

# Sociolinguistics Account of the Dimensions of Naa Tia Sulemana's Poem *M Ba Yeligu*

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**Abstract:** The focus of this current study is to provide a sociolinguistics analysis of a poem entitled *m ba yeligu* 'my father's advice' written by Naa Tia Sulemana. My analysis focuses on the language use in the poem (diction), the structure of the poem. The lesson of the poem is also discussed in the work. I claim that the advice that is given in the poem is one that is relevant for the social upbringing of children among the Dagbamba. This is attributable to the fact that the notion of telling lies is frowned upon in the social structures of the Dagbamba. The paper is important because it addresses an important poem in the context of the Dagbamba, particularly that literature has not been investigated in the study of Dagbani language.

**Key words:** Dagbamba, child raising, sociolinguistics, diction, advice etc

## I. INTRODUCTION

The poem under study was originally written in Dagbani language by Naa Tia Sulemana. However, this current study has made the efforts to get the poem translated into English language for the purpose of this study.

Dagbamba (also called Dagombas by nonnative speakers and even natives who are not into the language) is an ethnic group from the Mabilia (Gur) language family of the Niger Congo language family. Speakers of Dagbani or Dagbanli occupy some 8082 square miles in area and the Dagbon Kingdom dates back to the fifteenth century, with its early warrior equestrian ancestors coming into the present Northeastern location in modern day Ghana, from the Chadidic Region.

The author of the poem, Naa Tia Sulemana, born in 1927, comes from a royal lineage of Dagbon. He had an impressive education and career. He briefly worked with the Bureau of Ghana languages as a chief editor of Dagbani newspaper *Lahabli Chuyi*". Later in 1965 he joined the Information Services Department where he served on different levels as District Information Officer (DIO) and subsequently the Regional Information Officer (RIO) in different areas of Ghana. By dint of hard work he was posted to Kenya as information counsellor (press attaché) to Ghana's Embassy. Unfortunately, he had to return to Ghana after a coup de tat that took place in 1983.

Naa Tia Sulemana was also a known political figure in the northern region of Ghana. He held several political offices and

later become a member of the Council of state of Ghana from 2001 to 2008.<sup>1</sup>

As a royal of Dagbon, he first obtained the chieftaincy title as Fazhihini Naa, and was later elevated to higher chieftaincy of Zoosali or Zoosali Naa.

As an author, he was among the early Dagbani elites to have started writing proverbs, poems, stories and history in the Dagbani language. He has to his credit *Naa Luro mini o Bihi* (Naa Luro and his Children), *Naa Zangina mini o Bihi* (Naa Zangina and Children) *Kpamdi Fasara* (Proverbs in Dagbani). His main objective was to encourage the reading, studying and writing in Dagbani. Some of his books are used in Schools, Colleges and Universities in Ghana.

Social phenomenon and cultural nuances are always in constant motion. Language is a vehicle, which carries the do's and don'ts of a people. Language is considered to be the most important medium through which members of a community exchange or conceal thoughts and understand each other. Language is uniquely important. Language shows the values, conditions and beliefs systems of a particular group of people. Language develops in keeping with the level of thoughts and the development in every realm of human life.

Sociolinguistics primarily shows how human beings interact with each other using language structures. Sociolinguistics as a study spells out how language is used at different levels, purposes and functions in the social set up of a people. Closely related to sociolinguistics is the sociology of language. The close proximity of these two concepts often lead to the misunderstanding or misuse of these concepts. However, sociolinguistics and the sociology of language are diametrically parallel. Hudson (1980) made effort to differentiate between the two by suggesting that sociolinguistics is "the study of language in society, while the sociology of language is "the study of society in relation to language". Thus, sociolinguistics dwells more on language to know more about the society and the sociology of language concentrates in the study of society in relation to their language. Essentially, sociolinguistics is more concern about unfolding the mystery behind a language as it is used in a social context. In other words, sociolinguists try to find a justification for the use of a particular language structure.

<sup>1</sup> "M Ba Yeligu" as appeared in the title means 'my father's advice'.

Chaika (1982) describes sociolinguistics as the study of how families, friends, teachers and even strangers use language to interact with one another. The value in sociolinguistics lies in using language as a tool to bringing out differences of social stratifications in the society. Spolsky (2003) posits that sociolinguistics as an area of study tries to establish a link or relation that bridges a language and the society. Spolsky stresses that the essence of language is not only to communicate out meaning but also to establish and keep social ties. As well, Holmes (2003) argues that sociolinguistics is concerned with establishing the reasons for the use of different means or ways to communicate with people in different social contexts. Similarly, Aitchison (2003) says that the sociolinguists seek to understand the reasons for the variety of languages in our world. By so doing they often try to analyse the social factors which allow for such varieties to exist. Generally, sociolinguists who of course are concerned with the aspect of human communication agree on the relevance of analyzing the ways of language usage and its variety of functions (Mesthrie 2009).

In trying to connect language with the society, sociolinguistics considers style of speech as critical element or theory.

Style which involves diction, syntax, intonation and rhythm can be a written text or in oral submission Haase (2005). Style is mostly associated with stylistics and can be difficult to define. Missikova as cited in Wani (2013) proposed the following definitions;

- a. Style is the manner of expression “both in oral or written text”
- b. Style have variations; that is, “not only from situation to situation, but according to the medium and degree of formality”.

According to Coupland (2007), style is used connotatively by people to refer to “some aesthetic dimension of difference”. Coupland further explained that “literature style relates to the crafting of language text in literature genres and to an aesthetic interpretation of text.” Chaika (1982: 29) also defines style as a variety of language, which has the capability of transmitting social or artistic effects. In another vein, Chaika (1982: 43) posits style of speech involves three linguistic features; that is sound, words and syntax. Furthermore, Joos (as in Coupland, 2007) thinks style is a language form used by a speaker. Joos therefore, categorizes formality of style in both written and spoken language as formal, frozen, consultative, casual and intimate. These categories respond to the intuition of the speakers involved; their degree of intimacy. Explaining further Joos says the ‘frozen’ style, which is generally used in a particular literature, is based on the speaker’s meaning but open to the interpretation of the hearer. The ‘formal’ style as identified by Joos is said to be used under formal situations. Such language is used during formal lectures, sermons, newscast and so on. ‘Consultative’ style is used by a speaker to give an explicit background information and to allow the hearer to understand whom she or he is dealing with. It is mostly done strangers or

near-strangers. ‘Casual’ style is used in a relaxed situations. This is a ‘daily style’ as it is used in everyday conversation. ‘Intimate’ style comes in absolute private language between or among the people involved in the conversation. Lovers, close friends and sometimes families mostly use this. Speakers either can switch from any of the above to the other or even use a multiple of them at any engagement. For example, Hosen (2010) analysed the interactions between Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle Obama on the programme, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and conclude that the language style of Oprah Winfrey was varied from formal, informal, serious, ironic to humour. Hosen also concludes that the language between the host and the guest was standard and mostly simple sentences. Milroy (1980), (in Barbara et al 1991) shows that people change their ways of communication to allow for a conformity with the people they form a dense and multiplex social network with.

1. *The poem for the analysis*

This section focuses on the people under study in this current paper. I first provide the Dagbani version of the poem and then further translate it into English to make reading and comprehension easy. Below is the poem with line-to-line English translation.

“M Ba Yeligu” (My Father’s Advice’)

Poem in Dagbani	Translation
“M BA YELIGU”	MY FATHER’S ADVICE
M ba daa yeli ma.	My father once told me.
Ka ma mi yeli ma.	And my mother once told me.
M maan labi yeli ma.	Yes, they once told me,
Ni n-zom ziri	To fear lies
Ni ziri dihiri niri vi.	For lies disgraces a man.
Ka labsiri bilichini nyaaga.	And destroys the nobility of a man.
Ka n ti yi yisina.	But upon reaching my prime,
Ka zɛmana kana.	That moment in time,
Ka ziri mali nyɔri	Lies has become rewarding
Ka yelimaɗli n- le koŋ nyɔri	And truth unrewarding!
Oi! Oi! Bo zɛmana m-bɔŋɔ?	Oh! Oh! What season is this?
Ka ziri ti deei zaashee.	When lies rules.
Ka yelimaɗli n-lee koŋ zaashee?	And truth denied its place in life?
Oi! Oi! Bo zɛmana m-bɔŋɔ?	Oh! Oh! What season is this?
Amaa ziri yi kuli kɔri vuyisi .	But as lies tills the soil,
Yelimaɗli m-birita .	Truth sows its seeds.
“Situra laɣim koɓiga	And in the midst of a dozen colours
“Tampieli n-daa gari”	The white colour stands supreme.
Dinzugu ziri laɣim koɓiga,	Yes, in the midst of a dozen lies
Yelimaɗli n-daa gari.	Truth stands supreme.

Having presented the poem, the next section provides an analysis of the issues in the poem.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The poem begins with the persona recalling an admonishment of his parents. Line 3 says *yes, they once told me*, an admission and emphasis of what he was told by both the father and the mother. The real admonishment comes in line 4 as the persona reports that his parents admonish him *to fear lies*. The fear metaphor here is critical. Human beings by nature have fears emanating from different circumstances. To fear is to be emotionally stressed or drained. We fear monstrous monsters, wild animals and the 'unknown! Lie is an abstract now; we cannot see it let alone interact with it. The curious question is what is so monstrous about **lies** that the persona's parents would admonish him to run away from. The significance is great especially as line 4 is an enjambment or a run-on-line to line 5. In fact, the import of line 4 is felt in both lines 5&6 respectively.

*For lies disgraces a man. And destroys the nobility of a man.*

Telling lies does not 'merely' disgraces a man but it shreds and washes away his dignity, nobility and his social position. The social cultural acknowledgement of respect and nobility is greatly higher among the author's ethnic group. Royals and noble men can fall foul of sexual misconduct or promiscuity or even theft but to tell lies among Dagombas is completely unheard of. Rightly or wrongly, noble men among the Dagomba ethnic group would accept any accusation any day but for the fear of being considered a liar. Therefore, the monstrous position of "lies" as captured in line 4 is seriously significant. The conviction of the persona's parents is that telling lies devours a man as a wild animal would devour him.

Stanza 2 of the poem tells the persona's great aghast; at the persona's youthful age, he realizes a sharp contrast between what his parents had admonished him against and the prevailing immersion in lies by many people.

Accordingly, telling lies has become a daily game as line 8 (*That moment in time*) suggests. To be rewarded is to receive an acclamation for a good work done. Therefore, readers are amazed that, telling lies with its negativity is said to wear the crown of reward to the detriment of telling truth. The application of exclamation mark at the end of the last line of the stanza speaks volume. It suggests the persona's utter shock as truth becomes "unrewarding"!

The persona's use of rhetorical question in the beginning of stanza 3 is truly telling. In fact, the element of shock is seen in the phonology of "Oh! Oh! The chilling sound (Oh! Oh!)", speaks to the complete amazement of the persona. The phonology, coupled with the rhetorical statement leaves the persona in no unmagnified bewilderment. For **lies** to usurp the rightful position of **truth** is very significant in drumming home the message of the text. Truth has no position in the era of the persona unlike his parents.

Line 14 is a repetition of line 11, showing the great grief of the persona. In fact, the repetition here is meant to rehash the

persona's pangs of worry regarding his generation's applause for lies and those who tell lies!

The persona is however consoled and convinced by the consolation that when *lies till the soil*, it is truth that *sows its seeds*. Personifying "lies" and "truth" is significant in a sense that the persona, wishes to demonstrate that in spite of the seeming respectable position *lies* has gained in contemporary times, it still suffers because *truth* would enjoy the labours of *lies*. The line *Truth sows its seed* is emphatic suggesting that truth would always be the victor over lies. Furthermore, the persona posits that

*–in the midst of dozen colours The white colour stands supreme.*

This image of white colour's supremacy in the midst of many other colours is to portray the persona's conviction that lies would always fall flat in the face of truth irrespective how lies has been revered.

Themes of the poem

1. **The truth morality-** truth is morally fit in every society and the persona's society is no exception. Telling true always is not only considered a moral obligation but a means to gaining dignity and nobility in the society. The persona mince no words when he posits that

*For lies disgraces a man. And destroys the nobility of a man.*

As telling lies disgraces and destroys man, the opposite is true. The persona sees telling true as a moral obligation as he is bonded to the admonishment of his parents. So no matter how telling lies has gained respect in the society, the persona is morally obliged to remain truthful.

2. **Women empowerment-** the poem gives equal rights to both the father and the mother of the persona. Both genders is acknowledged in the first two lines of the poem for their parental or guidance role. In fact, no gender is given a superior role. In the face of the author's background, which is typically patriarchal, one would have expected that some level of superiority been given to the man. Nevertheless, such is not realized as the persona is morally bound to both his father and mother so much that he does not want to be swayed away from their advice. Incidentally, both the persona's father and mother gave the same advice, eschewing lies and imbibing truth.

## III. SOCIOLINGUISTICS PERSPECTIVE OF THE POEM

The poem is a narrative representation of the poet and his parents. Culturally and socially, the African parent possess deep insight of life and therefore has the unique wisdom of advice. The title "M BA YELIGU" loosely means My Father's Talk. In addition, to understand the social or cultural set up of the poet is to appreciate his choice of words for the

title. Sociolinguistically, the title is capable of revealing the background of the poet. Since sociolinguists study the society through language, and though the words captured in the title may be general in meaning, a careful ponder over it connotatively reveals its setting as African. Equally prudent to the advice or African father's wise word content of the poem is the report in the first two lines of the poem. Both lines emphatically speak to the persona's report of his parents. Moreover, in line four, readers are told what the persona's parents have told him to eschew lies because of the negative consequences that go with telling lies. Barbara et al (1991) confirms that titles could easily suggest the sociolinguistic approach to a literary analysis.

The sociolinguistic aspect of the poem is also express from the angle of relationship that exists between the persona and his parents. Relationship between the persona and his parents is not only age difference, but it is also about crystalizing or manifesting their words as a form of respect and reverence to them. The persona's choice of words shows how dear he holds his parents advice. The African parent seems to have it all and the African child seems compel to accepting the parents words hook-line-and-sinker. The line *And truth unrewarding!* shows the level of bewilderment the persona has become. Prior to his prime, he held solid his parent's advice to eschew telling lies but his generation seems solidified in telling lies as a 'means of earning a living'. The persona's use of exclamation mark at the end of the above quoted line shows his level of surprise and since his parents can never be wrong in their advice, the persona went further to confirm his parents 'golden' advice as

*But as lies tills the soil, Truth sows its seeds.*

Barbara et al (1991), using language or choice of words to analyze the behavior pattern of one of the characters in Toole's novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces* conclude that the "behavior is completely consistent with, and predictable from, sociolinguistic theory and lies at the heart of the humor in this novel, demonstrating the author's considerable linguistic sensitivity"

Equally important is the poet's version of language. In the concluding lines of the poem, the poet resorts to the venerable language of proverbs. Proverbs are very much common with the African especially the elderly. Adeoti (2019) says that "Proverbs are indexes of a people's language, history, literature and culture." Stressing the significance of proverbs in sustaining African culture, Yankah (2012) posits that the usage and re-use of proverbs from speakers after speakers and generations after generations make proverbs assume the unique role of preserving culture and traditions. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona captured as;

*And in the midst of a dozen colours, The white colour stands supreme.*

These lines summarizes the main theme of the poet-the truth virtue. The lines also predicts the society of the persona. Also, the lines *But as lies tills the soil/ Truth sows its seeds* are gravely important in conveying the intent of the poet as he seeks to portray the wasted effort in telling lies. In other words, telling lies may be very tasteful in the mouth of the liar but the results is always gravely bitter.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to examine the sociolinguistics dimensions of the poem *M Ba Yeligu* 'my father's advice' written by Naa Tia Sulemana. I investigated the language style and sociolinguistics components of this poem in the context of the Dagbamba people of Northern Ghana. From the foregone, we found that the style of the poem, which include the language (choice of words) and structure sufficiently, predicts the setting of the poem. It also reveals intimacy of the poet and his parents.

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