THE ART OF GBEYA INSULTS*

WILLIAM J. SAMARIN

CENTRE FOR LINGUISTIC STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

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1. It is indeed “not the case that anyone can say anything, by any means, in any manner, to anyone else, on any occasion, and to any purpose” (Hymes 1964: 387). Society in a sense legislates what a person can or must say in given circumstances. There is therefore in every normal society a repertoire of varieties of speech, some available to everyone, some to certain age groups or classes of people, etc. But not all societies are equally so endowed. There are vast differences between literate societies and most preliterate ones, and even among the latter there are differences as great as, or greater than, one finds between the Barundi (Albert 1964) and the Gbeya.

2. The Gbeya, found around the town of Bossangoa in the western part of the Central African Republic, must surely have a low rank in a cross-cultural typologization of speech communities. Their extreme democratic approach to life is correlated with a poorly developed sense of verbal excellence. This is true even in the use of traditional folklore. I never succeeded, for example, in finding someone who was considered an artistic raconteur of stories. Individuals appear to have their own repertoires of stories, some of which are told better than others. This relative lack of concern with speech, by comparison with other societies, is revealed also in child rearing. Gbeya parents and other adults focus little attention on the speech of children. No serious attempt is made to improve their language. In fact, a child only uncommonly takes part in a dyadic speech event with an adult, whether it be in conversation (e.g. of the question and answer type) or in instruction. Among the Gbeya “children are seen and not heard.” Finally, there appears to be very little interest in reporting how a person speaks, particularly when psychological motivations are implied. We cannot find equivalents for the distinctions that are revealed in English verbs like ‘assert’ and ‘rant’ and adverbs like ‘curtly’ and ‘evasively’. There are, in fact, relatively few verbs of speaking, but one might expect the descriptive adverbs (ideophones) to carry the semantic weight. This is grammatically possible, but speech is simply not one of the semantic domains that the Gbeya are concerned with.

This is not to say that the Gbeya are unaware of speech as part of their experience and of the effects that speech has in interpersonal relations. There is, indeed, bad speech and good speech, but bad speech is what causes trouble between people, and those who talk badly are themselves bad people; one must therefore give thought to what he says before speaking. It is often times better not to speak at all than to incriminate oneself (Samarin 1965). Such values are common knowledge, and they receive the imprimatur of tradition in tales and proverbs. For example, wen ṣókó ẓif ʔ ᱉́̀nɛ Speech came out (read excrement) then flies descended on it. But this concern with

speech is moralistic and not linguistic. Good speech is good because it leads to harmony between people and not because it is in harmony with some standard of verbal excellence.

In such a society the discovery of any variety of speech or genre of discourse is of considerable importance. Their very existence may have significant cultural implications. For this reason, and because they reveal the convergence of disparate linguistic traits, Gbeya insults deserve our attention.

3. Gbeya insults constitute a special genre of discourse on purely linguistic grounds. In this respect they are to be listed with proverbs and riddles, but they are more distinctive. Whereas proverbs and riddles are formally almost indistinguishable from ordinary utterances, insults assume a form that is linguistically and paralinguistically unique.

3.1. The Gbeya insult is abusive by speaking ill of a person’s physical characteristics. If there are other targets in the insults (like a person’s parenthood, failure in hunt, farming, or producing children, etc.), they did not occur in the insults that were collected by me. The abuse may simply be implied in the fact that attention is drawn to the object (e.g. your mouth is wide), or it may be spelled out. In the latter case one finds pejorative terms like bad or dirty (as in Dirty split mouth, like dirty sorghum which they planted), comparisons to other objects where pejoration is implied (e.g. Awful tough-bridged nose, like an elephant’s neck-tendons cut out and thrown away; Your mouth is wide like a cow’s vagina), or in the expression what kind of a (e.g. mouth)! The last expression does not generally stand alone but usually follows an explicit statement and has the meaning “Can you imagine the existence of such a (e.g. mouth)?” For example, You’ll see me today. Your mouth is crimson. What kind of a mouth!

The insults are not necessarily nor characteristically vulgar, that is, vulgar by Gbeya standards. The Gbeya do have a sense of propriety in talking about sexual matters and bodily functions. Thus d’55 excrement and d’angba testicles are referred to rather freely, but one says nê zê go to the bush instead of sê d’55 to defecate in talking about relieving oneself; and although animals do each other in copulation, human beings kā interwine or some such thing. One can therefore overestimate the Gbeya tolerance to what we consider vulgar by observing, as I have, that a man may continue a conversation with a woman (related?) while urinating (standing but facing in another direction) and that a woman may urinate upright in the village (which I saw once). (Not understanding the limits of propriety, I once shocked an audience by using the common Sango word for a prostitute.) There are therefore limits to what one can refer to even in insults. Thus my informant told me, with a hushed voice—although we were entirely by ourselves—that one should not use the expression red mouth insultingly in the presence of women. Discretion prevented this married man from pointing out the allusion that might be made to the vagina.

There apparently are various degrees of
abuse, and at one end of the spectrum there is ambiguity. We have just seen that certain topics, at least in the given circumstances, are taboo; but it is not unreasonable to imagine that if a person were angry enough he would break the rule and suffer the consequences.

3.2. The insult is a relatively short utterance, consisting of only two or three sentences. The essential core of the insult is a characterization of some part of a person’s body; it may be preceded or followed by other utterances appropriate to the circumstances. For example, mI a nê mê kidfIm it’s me with whom you’re looking for trouble, dé bao ln mê nà I’m not going to do anything stupid with you, ndôô ba nêmà sóô nà won’t we fight today?

The description of the person being abused is achieved grammatically by the use of descriptive adverbs (ideophones) and similes. The latter are dependent on the former and stand as a kind of periphrastic commentary on them. Comparisons are made by the use of the discontinuous connective óró...gà like, but the first morpheme can be omitted; this omission is not common in ordinary speech: e.g. zôk nà a yôô fegbede óró iki dere gà wèn look at him standing narrow-waisted like a frog, nà më 5 wàfiu (órò) nà gedè-forô gà your mouth is flabby like an elephant’s arse. This omission of óró is to be correlated with and perhaps explained by the fact that the simile is not linked to the main clause intonationally as it would be in ordinary speech; it acts as a separate sentence.

Gbeya ideophones, like ideophones in all other African languages, represent a separate class of words grammatically defined. They also have phonological peculiarities and refer to semantic domains that in some way distinguish them from other word classes in the language. These are, for example, color, motion, texture, sound, smell, temperature, and condition. The closest thing to them in English are words like ‘itty-gritty’ and ‘flim-flam’ although they are not necessarily reduplicated in Gbeya. There are thousands of such words in the language; my own collection includes about 3,000 of them, practically all known to a single informant.2

In insults the ideophone occurs either in its characteristic position, the verb phrase, or uncharacteristically as a modifier in a noun phrase. Of the former the most common constructions are with the verb a to be whose subject is the object in question: e.g. nû më 5 toô your mouth is cavernous, but also zôk nà a yöô göô kôla look at him stand crooked after the verb yoo to stand. The omission of the verb a, as in nû më ngôl ngôl your mouth is stubby, does not appear to be frequent, and it has never been recorded for ordinary speech. The really striking thing about the use of ideophones in insults is their acting as modifiers in a noun phrase: e.g. kpuyuru nû huge mouth. (There are instances also where a noun phrase with its ideophone modifier follows the verb a: e.g. zôp 5 zôngon zôp nose is a long nose.) Although this use is not unknown in ordinary speech (Samarin 1966:122), it is nowhere so common as it is here in insults. Perhaps it is motivated by semantic or stylistic reasons. There may be a semantic difference in the position of the ideophone as there is in the position of some French adjectives. I am inclined to believe, however, that it is used to put the ideophone at the beginning of the sentence where there is the greatest stress and volume (see below). But even when the ideophone occurs elsewhere in the sentence, it is still the locus of affective meaning as is characteristic of ordinary speech.

4 Ideophonic words are found in languages throughout the world, as is demonstrated in Samarin 1968, but nowhere are they as numerous and so widespread as they are on the African continent. Only the Khoisan languages appear to lack them. Martin is therefore probably mistaken in asserting that “Korean has perhaps the richest and most extensive system of SOUND SYMBOLOGY in the world” (1964:407). He would be correct only if these words were truly mimetic, which I doubt, since only some African ideophones are imitative of sounds.
Prosodically and paralinguistically insults are unique in the language. This is not to say that their features are nowhere else found in the language, but that only here are they correlated with a specific genre of discourse. It is not easy to describe these features in explicit terms. There is a strong tendency to begin the whole insult with great volume and reduce it to such a point that the last words are almost imperceptible. This is accompanied by a modification of articulation and air control to the point that, for me at least, an insult becomes virtually unintelligible. It is clear nonetheless that in insults the expressive function is as important if not more so than the denotative function of language.

3.3. I have virtually no information about the contexts in which insults are used. They are obviously addressed to the target, but at what distance? It is reasonable to assume that they are sometimes uttered more or less under one's breath in proximity to the person being abused. At other times they might be yelled out over a long distance, the length of a village or down the garden path, for example. These conditions would expectably affect not so much what was said but how it was said. One can also rightly assume that there are some people who are more prone to use insults than others, and we can expect their performances to be different (perhaps 'better') than those of the infrequent insulter. They might, in fact, set a model for the other members of a village by their skill, imagination, and audacity. If such people exist, one would like to know what other roles they play as users of the language.

Because of their formal structure and the imagery they evoke, insults deserve being compared with what we know as poems in our own western society. There is certainly something esthetically pleasing (at least to me) about the comparisons that are made, many of which are as perceptive and imaginative as those we find in the works of our good poets and novelists. Like the following:

rifaa nê dé leq leq
rip-mbola nê dûŋ ká kara gá
mâ ndôô nê më tô nê

Eyes that shine.
Like the eyes of a wildcat sitting at the edge of the clearing.
Who is the person you're going to talk with?

4. A linguistic description of insults, indispensable though it may be, is only a partial description. Insults cannot be fully understood without some appreciation of their cultural setting. In the first place, there is no reason to believe that these insults provide the only means for abusing people. Human behavior is too complex and language too rich a device for people to be restricted to a single means of ridiculing others. There are at least two others means that I know of. One is the use of traditional tales, the to, which can be modified so as to allude to known individuals, even those in the audience. The other is to relate a real anecdote as if it happened to someone (with all the references quite vague) who was not present in the audience. (One of my informants, Mr. Julien Nam-kpea, tells me that any anecdote of this type makes members of the audience uneasy, and the fun that the members of such a speech event experience is in knowing who is being referred to before the victim does. Apparently the skill is demonstrated in being able to postpone the disclosure as long as possible.)

The other thing that must be appreciated is the Gbeya's distaste for having attention focussed on them. They always assume the worst when they hear their names mentioned (ba yfn to take a name) in a conversation. And even in direct conversation any specific reference to one's person is taken as criticism or ridicule unless there is sufficient reason to believe otherwise, e.g. an ingenuous behavior on the part of the speaker or explicit statements in one's favor. One might therefore
say that the Gbeya are almost obsessively concerned with how they appear to others. A person who walks down the road in a village not one's own (and all villages line the automobile roads) is painfully conscious of the comments that are presumably being made about his height, his gait, his dress, etc. In such a society a friend is one who tells you about anything that might attract attention. One of my most common experiences among the Gbeya was to be told that I had a spot of mud on my leg, always said with as much seriousness as, I thought, one would when relating news about the death of a relative.

It is significant, when one remembers the place that ideophones have in insults, to note the impact that they have in even ordinary conversations about a person. Thus, one can say that someone is short or tall, using the adjectives dôô and dûu, without getting very much reaction, but the ideophones récféq and mbeloo invariably arouse laughter, as I learned to my satisfaction in an experiment in which I talked about my two daughters whom my subjects had not seen in many years. The laughter, was, I believe, a symptom of embarrassment indicating uncertainty as to how to respond to this very explicit reference. The words themselves are not intrinsically humorous, a fact that was authenticated in other test situations.

5. This discussion of personal abuse among the Gbeya is of sociolinguistic significance because of the convergence of a culturally relevant pattern of behavior and the linguistic behavior that is correlated with it. This convergence may in fact be unique.\(^3\) Personal abuse, of course, is not unique in any society,\(^4\) although there are certainly differences between societies in the degrees to which insults are tolerated and the topics that figure in them. It is to be expected that not all societies focus as much attention on a person's body as the Gbeya do, and if they do, they may not have the wealth of vocabulary that the Gbeya and other Africans have in talking about it. A lexically poorer society would be behaviorally different in significant ways from the Gbeya; one expects some kind of nontrivial relationship between language and culture in this area of life.

In any discussion of abuse it is necessary to consider the obverse behavior, namely, complete avoidance. If one society has institutionalized the insult, has another society institutionalized the avoidance of reference to a person's body? Both avoidance (taboo) and reference are the realizations of cultural focus on the human body, on kinship, or any other part of one's experience. If the Gbeya have institutionalized their focus in the insult, it is to be expected that another society may have institutionalized the taboo. This is, in fact, precisely what we find in several far-eastern societies. The taboo is, however, one of degree; that is, there are various levels of usage from the vulgar (at least in certain circumstances) to the honorific. That these are stratified societies whereas the Gbeya one is very egalitarian reveals the universality of the human body as a culturally significant part of experience. There is therefore reason to question the assertion made by Boas that the "idea of propriety simply arises from the continuity and automatic repetition of... acts, which brings about the notion that manners contrary to custom are unusual... Bad manners are always accompanied by rather intense feelings of displeasure, the psychologi-

\(^3\) The closest parallel I have yet found is what Sapir (1915) describes for the Nootka among whom separate linguistic forms are used in speaking to or about fat people, dwarfs, hunchbacks, etc. as well as children.

\(^4\) For example: "Skin disease terms figure prominently in competitive joking and maligning, thus entering into special kinds of discourse such as drinking songs and verse" (Frake 1961, in Hymes 1964:199).
6. References cited are:

7. Sample of Gbeya insults follows below.
1. mé a né mé kidfim,
go n–mê ɔ vetetei.
2. It's me that you're looking trouble with.
Your mouth is wide.
3. dè boa in mè ná.
n–mê ɔ tangbala,
n–gendé gá.
I'm not going to do anything stupid with you.
4. Your mouth is spread out,
Like what kind of a mouth?
5. bû mè saram,
nêm rîk mè sâo.
5–mê ñ ngbe6ele.
If you start trouble with me,
I'll hit you today.
6. Your mouth is duck-billed.
5. n–mê ñ wà6uu,
n–ge6e-foro gá.
mû ndôo a mè dê boa.
Your mouth is flabby,
Like an elephant's anus.
7. Whom are you acting stupidly with?
5. n–mê ñ ñø6i ñø6i,
n–bâ6â–ri–ge6a gâ wën.
Your mouth is soggy.
8. Like soaked manioc.
6. wele kese nà dây,
dây fôn nde wa guno gá.
Dirty split mouth.
Like dirty sorghum which they planted.
7. zôk nà ñ yô6 gô6 fûlô6,
re dây sëre nde wa baâ gá.
Look at him stand crooked,
Like worthless spears that they took.
8. væy6 nù dây,
tuwa-tóri gá wën.
Dirty drooping mouth,
Like (the mouth of) a humming bird's nest.
9. n–mê ñ lìe,
n–ge6e-wan–gbara gâ wën.
ndôô ba ñmââ sôo ná.
Your mouth is crimson,
Like a wan-gbara (bird's) arse.
Won't we fight today?
10. zôk nà ñ yô6 fegbe6e,
óro ifikasi dere gâ wën.
Look at him stand narrow-waisted,
Like a frog.

11. zôm-mê õ toŋ,
zôm-gende gá.
né mê zâkóm sóo ái.
Your nostrils are cavernous,
Like what kind of nostrils?
You'll have me to deal with today.

12. oô rôk kê ê ná sókô zôm ô gûm gûruŋ.
zôp-gende gá wên.
Who is the good-for-nothing with a huge
nose?
What kind of nose?

13. dâŋ mô-û nê-ge sókô nû ô bâŋ zôp.
So what's that dirty thing whose mouth is
wide?

14. rip-mê nê ô hâforô,
rip-âka dere nê feá ri gá.
dê bôc fn mê ná.
Your eyes that are empty,
They're like the eyes of a frog that drowned.
I'm not going to do anything stupid with
you.

15. goŋ doŋ rip d'âŋ,
suɗa-mûnô nde wa hofá wa â zu-ɗara.
Awful empty eye-sockets.
Empty mûnô shells thrown on the rubbish
heap.

16. ngbalâbây rip d'âŋ,
dâŋ ri nde wa ââ kô-mû gá wên.
Awful watery eyes,
Like dirty water poured in the dump.

17. pirip pirip rip d'âŋ,
wî-zok mô nê ze gá wên.
Awful obscure vision.
Like a person who looks at night.