

## **Face-attack in Political Discussions on Radio in the Context of Ghana's 2016 Electioneering Period**

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### **Abstract**

We examined insulting and offensive comments made by political actors and party sympathizers on radio as recorded by the Media Foundation for West Africa in the 2016 electioneering period in Ghana. Using the concepts of face and face attack, we found that rival politicians, members/affiliates of political parties and even journalists were attacked through face-threatening acts which include the use of name-calling expressions and derogatory adjectives. We identified face-attacking expressions in the form of attack on moral behaviour, attack on intellectual/mental ability, and attack on physical appearance/characteristics. As suggested by previous studies, face attacks block the free exchange of critical ideas which play a very important role in the development of democratic countries as many citizens would not want to get involved in discussions that threaten their self-image. We, therefore, recommend that political actors in Ghana desist from disrespecting people of divergent political backgrounds or persuasions and rather focus on substantive issues in their public speeches.

### **Keywords**

Election; Face Attack; Politics; Free Speech; Democracy; Radio

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## Introduction

Ghana has experienced stable governance under two political parties namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), and all general elections held from 1992 to 2016 have been free of major violent acts. However, none of these elections has been devoid of verbal animosity, indecorous language and the use of abusive words on radio, which often resulted in needless tensions among citizens (Asamoah, Yeboah-Assiamah and Osei-Kojo, 2014). In Marfo’s (2014: 527) words, the political landscape has become a “theater of most vitriolic insults ...”. Various explanations have been given and factors commonly mentioned are the rights to freedom of speech and freedom of the media guaranteed by the Constitution of Ghana (Mahama, 2012; Marfo, 2014; Thompson and Anderson, 2018). Another factor, according to Asamoah et al. (2014), is the repeal of the Criminal Libel Law. They explain that repealing this law was meant to “encourage a free and congenial expression of thoughts and opinions ... but it appears it has rather encouraged uncouth free speech” (Asamoah et al., 2014, p. 49).

Before the 2016 general election in Ghana, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) in Ghana undertook a nine-month project titled ‘*Promoting Issues-based and Decent Language Campaigning for a Peaceful, Free and Fair Elections in Ghana in 2016*’. They focused on speeches or comments made by supporters, affiliates and officials of various political parties in Ghana on selected radio programs from April to December 2016. The project produced bi-weekly reports from the day-to-day monitoring of comments the MFWA refers to as “indecent expressions” used by individuals during the stipulated period. By the end of the first two weeks, it was already clear that offensive language was mainly used during programs related to politics. Also, insulting and offensive comments, unsubstantiated allegations and provocative remarks were observed to be the three most frequently used types of “indecent expressions” among Ghanaian politicians (Tietaah, 2017).

This paper provides an analysis of the comments labeled as insulting and offensive comments in the MFWA project in light of the theoretical conceptualizations of face and face attack (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1987 [1978]; Tracy and Tracy, 1998). It focuses on the strategies of face attack employed by some political actors who participated in radio discussions during Ghana’s 2016 electioneering period. Additionally, it highlights the lexical contents of the expressions that these political actors used to attack the faces of their targets.

### 1. Concepts of Face and Face Attack

The concept of face posited by Goffman (1967) is considered as more useful for studies that focus on expressions in social interactions that are antagonistic and hostile or negative communicative behaviour in general (Locher and Watts, 2008; Tracy, 2008; Arundale, 2010). Face is defined as “the public self-image every member wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). It involves an emotional investment and thus can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. In a speech event, a speaker’s choice of words and expressions can be interpreted as ‘giving’ or ‘attacking’ face. Speakers ‘give’ face when their utterances can be interpreted as preserving or maintaining the other party’s perceived sense of respect while speakers ‘attack’ face when their utterances can be interpreted as undermining the other party’s perceived sense of respect (Brett, Olekalns, Friedman, Goates, Anderson and Lisco, 2007).

This means that whether one’s utterances preserve or attack face, they are subtly providing information about their relationship with the other party or how they perceive the other party’s

behaviour. On the one hand, preserving a person's face suggests that the speaker acknowledges the person's status and regards him/her as one 'above' others (which may include the speaker). Also, it suggests that the speaker believes that the person's behaviour/character is following the norms of a society or institution. Thus, the person deserves respect. On the other hand, attacking a person's face implies that the speaker sees the person as one who is 'below' him/her or as one whose behaviour/character transgresses the norms and values of a society or institution (Brett et al., 2007). For that reason, the person must be disrespected or treated with contempt.

According to Tracy and Tracy (1998), face attacks are "communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive" (p. 227). They are that part of a speech, discourse, or even a single comment that is often judged as contemptuous by the 'direct target' (intended addressee), the 'indirect target' (affiliates of the intended addressee present at the speech event) or sometimes by other hearers. The contempt expressed by the speaker is seen as "with the intention of causing open insult" (Methias, 2011. p. 12). Tracy (2008) notes that face-attacking communicative acts are "judged as deliberately nasty and spiteful, where the speaker is assessed by the target and at least some others as purposefully out to disrespect and insult" (p. 173). Many scholars agree that face-attack is a better way to label communicative acts that are commonly described as insulting, offensive, rude, demeaning, disrespectful, personal attack, or out-of-line (e.g. Tracy and Tracy, 1998; Mills 2005; Culpeper, 2011; Mirivel, 2015).

Face attack is often an interpretation rather than just a linguistic feature which points to an attack on the direct target's social identity. It is an assessment of a situated communication on the basis of one's cultural knowledge of what kinds of identities are desired or undesired or what kinds of communicative acts are appropriate or inappropriate in a particular speech community or context (Holmes, Marra and Schnurr, 2008; Tracy, 2011). Generally, the recipient of a face attack constructs the speaker's behaviour as intentional. As a result, one whose face is under attack is more likely to respond in a defensive and non-cooperative manner (Culpeper, 2005). In a socio-political speech event for instance, not only will the political actors who suffer face attack (or their affiliates) defend their material interests, but also their honor and self-image. There is, therefore, a high possibility that face attacks will escalate and reduce the possibility of agreement and harmony, thereby, destabilising personal relationships and further causing social conflicts (Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003; Kienpointner, 2008). In the present study, we identified that the face attacks were mainly directed at some key politicians in Ghana. Also, we realized that some of the attacks were not directed at individuals but to all the members of a political party. This occurs because of the collectivist nature of face in the Ghanaian context. That is, a group's face matters more than an individual's face (Agyekum, 2004).

## **2. The use of Insults among Ghanaians**

According to Ofori (2017), an insult is "a behaviour or discourse, oral or written, direct or indirect, gestural or non-gestural, which is perceived, experienced, constructed and most of the time intended as slighting, humiliating, or offensive, which has the potential of psychologically affecting not only the addressee or target but his/her associates" (p. 130). This act typically involves two communicative participants namely, a perpetrator and a target(s), and it defies the target(s)'s desire to be respected and to have the self-esteem maintained (Sekyi-Baidoo, 2009). On many occasions, specific words or string of words which may be ingenious, insidious or unpredictable and can cause psychological and emotional harm are deployed to strike directly at the target's self-esteem, identity, pride and ego (Neu, 2008). Among Ghanaians, the use of

insult is generally considered morally unjustifiable (Thompson and Agyekum, 2015; Ofori, 2017; Thompson, 2021). However, it is often used when a speaker wants to unleash their anger or express their pain about a particular situation. Neu (2008) notes that the intention to offend or draw out some negative feelings of a person is unnecessary for an insult to be effective. That is to say that a speaker may lack the intention to insult a person but if their language signals a lack of regard, it may cause offence. The damage is done once the latter perceives it to be hurtful and consequently becomes offended whether the speaker intended to inflict emotional harm on the addressee or not (Yiannis, 1998).

The content of an insult is arguably arbitrary as its impact is usually not dependent on its veracity. The impact may be as a result of consistent prosodic and nonverbal elements such as increased loudness, tense voice quality and frowning. It may also be determined by the mood of the person (target), the time, the event, the place the atmosphere, or the audience involved (Thompson, 2020). Consistent with this, Forson, Fordjour, Tettey and Oteng-Preko (2017) note that in order to achieve the much-needed impact of insults and other abusive language forms in Ghana, “most often perpetrators intentionally attack their victims at strategic settings, [...] such as durbar grounds, lorry stations, and market places” (p. 150). The foregoing therefore suggests that there is a high chance that the use of insults during interactive socio-political programs on radio, especially those with wider listenership, can have a negative effect on the target(s).

Bousfield (2008) notes that communicative practices that breach the norms of many societies (e.g. the use of insults) form a central part of radio broadcasts that involve issues of national interest and encourage citizens’ self-expression through interactive programs. During such broadcasts, citizens not only have access to information in their own languages; they also have the opportunity to express views which could sometimes shape decision-making processes through whatever medium they find comfortable. In Ghana, for instance, many radio stations have created the room through their talk shows for political party activists and sympathizers, government officials, and other citizens from diverse socio-political backgrounds to speak out about issues of national concern (Karlekar and Marchant, 2007). Various studies have examined the use of language during socio-political discussions on radio in Ghana and have concluded that it is characterized by (1) emotionally charged contributions, which can be considered as disrespectful to people in authority (Yankah, 1998); (2) expressions of dissatisfaction about national issues through verbal attacks and insults (Coker, 2012); and (3) on-record strategies of impoliteness (Thompson and Anderson, 2018).

In a democratic country like Ghana, although political discussions on radio usually involve people from different sides of the political divide, it is required that reasonable arguments, cooperative communication, and mutual respect remain the strong ideals that shape the linguistic behaviour of participants. At the same time, it is not unexpected that the use of offensive comments and provocative remarks will be a regular feature of such discussions, especially during an electioneering period (Sobieraj and Berry, 2011). However, to the best of our knowledge, prior studies of political discussions on radio in Ghana have not focused on *face-attack* (or *impolite moves*) in contributions made during the 2016 electioneering period. The present paper fills this gap.

### 3. Dataset

We used an existing dataset from the project, *Promoting Issues based and Decent Language Campaigning for Peaceful Elections in Ghana in 2016* conducted by the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA 2016 data). This project involved daily monitoring, recording and

reporting the use of abusive language on radio during the campaign period of general elections in Ghana. From April to December 2016, a total of 16,006 interactive programs which were aired in the morning or evening were observed on 70 selected radio stations across the country. The purpose was to identify radio stations, hosts of programs, panel discussants (guests), and callers who engaged in the use of abusive language during the period. It was also to identify specifically the kinds of expressions used and to name and shame political actors who engaged in verbal abuse rather than issue-based discussions and arguments.

In all, a total of 464 “indecent expressions” were identified and these were categorized as (1) Insulting and Offensive Comments, (2) Remarks inciting Violence, (3) Remarks Endorsing Violence, (3) Ethnic/Tribal Slurs (4) Provocative Remarks, (5) Unsubstantiated Allegations, and (7) Divisive Comment<sup>26</sup>. Table 1 below shows the distribution of these categories. These “indecent expressions” were recorded during interactive programs related to political party activities, corruption, and the 2016 elections. The majority of the participants (i.e. panelists, callers, or texters) as well as the moderators (hosts) of these programs were males. Those who participated in these programs were political officials, affiliates and supporters of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Progressive People’s Party (PPP), National Democratic Congress (NDC), People’s National Congress (PNC), Ghana Freedom Party, New Labor Party (NLP) and the National Democratic Party (NDP). Most of the “indecent expressions” recorded were used by known political figures from the two major political parties, NPP and NDC (Tietaah, 2017).

For the scope of this study, we focused only on the 159 expressions categorized as insulting and offensive comments as shown in Table 1 from the MFWA 2016 data. This is because, as explained in Section 1.1 above, the concepts of face and face attack are more applicable to the insulting and offensive comments than to the other forms of expressions identified. Thus, the other forms of “indecent expressions” in the Table 1 were not taken into consideration.

**Table 1: Indecent expressions used during Ghana’s 2016 electioneering period**

Categories	Frequency
Unsubstantiated Allegations	165
Insulting and offensive Comments	159
Provocative Remarks	88
Remarks endorsing inciting Violence	26
Remarks inciting Violence	12
Divisive Comments	12
Ethnic/Tribal Slurs	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>464</b>

(Tietaah, 2017, p. 23)

#### 4. Method of Analysis

We examined the data through the analytical lens of *face attack* ((Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1987 [1978]; Tracy and Tracy, 1998). First, we got acquainted with the MFWA 2016 data, reviewed the comments labeled as insulting and offensive comments to ensure that they are consistent with our working definition of insults. Secondly, we identified the forms of attack that political officials and supporters employed on radio to challenge the faces (i.e. positive

<sup>26</sup> The operational definitions of the categories identified can be found in Tietaah (2017, pp. 13-15). The authors of the present paper do not contest these definitions.

self-images) of others. Also, we sought to identify the negative lexical content that made up the insulting comments. The comments were then double coded by the second and fourth authors. They coded the comments based on the forms of face attack identified. Lastly, they compared and merged their codes to ensure consistency.

Comments from the MFWA 2016 data used as examples in this study were mainly presented without the names of the speakers. The names were replaced with pseudonyms to minimize any risk of potential harm to the speakers and to ensure the protection of their public image (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Also, comments that were not originally in English were first presented in the Ghanaian language used and then followed by its translation. In the presentation of excerpts, we introduced the ellipses points (...) to indicate that parts of a comment that are not needed to enhance understanding in the present study have been omitted.

## 5. Face Attacks in the 2016 Electioneering Period

This section presents (1) the forms of face attacks in the MFWA 2016 data and (2) the lexical contents of the face attacks. As exemplified in the following, the face attacks were mainly directed at key politicians but in some instances, the speakers extended the abusive behaviour to all the members or supporters of their ‘rival’ political parties. Also, there were few instances where the attacks were directed at certain journalists in the country.

### 5.1. Forms of Face Attack

The attacks directed at these politicians were in three forms. As shown in examples 1 – 12, they are attack on moral behaviour, attack on intellectual/mental ability, and attack on physical appearance/characteristics.

#### 5.1.1. Attack on Moral Behaviour

The examples below portray some of the negative characteristics attributed to the targets as an attack on their moral behaviour. Among other things, the speakers commonly identified their political rivals as ‘thieves’, ‘liars’, ‘criminals’, ‘murderers’, ‘dishonest’, ‘corrupt’, ‘wicked’, and ‘disgraceful’.

1. ... *Kojo Adu Asare, kɔɔfoɔ tekyiamoa and I am saying it without fear or favor, a thief. Me ne wo yere koraa anka m'agyae wo. kɔɔfoɔ, ah wo ne Kejetia kɔɔfoɔ difference nnim. The only difference is that, ɔmo no, ɔmo ye institutional armed robbers but you, wo deɛ wo ye decorated armed robber ... criminal like you.*  
 ‘... Kojo Adu Asare, perfect thief and I am saying it without fear or favor, a thief. If I were your wife, I would have divorced you. Thief, ah there is no difference between you and Kejetia thieves. The only difference is that they are institutional armed robbers but you, as for you, you are a decorated armed robber ... criminal like you.’  
 [EOB, 7/21/16]

Excerpt 1 demonstrates a face attack on Kojo Adu Asare, a member of parliament, as the speaker explicitly labels him as a thief, an armed robber, and a criminal. The use of the phrase ‘without fear or favour’ implies that the speaker recognizes the target’s social status. However, to him, the target has failed to adhere to some expected conduct of someone of his competence. Thus, he implies that the member of parliament is not fit to have a wife given that being married is seen as honorable and respectable in the Ghanaian context. Also, the speaker compares the member of parliament to *Kejetia kɔɔfoɔ* ‘Kejetia thief’ and concludes that apart from their

background, there is no difference between them. The repetition of the label *krɔnfoɔ* ‘thief’, modifying it with an evaluative adjective *tekyiamoa* ‘perfect’ and using a worse form of the label ‘armed robber’ heightens the face attack on the member of parliament (see Taboada, Trnavač and Goddard (2017) on repetition and adjectives).

2. ... *this same Bawumia the liar has come out to lie and say se they will not take any more loans because President Mahama regyegyɛ loans dodo, the same Bawumia the liar has come out to say se, ɔmo deɛ ɔmo ngyɛ tax because we are overtaxing Ghanaians, enti ɔno Bawumia deɛ, ɔba a, all the taxes that are in place, ɔbe yiɪ ni nyinaa efri hɔ...this same Bawumia the liar.*

‘... this same Bawumia the liar has come out to lie and say that they will not take any more loans because President Mahama has been taking too many loans, the same Bawumia the liar has come out to say that, they will not be taking taxes because we are overtaxing Ghanaians, so he Bawumia, when he comes, all the taxes that are in place, he would eliminate all of them ...this same Bawumia the liar.’ [KA, 7/27/16]

In this excerpt, Bawumia (the presidential running mate of the NPP, the main opposition party in 2016) is repeatedly called “the liar” because according to the speaker he stated that when their party is voted into power, they are not going to take loans or take taxes from citizens. Labeling the target as a ‘liar’ gives us the hint that this speaker (who was a deputy general secretary of NDC, the party in power in 2016) believes that it is impossible for a ruling party to avoid taking loans and at the same time ask citizens to stop paying the taxes already in place. This excerpt, therefore, signals an indictment on the NPP running mate’s commitment to follow “due process” for national development. The face-attack here is not just on the running mate but the entire leadership of the NPP.

3. *Ghanafoɔ, akrɔnfoɔ aba kuromu o! Thieves are here, ye betumi apam wɔn mu a gyɛɛ 7th December because 7th November deɛ Ghanafoɔ enyi wɔn adwen enfiri hɔ, maame no ye wicked... ɔka kyerɛ John Mahama se I will not disappoint you because ɔservi John Mahama’s interest, not Ghana’s interest.*

‘Ghanaians, there are thieves in town o! Thieves are here, to be able to sack them we’ll have to wait for 7th December because we can forget 7th November, the woman (referring to the electoral commissioner) is wicked... she told John Mahama that I will not disappoint you because she serves John Mahama’s interest, not Ghana’s interest.’ [CO, 5/26/16]

Here, the speaker described the electoral commissioner as wicked and added that she served the president’s (John Mahama) interest rather than the nation’s interest. De Angelis (2009) states that “institutions rest on ethical principles that define the legitimate expectations that citizens nourish towards them” (p. 524). Normally, it is required of the leaders and others who are part of every institution to uphold such principles. Even though everyone who is part of the institution should ensure that the ideals are accomplished, it is the leader(s) who is often seen as most responsible as they supervise/control the implementation of decisions. Therefore, for the speaker in this excerpt to say that the electoral commissioner was subverting the ideals of the commission for an individual’s interest is a serious face attack. The comment “she serves John Mahama’s interest, not Ghana’s interest” means that the electoral commissioner was not attentive to or has violated the commission’s basic values. The speaker, therefore, was challenging the electoral commissioner’s commitment to the democratic processes that can guarantee Ghanaians of a free and fair election.

4. ...*NDCfoɔ ye akrɔnfoɔ too much, wo ye awifo too much, wo ye nsommɔre, wɔye nsommɔre.*

‘... Members of the NDC are dangerous thieves, they are dangerous thieves, they are ticks, they are ticks.’ [UEB, 5/9/16]

Without any form of hedging, the speaker maintains that members of the NDC are thieves. In addition to the name calling, the face attack on the NDC members is reinforced in the repeated metaphorical expression, “they are ticks”. Since the NDC was the government in power then, referring to them as ticks may be the speaker’s way of saying that they were exploiting the system to the detriment of others.

5. *Wɔn a w'atwa Nana Akufo-Addo ho ahyia no nyinaa, se wɔn kɔda mu mma a yɛ a, wei yɛ cocaine ni, ɔnye cocaine ni a, w'ako da mu aba. Se enye cocaine a, wa yɛ wei. Mo nkyerɛ me nipa baako pɛ, sika die basabasa. Exconvictfoɔ nkoa na etwa ne ho ahyia. Yenfa Ghana mme hye m'onsa, yenfa Ghana mme hye exconvictsfoɔ nsa, jail breakers foɔ, Captain Koda, yenfa Ghana mme hye m'onsa. Anfo Kwaakye ex-convict, yenfa Ghana emme hye m'onsa, eh, Anfo Kwaakye o, exconvict, yenfa Ghana mme hye wɔn sa. Raymond Amankwah, Nana Addo be ma wɔ mo diplomatic passports. yɛ kyekye wɔn wɔ cocaine ho wɔ Brazil, ɔmo aba, yen nsa nfa Ghana emme hye mo nsa? ‘all those around Nana Akufo-Addo, if this has not gone to jail, this is a cocaine dealer, if this is not a cocaine dealer, he has been to jail. If it’s not cocaine, he has done this. Show me one only person, spending money anyhow. Its only ex-convicts that have surrounded him. We should hand Ghana over to you, we should hand Ghana over to ex-convicts, jail breakers, Captain Koda, we should hand Ghana over to you. Anfo Kwaakye ex-convict, we should hand Ghana over to you, eh, Anfo Kwaakye o, ex-convict, we should hand Ghana over to you, Raymond Amankwah, that Nana Addo gave them diplomatic passports. They were arrested in Brazil because of cocaine, they have returned, should we hand Ghana over to you again?’ [MA, 6/17/16]*

Here, the speaker suggested that associates of the then opposition leader Nana Addo did not possess qualities deemed acceptable for governing a nation. Employing name calling, he refers to them as jailbreakers, ex-convicts, and cocaine dealers. From this excerpt, it can be understood that, to the speaker, people with such background are morally incompetent or not capable of being at the helm of affairs in Ghana.

### **5.1.2. Attack on Mental/Intellectual Ability**

The attack on the mental or intellectual abilities of the targets can be seen in the use of certain expressions and keywords against them as shown in the excerpts below. The keywords include ‘fool’, ‘mad’, ‘retard’, ‘empty, hollow brain’, and ‘unwise’. By the use of these keywords, the speakers discredit their targets as being mentally or intellectually unfit.

6. *Ɔye hwan?... Afoko w'anom cocaine saa w'abɔ dam, mmere a yɛ reye campaign na w'anom cocaine abɔ dam, me se Afoko kwasea saa, Afoko gyimifoɔ. ‘Afoko has sniffed cocaine for a long time, he is mad. When we were campaigning, he was already mad as a result of cocaine, I said Afoko, is a fool indeed, Afoko, is retarded ...’ [KA, 5/3/16]*

Afoko, the one to whom the face attack in this excerpt is directed, was the national chairman of the NPP who was suspended in 2015 by the party’s National Executive Council for allegedly working to undermine their chances in the general election. In this excerpt, the speaker (who is also a leading member of the party) identified Afoko as *kwasea* ‘fool’ and *gyimifoɔ* ‘retard’. Both expressions, as observed by Thompson (2020), are insults used in Ghana against a person whom one believes has engaged in some inappropriate acts that challenge the values of a society. The speaker also expressed contempt for his target by posing twice a question which is considered derogatory in this context, *ɔye hwan* ‘who is he?’ as well as maintaining that Afoko has gone mad as a result of the continuous use of cocaine.



7. *Abankwah Yeboah ...wo na wo krakra party sika...wo se Nana Addo se, menfa sika no nkɔtu account a εye dormant mu εwɔ Ecobank ... m'aka akyere wo se koyi wo sika because they can do fraud at any time, nea ɔmo ye no ye fraud, serious fraud ... w'anbe kasa kraa there would have been wisdom in his silence...papa no n'adwen mu tokro dem, tokro wɔ n'adwen mu, its empty, hollow*  
'Abankwah Yeboah...you have the party's money...you said Nana Addo says, I should place the money into a dormant account at Ecobank ... I have told you that go and take your money because they can be fraudulent at any time, what they are doing is fraudulent, serious fraud ... If he has not even spoken there would have been wisdom in his silence...the man has a hole in his brain, there is hole in his brain, it is empty, hollow'. [LNKP, 7/21/16]

The face theory states that people have the desire to be appreciated, approved of, or seen as competent during a social interaction. Excerpt 7 shows a total disregard for the target's face wants in this respect. The statement 'if he has not even spoken, there would have been wisdom in his silence' indicates that the speaker did not appreciate the response from the target. The speaker intensifies the face attack by adding that "the man has a hole in his brain, there is a hole in his brain, it is empty, hollow".

8. *Me gye di se Baah Achamfour ankasa onoa ankasa eyeme se n'adwene no... gyama ate... ate. Akoa yi main line no mu abɔpɔw.*  
'I believe that Baah Achamfour himself, he himself, I think that his mind ... perhaps, is torn. It is torn. This gentleman's main line is entangled.'  
(Baah Achamfour is mentally ill.) [ECK, 5/17/16]

In excerpt 8, the speaker resorts to indirectness to say that the target is mentally ill. As posited by Amfo, Houphouet, Dordoye and Thompson (2018: 16), "the key to normal human behavior and function is the mind". That is, for the speaker to say that Baah Achamfour's mind is torn and his main line (referring to the neural connections in the brain) is entangled means that he is engaging in abnormal human behaviour. By this, the speaker is further implying that people should not pay attention to Baah Achamfour because he is not in a sound frame of mind.

9. *... Onnim nyansa, maame no onnim nyansa, onim nyansa a, ɔnfa Ghanafoɔ akoma nni agorɔ.*  
'... She [Charlotte Osei] is unwise, this woman is unwise, if she is wise, she would not play with the hearts of Ghanaians'. [CO, 5/26/16]

Here, we see the speaker trying to justify his attack on the electoral commissioner (Charlotte Osei) with the claim that she was toying with the hearts of Ghanaians. However, describing the commissioner as 'unwise' is considered very disrespectful in the Ghanaian speech culture since she is regarded as more powerful and of a higher social rank than the speaker (Thompson and Anderson, 2018). The face attack on the electoral commissioner may even be measured higher not only because the speaker employed the techniques of parallelism and repetition for emphasis but in this context, it is also because the attack was on radio (Forson et al., 2017).

10. *Baby Ansaba should go away with his gutter journalism...Baby Ansaba ɔkaase yen nim nu anaa ...?*  
'Baby Ansaba should go away with his gutter journalism...Baby Ansaba, does he think we don't know him...?' [NOB, 5/16/16]

The use of the phrase 'gutter journalism' clearly shows the speaker's contempt for Baby Ansaba's style of journalism and discredits it. The rhetorical question *ɔkaase yen nim nu anaa?* 'does he think we don't know him?' also signals that the speaker knows something unpleasant or about the target that can damage his image.

### ***i. Attack on Physical Appearance/Characteristics***

In excerpts 11 and 12, the speakers describe their targets in an abusive manner by drawing the attention of readers to certain physical characteristics of these targets.

11. *Obi te se Collins Dauda, dabiaa na wa hye n’atadee na abe si ni ha sei na oto ne pa tesse akokono a owo abe mu.*  
 ‘Someone like Collins Dauda, every day, he wears a dress that is hanging on his leg, then he is twisting his waist like the insects in a palm tree’. [YAB, 5/10/16]

In excerpt 11, YAB challenged the face wants of Collins Dauda (a member of parliament) by vilifying him based on his style of dressing. Even though this comment can be seen as innocuous in another context (see Sekyi-Baidoo, 2009), it is hard to imagine that Ghanaians will not describe it as insulting, especially if they consider that the target is older and higher in rank than the speaker.

12. *Manesseh Azure, nea ye kakyere wo nne ewia e, ye nim se sebe sebe, wo se aprɔ, bra na yen ma wo toothbrush ne toothpaste na ko twetwe, na yen sa mma wo sapɔ ne samina na wo honam kankan a ewɔ wo ho a, ... na w’adware*  
 ‘... Manasseh Azure, what we are telling you this afternoon, we know that, excuse me, your teeth are rotten, come and let’s give you toothbrush and toothpaste and brush your teeth. We will then give you sponge and soap so that the body odor you have ... you take a bath’. [MA, 6/9/16]

Excerpt 12 focuses on personal hygiene of the target. To describe the target’s teeth as rotten and to add that he has a body odor means that the target is not engaging in good personal hygiene practices. Personal hygiene assessments of this kind, according to Grainger (2004), is “personally face-threatening” (p. 44).

## **5.2. Lexical Content of Insulting Expressions**

The following shows that the insults in the MFWA 2016 data were expressed both in plain language (13-20) and in imagery or symbolic terms (21-27).

### **5.2.1 Plain Language**

The plain language used was in the form of noun phrases, adjectives, and adverbs.

#### *Noun Phrases*

We observed the use of name-calling expressions such as *akɔɔnfoɔ* ‘thieves’ and *awudifoɔ* ‘murderers’ in excerpt 13 and ‘paedophile’ in excerpt 14:

13. *Na Electoral Commission ho, nipa num wo ho a omo ye akɔɔnfoɔ .... W’omo ye akɔɔnfoɔ awudifoɔ paa.*  
 ‘There at the Electoral Commission, there are five people who are thieves ... they are thieves and murderers.’ [AD, 5/19/16]

14. *obi de adee bi edi wo ama Kofi Ghana ena yen nyina ne no twe manso, ose wo de wo to na a ko gye KMA boss, now, na wo Otiko Djabah, a wo me nim wo track record, a paedophile, a paedophile ...*

‘someone did something to you for Kofi Ghana and we all quarreled with him, he said you used your body to gain the position of the KMA boss, now and you, Otiko Djabah that I have your track record, a paedophile, a paedophile ...’ [LNKP, 7/21/16]

or nouns modified by derogatory adjectives such as ‘stupid fool’ in (15) and ‘greedy bastard’ in (16) below:

15. *Mugabe ... Wo dwane behyee nkran ha a wo nyaa dɔm, obi yee wo adom ma wo kɔɔ kɔhyee UK. nne wote hɔ nom se den? You are a stupid fool.*  
‘Mugabe ... You escaped to Accra and got many followers, someone made you a favor to UK. Today what are you saying? You are a stupid fool.’ [HA, 5/30/16]

16. *Carl Wilson ne ho aye fi ... who born dog? greedy bastard.*  
‘Carl Wilson is dirty ... who born dog? greedy bastard.’ [MA, 6/9/16]

### *Adjectives*

Adjectives often “carry a large proportion of the evaluative load in language” (Taboada et al., 2017, p. 64). This suggests that derogative adjectives including ‘dumb’ and ‘corrupt’, as used in excerpts 17 and 18 respectively depict the speakers’ negative evaluation of the targets.

17. *Wo President nu w’abon, onni anisuadehunu ...*  
‘Your president is dumb, he has no vision ...’ [NA, 5/26/16]

18. *IGP... IGP... Police Payin no ankasa ye corrupt.*  
‘IGP... IGP... The Inspector General of Police is corrupt.’ [BAB, 5/30/16]

### *Adverbs*

The excerpts below demonstrate the use of adverbs of degree/intensifiers such as ‘very’ as in ‘very very uncouth’ (19) or *saa* ‘indeed’ as in *kwasea saa* ‘a fool indeed’ (20) to exacerbate the face threat and heighten the face damage inflicted on one’s target.

19. *Yese every great leader must surround himself with intelligent and smart people, nti wo ko nya obi te se Tawiah Boateng... Unintelligent Character, very very uncouth to come and stand on radio and talk a, saa na ebe ba.*  
‘It is said that every great leader must surround himself with intelligent and smart people but when you have someone like Tawiah Boateng, who is an unintelligent character and very uncouth talk on radio issues like this come up.’ [EOB, 5/18/16]

20. *ɔye hwan? Kwasea saa, ɔye hwan? Afoko w’anom cocaine saa ...*  
‘Who is he? A fool indeed, who is he? Afoko has sniffed cocaine for a long time ...’  
[KA, 5/3/16]

## **5.2.2 Imagery**

The imagery used included animal terms, similes, and other figurative expressions. It is noteworthy that in the Ghanaian context, the use of images as insults is rhetorically more powerful and has a more debilitating punch than the use of plain nouns and adjectives.

### *Animal Terms*

Addressing someone with the name of an animal is metaphorical (Allan and Burridge, 2006). It implies that the speaker is bestowing on the person, the negative characteristics of that animal. In many societies (including Ghana), the negative characteristics that the people perceive about that animal determine how badly the target has been vilified (Ofori, 2017).

21. *sebe, sebe moahu se national media commission wo ho. Se wa reserve one-hour ama aboa bi a ye frɛ no apapon, ... ɔhye wee.*

‘excuse me, you have seen that there is National Media Commission. That you have reserved one hour for an animal you call billy goat, he smokes marijuana’.

[MA, 6/21/16]

22. *Ye bisaa nu se wa gye bribe da anaa se ya ma no bribe da, ɔse as a human being?... the man is a dead goat! Nipa no agye atumu see ɔye dead goat... enti ɔno koraa ɔte ho no, onim se ɔye nipa... ye bisa no asem aah as a human being, as a dog na ye bisa wo asem, cow, dog, dead goat, John Mahama na ye bisa wo asem...*

‘When asked if he had taken a bribe before or if he had been offered one he asked if as a human being?... the man is a dead goat! He accepts that he is a dead goat... so even he over there doesn’t know he is a human being?... when asked a question you say as a human being? you were asked as a dog, cow, dog, dead goat, you were asked as these things John Mahama’. [CO, 5/27/16]

23. *Kennedy Agyapong ɔre a, opo te se kraman.*

‘Kennedy Agyapong stands and barks like a dog.’ [MA, 6/17/16]

Among Ghanaians, referring to someone as *apapon* ‘billy goat’ as in excerpt 21 means the person has body odor, is destructive, extremely stubborn, or promiscuous; ‘dead goat’ as in excerpt 22 means the person lacks not only the qualities of a human being, they also lack those of a living goat; ‘dog’ as in excerpt 23 means the person is greedy, promiscuous, quarrelsome, or a thief (see Ofori, 2017; Thompson, 2020).

### *Similes*

In excerpt 24, the target is compared to a child while in excerpt 25, the target’s style of walking is compared to that of insects in a palm tree.

24. *Kwadwo Adu Asare te se akwadaa bi.*

‘Kwadwo Adu Asare is like a child.’ [DB, 5/16/16]

Even though this excerpt has no explicit negative label, it is considered insulting and offensive among Ghanaians because it is seen as belittling the target. This is because in Ghana, children are often perceived as people who are immature, frail and incapable of making sound decisions (Ofori, 2017). To present Kwadwo Adu Asare (a member of parliament) as *akwadaa bi* ‘a child’ is to degrade his social status.

25. *Obi te se Collins Dauda, dabiaa na wa hye n’atadee na abe si ni ha sei na ɔto ne pa tesse akokono a ɔwo abe mu.*

‘Someone like Collins Dauda, every day, he wears a dress that is hanging on his leg, then he is twisting his waist like the insects in a palm tree’. [YAB, 5/10/16]

The insects in a palm tree include caterpillars, palm weevils, and palm borers. These insects are boneless, and they usually crawl. Therefore, the expression ... *na ɔto ne pa tesɛɛ akɔkono a ɔwo abɛ mu* ‘... then he is twisting his waist like the insects in a palm tree’ means that the target’s style of movement is incomparable to that of other human beings.

### Other Figurative Expressions

26. *Yebe ka corruption dea esese NPP foɔ ka wɔ mo ano tumu but ɔmo hyɛda paa because panyin biara nni ho a obetu wɔ mo fo.*  
‘When we talk of corruption NPP has no right to speak but they do so because there is no elderly person to advise them.’ [ABS, 5/16/16]

The statement *panyin biara nni ho a obetu wɔ mo fo* ‘there is no elderly person to advise them’ in excerpt 26 is considered offensive because it implies that the members of the NPP lack guidance and therefore are unable to make informed decisions on social issues. Generally, Ghanaians believe that the elderly (people advanced in age) are the symbol of wisdom and are supposed to know better. Thus, people who rely on their guidance and advice usually do extremely well (van der Geest, 1998; Thompson, 2020). This means that people who do not have any elderly persons in their factions are more likely to behave in a way that is contrary to the tenets of society or even fail in their endeavors.

27. ... *nti se ye pe mmarima na a ma ɔmo akasa ewɔ Ghana ha a, na ɔmo a ɔmoho aye fi a ewɔ se, eeh, sebe sebe, yen ma ɔmo sapɔ ne samina, ye de sapɔ ne samina, ye de hyɛ Appiah Stadium nsa...Carl Wilson ewɔ se ye de sapɔ ne samina hyɛ Appiah Stadium nsa, se Appiah Stadium e, Carl Wilson ne hu aye fi nti dware no wɔ badwem.*  
‘...so if we want men to talk in Ghana, then those who are dirty, excuse me, let’s give them sponge and soap, we will give sponge and soap to Appiah Stadium... Carl Wilson, we ought to give sponge and soap to Appiah Stadium and tell him that Carl Wilson is dirty so bath him in public.’ [MA, 6/15/16]

Carl Wilson, the target of the excerpt above, was a former chairman of the Confiscated Vehicles Committee but was sacked over allegations of abuse of office and corruption. The expression *Carl Wilson ne hu aye fi* ‘Carl Wilson is dirty’ is an indirect way of saying the target is corrupt. The speaker further implies that the target has no moral right to speak about issues in Ghana, rather he must first be made clean.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we examined insulting comments made by political actors and party sympathizers recorded by the MFWA during Ghana’s 2016 electioneering period in light of the concepts of face and face attack. We found that the communicative behaviour displayed on radio during the 2016 electioneering period is clearly not reflective of the “respect for others” that national stakeholders seek in Ghanaian political discussions. The radio discussants attacked the face of rival politicians, members/affiliates of political parties and journalists by employing negative assertions or negative references to arouse the negative sentiments of the listening public towards them. Generally, the attacks were in three forms: attack on moral behaviour, attack on mental/intellectual ability, and attack on physical appearance/characteristics. They were expressed directly through noun phrases, adjectives, and adverbs or indirectly through symbolic terms or imagery. The discussants purposefully delivered their comments (together with the

face-threatening acts) because of the elections as they wanted to persuade the listening public to vote for their preferred candidates.

Even though research has shown that face-threatening acts are not uncommon in political discussions due to the emotions involved, when face attacks become recurrent, they can easily cause an impairment to the target’s enduring preferred social identity. Also, the act of attacking the self-image of leading politicians and lowering their social status can easily lead to social conflicts, especially in situations where the public is involved as there may be counter attacks from their supporters. Moreover, face attacks have the potential of blocking the free exchange of critical ideas, which plays a very important role in the development of a democratic country such as Ghana. This is because people would not want to get involved in discussions that threaten their self-image. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the practice of resorting to verbal abuse in the midst of disagreements is one of the main factors that dissuade people from participating publicly in political discussions in Ghana. That is, when deliberative political discussions are devoid of insulting remarks, people of diverse backgrounds will feel encouraged to participate and good will among citizens will also be advanced.

We, therefore, recommend that political actors in Ghana must desist from insulting and disrespecting people of divergent political backgrounds or persuasions. They must promote Ghanaian communicative values by exercising their right to freedom of speech in a responsible manner, especially on radio and other open spaces. Also, leaders of the various political parties should boldly sanction their members, especially those who are high ranking, when they engage in deliberate face attack of their political rivals. The MFWA must be motivated to carry on with their name-and-shame approach. Their initiative must be supported by the government of the day to cover a wider scope so that individuals who engage in deploying insults to tackle issues of national concern rather than coming up with more convincing arguments can be identified and openly condemned.

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