conceptualisation of these various topics and that the idiomatic expressions are grounded in the socio-cultural lives of a given speech community. The euphemistic devices are markers of good communicative competence and help manage daily interactions with other interlocutors. The analysis was cast within the theoretical framework of politeness theory and ethnography of communication, where we demonstrated that the strategies are used to present a good self-image of the

interlocutors, which is crucial in the avoidance of face threatening acts and the consideration of speech within the cultural context. Since this study is based on data drawn from only three Mabia languages in Ghana, we recommend future research that will employ much larger sampled data from these Mabia languages. In addition, we recommend that future research focus on the influence Western education and the dominance of foreign religions (Islam and Christianity) in the Mabia cultures have on preserving verbal taboos.

Abbreviations

3	third person pronoun
DAB	Dagbani
FOC	focus marker
GUR	Farefare
KUS	Kusaal
PFV	perfective
SG	singular

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