**Article**

# Re-thinking everyday metaphors through Indigenous Ghanaian languages:
## Shifting the center to the margins

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## Abstract

The purpose of this Special Issue is to expand our understanding of conceptual metaphors in six of Ghana's Indigenous languages: Asante-Twi, Gonja, Likpakpaln, Mfantse, Nzema, and Safaliba. The authors bring new knowledge to the international community from these understudied languages, which may become inaccessible in the not too distant future, particularly those from oral sources, given Ghana's political embrace of neoliberal global flows of people, goods, and information which expands the reaches of language shift. Nevertheless, the specific metaphor data from the languages in this Special Issue represent the first preliminary examples of documentation and hence are of foundational significance, as the data generate new understandings.

KEYWORDS:     Indigenous metaphor, conceptual metaphor, language materiality, Ghanaian Indigenous metaphors, Asante-Twi, Gonja, Likpakpaln, Mfantse, Nzema, and Safaliba

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> Metaphor is as much a part of our functioning as our sense of touch and as our perception. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:239)

> The conceptual and pedagogical benefit to scientific and speech communities from systematic semantic analysis [of metaphorical and metonymic mappings]…is quite promising. (Rice, 2012:73)

## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this Special Issue of *Sociolinguistic Studies* is to expand our understanding of conceptual metaphors in six of Ghana's Indigenous languages: Asante-Twi, Gonja, Likpakpaln, Mfantse, Nzema, and Safaliba. The authors bring new knowledge to the international community from these understudied languages, which may become inaccessible in the not too distant future, particularly those from oral sources, given Ghana's political embrace of neoliberal global flows of people, goods, and information which expands the reaches of language shift. Nevertheless, the specific metaphor data from the languages in this Special Issue represent the first preliminary examples of documentation and hence are of foundational significance, as the data generate new understandings.

Unfortunately, metaphor studies are often not well funded if funded at all, as traditional documentation mostly concerns itself with dictionaries and sketch grammars. No less today than in the 1980s when George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) published their seminal ideas on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), funding constraints contribute to the precarity and fragility of much Indigenous conceptual metaphor study and further underscore the importance of the documentation in this Special Issue. We still live in a world that values funding the development of dictionaries and sketch grammars for Indigenous languages rather than studies of figurative language in everyday use. Nevertheless, during the last 40 years conceptual metaphor study has been a burgeoning line of research, with the lion's share of data from English and additional international languages. Notable exceptions from Ghanaian Indigenous metaphor studies are by Agyekum (2013), Ansah (2014), and Schaefer (2015).

With respect to a broader cross-section of Indigenous languages, tentative findings from Idström and Piirainen (2012) and Piirainen and Sherris (2015) are noteworthy. They indicate that while source-to-target domain mappings are helpful to understand the importance of some everyday metaphors, they don't tell the whole story. Moreover, adopting a universal application of a Lakoffian positioning might only be a form of Anglo- or Euro-centrism and essentialism. CMT might best be modified to make room for Indigenous cultural, linguistic, and semiotic capital as the papers in this Special Issue indicate. This, of course,

questions the universalist or essentialist claims for everyday metaphors and, in so doing, shifts the center away from international languages to Indigenous languages, which nation states often marginalize.

This line of thought further asks if universalist and essentialist positionings might only serve the hegemony of English and additional so-called international languages. Questions which many avoid as the discourses of neoliberal economics lock themselves into Ghana generating a typical master narrative we see throughout the early 21st century worldwide. Take for, instance, educational funding in Ghana. It is mostly international donor funding which focuses on transforming the multilingual landscapes of 83 living languages, of which 73 are Indigenous and eight are non-Indigenous, into an English-dominant country with a handful of Ghanaian languages as quaint and historic artifacts for nostalgic visits to the countryside, music, dance, and early childhood education. While this is not yet a widespread Ghanaian reality, some do foresee its troubling indicators. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the children of middle class and wealthy Ghanaian's in Accra, Ghana's capital, often have only passive understandings of their heritage Indigenous languages and increasingly prefer English, with parents placing their children in private English-only schools. As in many other so-called developing nation-states, the intention is putatively 'for the good of all' Ghanaians and will (so the discourse of good intentions argues) bring prosperity, digital literacy, and social cohesion. If only society were so simple and greed was not the agenda of elites everywhere. With the presumption of good intentions like these, the hegemonic Global Northern agenda will become a reality as will a diminished ethnolinguistic landscape.

Against the background of neoliberal forces of social homogenization (a preemptive funeral dirge, for others a call to activism), this Special Issue raises the value and merit of difference across and within languages. It reframes metaphor studies away from languages for wider communication on to Indigenous metaphors as communicative practices, potentially making additional significant contributions to meaning-making (or sign making, if employing a semiotic perspective) along axes of differentiation (Gal and Irvine, 2019). Indeed, these papers stand together in their demonstrations of difference and hence generate greater cultural and linguistic capital to reshape what is of value and merit in the richness of their diverse embodied and situated meaning-making moves.

## 2 Lived experiences and metaphors

The place of metaphor is indelibly entrenched in lived experiences. We use metaphor unthinkingly, almost everywhere and almost all the time. Indeed, some metaphors are so commonly experienced that they are veiled, an irony which was

not lost on Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Some forty years on, and due to Lakoff and Johnson's profound influence on the way we think about metaphors, there has been a paradigm shift similar to Thomas Kuhn's (1996) conception of the Copernican Revolution. Now, we find that the place of metaphor is no longer just at home in studies of literary rhetoric, wordsmithing of literati, or the disempowered positioning of those who wrongly claimed that science 'cures us of metaphor' as much as it cures us of disease and low-tech discomforts. Indeed, these travesties of discourse have been put to rest. When one sees the industrious source-to-target mappings of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) in analyses of world languages, the anachronisms of science as a remedy for metaphorical thought are on the junkheap of history and, at best, artifacts for historical anthropology. Laughable – all – in our poststructural world with its deconstruction of binaries that would otherwise place metaphoric thought to one bounded way of thinking and scientific thought as another bounded and higher cognitive realm. We owe Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for adding their voices to many that have put these tired ideas to rest.

Moreover, many of the metaphors that go unnoticed and unquestioned are not just unwittingly veiled in everyday conversations, but also make their unnoticed appearance in written text, whether prosaic and conversational or literary. We see conceptual metaphors in multilingual rap, Beowulf, Gilgamesh, and the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in the storied narrative traditions across Indigenous languages. That is, of course, when we take the time to look beneath the everyday veils and we begin to process the intertextual resonances and the fractal recursivities (Gal and Irvine, 2019) that work through the ways we make meaning iteratively in relation with the world, with others, even with things. We often don't notice metaphors in conversations, newspapers, or social media postings from our personal repertoires of languages. Their ubiquity is their camouflage. The mundane intertextuality of metaphors begs us to reconceptualize how we understand these mappings and their embodiment and how we understand the materiality of the enterprise itself.

## 3 Mappings, embodiment, materiality (or not)

The mappings, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have labeled them in CMT, are between a source domain and a target domain. For example in English, BITTERNESS is a source domain for RESENTMENT. Both are experienced as embodied materiality to my thinking. However, Lakoff and Johnson don't follow my thinking into materiality. We agree on embodiment – the wedding or unity of mind and body. All three of us are post-Cartesian. The next step is absent from

Lakoff and Johnson. It is about theorizing thought and language. Are they material or not? Are they physical or not? Let me return to a Lakoffian analysis, but take it further than they in order that I may leave behind their starting point – cognition and the stance they take, which is to remain silent on the materiality of thought and language. To wit: BITTERNESS is rooted in the embodied sensory and material experience of taste. RESENTMENT is rooted in the embodied and material experience of emotions. However RESENTMENT is a target domain and not a source domain, at least not with respect to BITTERNESS. Perhaps this is due to the experience of RESENTMENT being a complex and multi-componential emotional experience of a blend of anger, disappointment, fear, apprehension, aversion, and disgust to different degrees with different people, whereas the experience of BITTERNESS is a simple (or simpler?) and componential sensory experience of acidity, sharply distinguished from, or separate and distinct from, sweetness and saltiness in English. Nevertheless, even here, the Anglocentric – perhaps Eurocentric – positioning should be obvious even to a novice anthropologist. Assumptions built into an unquestioned universal view of even taste, not to mention emotion, or the study of foods are submerged in this view. Moreover, the entire positioning of Lakoff and Johnson's CMT is through a concept of embodiment, which remains undeveloped with respect to materiality. In this way they avoid constructing metaphor as material and leave unchallenged the 17th-century binary with thought and language as nonphysical and the world – its opposite – as physical as it gets. This strengthens, of course, the ambiguity surrounding rationalism and science, which at the same time Lakoff and Johnson do show us exploit metaphor – and by extension metonymy and synecdoche when science and rationalism express paradigmatic concepts, as well as in their modelling and simulations, research, and understandings.

At the same time that Lakoff and Johnson (1980) marks an important paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996), it leaves us in a cognitive paradigm rather than a sociocultural one, and it privileges the universalizing positionings of individuals rather than their sociocultural interdependent positionings. Further, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) remain deafeningly silent on metaphor materiality, preferring to leave unquestioned the Global Northern binary of idealism/symbolism/representation, on the one hand, bounded and cordoned off from the material/physical world on the other. As a researcher and student of metaphor, I raise the above topics more as a challenge to the field of CMT to continue to develop the important and seminal work on embodiment that might lead to a move towards understanding the embodiment of all language, not just metaphor, as material as the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and earth itself.

## 4 Some highlights from papers in this Special issue

In her paper, '"My heart tears" and "my eyes open": Exploring the verb *te* "to tear" and its range of interpretations in Asante-Twi', Dorothy Pokua Agyepong draws from Ruhl (1989), Wilkins and Hill (1995) and Goldberg (1995) in her examination of the Asante-Twi verb '*te*' [tear or rip]. Her systematic analysis leads to the discovery of an array of interpretations of the verb *te*. She argues that its context-based interpretations align with target and source mappings, respectively, the base or source being 'to separate a soft or flexible object into parts by pulling the object'. She shares a wide range of contextual interpretations that Asante-Twi speakers use to express communicative eloquence or clarity, wisdom, cunning, rain stopping, sky clearing, and establishing a new institution or organization among others. Agyepong positions this work as a valuable approach for languages with richly polysemous verb meanings and encourages the application of her approach to Indigenous metaphor studies worldwide.

Kenneth Bodua-Mango, in his paper 'A Conceptual Metaphor Theory analysis of *anishi* "eyes" based metaphors in Gonja', documents twenty metaphors based on *anishi*, 'eyes' in Gonja. Bodua-Mango's paper documents examples that support universalist considerations and those that would not at the outset. He discusses how Asante-Twi, Gonja, Safaliba, and English participate in similar source and target domain universality around KNOWLEDGE IS SEEING and LIFE IS A JOURNEY such that, despite their linguistically genetic differences, the lived experiences of speakers of these languages have led to similar everyday metaphoric expressions in these two examples. However, Bodua-Mango reports that the paradigm shift towards culturally differentiated metaphors among cognitive linguists, including Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), provides for a variationist perspective which more fully supports his dataset. He then documents and explores his dataset for *anishi*, in which he demonstrates cultural differences that include linking 'eyes' to objects, possessions, seriousness, invisibility, timidity, and carefulness, as well as sight and many more meaning-making constructs for Gonja.

In their paper, '"The heart has caught me": Anger metaphors in Likpakpaln (Konkomba)', Abraham Kwesi Bisilki and Kofi Yakpo examine *liɲuul* 'heart' as the alleged linguistic location of the anger emotion in Likpakpaln. Their preliminary findings indicate that *liɲuul* as a body part requires no structural expansion to be perceived as anger, which is not true of additional emotions in Likpakpaln, nor for findings that tend to conclude otherwise that are based in additional languages. Bisilki and Yakpo also illustrate the role of synonyms for *liɲuul* to express emotional differences or gradations which, they argue, suggests more data from understudied languages need be documented when claiming a universalist

position for conceptual metaphors. Evidence which is classified into four types by Bisilki and Yakpo does tentatively indicate support for cultural variation and embodiment in Likpakpaln metaphors. Finally, the dataset for emotion metaphors in Likpakpaln indicates that anger, as with many emotions, exhibits areal features of anthropomorphism and lexicalization in complex expressive structures.

Grace Nana Aba Dawson-Ahmoah and Patrick Nana Wonkyi, in their paper 'Conceptualizing MATURITY in the Mfantse dialect of Akan', frame their data as embodied and culturally diverse as they draw their approach primarily from Kövecses (2014) as well as from his earlier publications where he emphasizes variation in his approach to Conceptual Metaphor Theory that is culturally grounded. Dawson-Ahmoah and Wonkyi's study explores a variety of different lived everyday experiences among the Mfantse that shape everyday conceptualizations of maturity. They identify both metonymy and metaphor as mechanisms for grounding maturity, an otherwise abstract construct, albeit one that is commonly discussed in everyday life. The rich diversity of Mfantse source domains for maturity include, but are not limited to, plant florescence, specific female hair-dos, crowing, and eating among other sources examined in this study.

In his paper, 'The semantic extensions of *tu* "to uproot"/ "to pull out" in Nzema discourse: A Conceptual Metaphoric Perspective', Mohammed Yakub positions his scholarship on metaphor as culturally constructed. He draws his approach from the scholarship of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Goddard (2006), Sharifian (2011), and Ndlovu (2018) among others. Data were gleaned from spontaneous speech contexts and Nzema literature. Yakub examines *tu* as a source domain and finds that the characteristics of the verb align with the abstract notions that accompany the target domain. The author observes that the verb *tu* is polysemous, which evokes different scenarios with different figure-ground relationships and can participate in causative/inchoative alternation. Target domain documentation and analysis reveals, but is not limited to, fear, offering advice, bleeding, and belly protrusion.

Ari Sherris, Paul Schaefer, and Eden Kosiaku, in their paper 'Resonating embodiment: Everyday metaphorical abstractions in Safaliba', express their documentation of metaphors in enactments, which is an approach that emphasizes the materiality of meaning making. Arguing that meaning is not derived first and foremost from sensory-motor behavior, but instead is co-constructed through enactments in the everyday world of relationships with oneself, others, plants, animals, and things, the authors position theory in a dynamic, nonlinear view of otherwise traditional source and target domains. To this end, their work examines eight enactments, including praise, pomposity, offensiveness, and goodwill, among others. Their examples are situated in short texts.

## 5 Conclusion

The papers in this Special Issue contribute new knowledge to scholarship on everyday metaphors from six lesser-known languages: Asante-Twi, Gonja, Likpakpaln, Mfantse, Nzema, and Safaliba. The challenge is to continue to document, examine, and better understand metaphors for a better understanding of each language and the field of metaphor studies in Ghana and worldwide. As a Safaliba proverb would have it: *Dinaa baa ŋ nyɔgɛra dinaa sɔɔŋa*, which is literally, 'It is today's dog that catches today's rabbit' but means figuratively, 'It is these days' people who understand these days' matters', according to Safalɛnaa Kafiniti Ayisoba, the Safaliba Chief of Mandari, Ghana.

## About the author

Ari Sherris is Associate Professor of Bilingual Education at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, United States. During the 2015–16 academic year, he was a J. William Fulbright Scholar at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana. During June 2019, Ari was a distinguished guest researcher at the University of South Africa. He holds a PhD in Second Language Development, an MA in Applied Linguistics, and a BA in the Humanities. Ari's research and language revitalization interests include Mikasuki, Salish Ql'ispe (a.k.a. Salish-Pend d'Oreille, Montana Salish, and Flathead Salish) and Safaliba. His ethnographic work documents situated practice in grassroots policy initiatives and school-based activism among the Safaliba in rural Ghana. His language documentation includes conceptual metaphors and formulaic language in Salish Ql'ispe and Safaliba. He also explores applications of task-based language teaching in the pedagogy of revitalization. His practitioner papers analyze integrated content and language instruction, academic English instruction for graduate students, and asset-based coaching for and by language teachers (e.g., peer coaching, critical friending in educational contexts). He is the author of articles and chapters that focus on Indigenous communities strengthening the vitality of their languages and cultures. He is co-editor with the late Elisabeth Piirainen (2015) of *Language Endangerment: Disappearing metaphors and shifting conceptualizations*.

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