



‘Tell me what I mean, before I speak’: A rhetoric and cultural analysis of some Ghanaian Wax Prints used by the President of Ghana during the delivery of COVID-19 Updates in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines and analyses some of the clothes worn by the President of Ghana during the delivery of COVID-19 Updates to the citizenry of Ghana. The aim of this paper is to discover the communicative function of the clothes worn by the President of Ghana during his delivery of COVID-19 Updates symbolically adds value to his speech with regards to the state of the Pandemic in Ghana. Using Textual Analysis, focus group discussions and interviews, the study provides a deeper examination of the various meanings of the cloths worn by the president during various COVID-19 national speeches. The research concludes that, the cloths worn by President of Ghana, during the delivery of speech to update citizens on measures taken against the spread of the Corona Virus in Ghana, performed additional communicative function through cultural understandings and nonverbal cues to appeal to the reasoning of the citizens.

Keywords: *Cloths, Wax prints, Pandemic, COVID-19, Tradition, Communicative.*

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

Clothes are symbolic means of literally interpreting the expression ‘first impression last’ in the sense that, clothes give information of what the wearer communicates before they open their mouth to say anything. Argyle [1] argues that clothes, along with facial expressions, look, gestures, bodily contact, space and distance, behaviour, non-verbal cues as well as smell both pleasant and unpleasant form part of non-verbal signals in communication.

Every individual chooses clothes for different occasions and seasons. When it has to do with special occasions, attention is given to how one will appear in order to make a statement that will leave memories lingering on for a period of time. Occasions such as weddings, executive dinner parties call for unique and explicit appearance with respect to clothes. At interviews, individuals consider that their appearance can score them some points and sometimes leave memories of them in the minds of their prospective employees or clients. They pay attention to their appearance hoping that it will form part of getting them hired for the job. Clothing is an integrated part of culture, and most nations developed because they paid attention to their cultures which comprises local languages, beliefs, religious customs as well as costumes in the mist of modernization [2]

To Morris (1997) “it is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a subtle one about its wearer.” In actual fact, clothes might ‘give off’ more information about the person before people open their mouth to verbally communicate with others. Davis [3] mentioned “the clothes we wear make a statement by itself, a statement that in this age of heightened self-consciousness has virtually become a cliché.” Borgatti [4] asserts that the African cloth has its underlying symbolism which actually takes its root in the peoples’ values and belief system.

Presidential apparels serve as an identify mechanisms. It has been observed that, from the onset of COVID mandates and Presidential updates, Ghana’s President continue to ware specific wax prints during national address. The purpose of this research is to study the communicative function of the official wear of the President of Ghana, His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, during national speeches during COVID 19.

1.1.2 Significance of the Wax Print in Ghanaian Culture

Borgatti [4], asserts that the African cloth has its underlying symbolism which actually takes its root in the peoples’ values and belief system. In Ghana, the wax print is used as a ‘gift’ for different occasions. During traditional marriage

ceremonies, wax prints¹ are given as one of the primary requirements for the bride. The number given (unique to different tribes in Ghana) symbolises class or status. Some tribes give as many as 100 pieces of cloths for the hand of the bride among other traditional requirements. During these marriage ceremonies the mother and father of the bride may also be given wax prints as gifts. Individuals also use some pieces as souvenirs for guests at the engagement ceremony.

In some instance, clothes serve as a symbol of maturity. In the Ghanaian community, girls at the age of puberty are given wax prints. A way of ushering them into adulthood and guiding them on how to adorn in the traditional prints and look adorable. Teenage girls who go through puberty rites receive a number of pieces of these wax prints. Girls who do not go through the rites also may receive these wax prints as gifts from their parents during some occasions.

Furthermore, the use of the wax print is an expression of culture. Since language forms part of culture, there is dynamism in the names inscribed in the cloth. Different cultures in Ghana name the cloth according to how their language interpret it. Although there may be variations in the construction of some of the names, the meaning in depth is the same indicating the similarities and uniqueness of culture.

Apart from the fact that clothes may express culture, the wax print is used by many as a form of self-identity and personal branding. Some individuals in Ghana are known to wear the wax print for all occasions regardless of the type of occasion. Some individuals stick to the use of the wax print for official, casual or diplomatic purposes. These prints as observed by this study, have been a means of expressing fashion sense, exhibiting culture and also making subtle non-verbal communication statements.

The shades in terms of colour of wax prints also communicate what the occasion denotes. Sometimes, men go in for the dark colours such as dark brown or its related shades. It is of the assertion that women desire the bright coloured cloths or wax prints when the occasion is not specifically stated. During traditional marriage ceremonies, the bride is given shades for three specific occasions- for occasions that require dark colours, bright colours and those that are easy going for any occasion [4]. The wax prints that are used by the ladies in their youth are termed ‘sika.’² It is believed that the youth take delight in fancy looking fabrics than using the dull, dark and not so appealing-coloured ones used by adults.

1.1.3 Unmasking the hidden meaning of cloths

Knapp and Hall [5] assert that it will be impossible to outline the items that are communicated by cloths. This is because the outcome will be different depending on the demands of particular situations, contexts, ethnic groups, time of day, different era, religion, age among a host of other considerations. Knapp and Hall [5] states “another difficult way will be how multiple meanings are communicated based on the use of the cloth by the user or the wearer” (p.204). Davis [3] posited that ‘clothing styles and the fashions that influence them over time constitute something approximating a code’ (p.5). The clothing fashion code is context dependent. The identity of the wearer, the occasion, the place, purpose and even the wearer’s moods may influence meaning (p.8). Davis [3] also touched on the signifier-signified relationship. Again, Davis [3], using semiotic terminology suggested that the signifier-signified relationship of clothing/ cloth sign is not stable. This is to say that it is not possible for people to have similar meanings of the same symbols in clothing and this approach is adopted for this study.

1.1.4 Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Blumer starts with the premise that humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things [6]³The theory posits that individuals construct meaning through the communication process, that there exists the idea of Self-concept which is a motivation for behavior and finally a unique relationship exists between the individual and society. The primary idea of Symbolic Interactionism thought is the idea that individuals use language and significant symbols in their communication with others. Symbolic Interactionism dwells on the interpretation of subjective individual viewpoints and how each individual makes meaning of their world from their exquisite if not unique standpoints and perspectives. The society gets involved in the interpretation of these constructed meaning based on the make-up of the society.

¹ The whole piece is made up 12yards. Half piece, otherwise, 6yards is standard for ladies and 10yards is standard for men to wrap around their shoulders.

² ‘Sika’ in Twi, literally means ‘money.’ In Ghana, ‘Sika’ is translated ‘gold’ in English. Cloths or wax prints called ‘sika’ have a youthful and desirable look hence the name.

³E.M. Griffin, A First Look at Communication Theory, 8th Ed., New York, New York: McGraw Hill, 2012

The Symbolic Interactionism Theory answered the perspective on society that influenced sociology such as Talcott Parson's Structural Functionalism. Being a positivist approach dominant in all ways, the society was then examined in a 'top-down' approach placing emphasis on macro-level institutions and social structures not excluding how they impose and restrict individuals. Symbolic Interactionism was developed to expatiate on the ideologies and dealings of society from 'bottom-top' shifting the focus to micro-level processes that arise during face-to-face encounters. Blumer stressed on how the self emerges from an interactive process of joint action [7]. Like Mead, Blumer saw individuals as involved in 'mind action.' Humans constantly are occupied in mindful action where they manipulate symbols and negotiate meaning of situations. The four tenets [8]⁴, sometimes captured as three, identify that first, individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them. Second, interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (humans), as well as situations and occurrences must be defined and categorized based on individual meanings. The third focuses on the meaning emerging from interactions with other individuals and with the society. Last but not the least, it identifies that meanings are continuously created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others. Below is a simple model showing the inter-relation between tenets as discussed above.

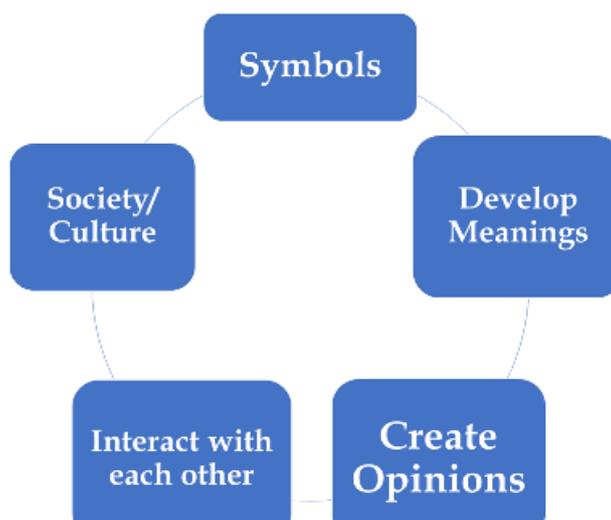


Fig. 1: Model developed by the researcher

2.0 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- 1) What are the hidden meanings embedded in the cloths worn by the President of Ghana during the delivery of Updates on COVID-19 Cases in Ghana?
- 2) How did the message in the cloth relate to the content of the messages delivered?

3.0 Rationale/ Problem

It is culture that decides what, when and how to wear certain clothes and guides its members to interpret the messages communicated through clothes [9]. The perceptions and interpretations related to clothing may be transmitted visually or through written descriptions. In Ghana, wax prints designs come with names attached to them. Individuals buy these prints based on the statement they make in order to suit what message they desire to send at a point in time [9]. The names attached to the fabrics or wax prints otherwise called cloths have grades and they indicate class and status. They sometimes communicate one's state of mind, being and emotions. Being one of the most important means of representing and exhibiting culture, cloths or wax prints are used by a larger population of the people of Ghana. The focus of this paper is understanding the communicative function of the wax prints worn by the President of Ghana during the delivery of the COVID_19 updates as a means of communicating messages embedded in the written speech at a particular point in time during the period under study.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach [10]. Primary data was collected online on the official Facebook page of the President of Ghana and the official page of the Ministry of Information. Videos and pictures of each update were sampled. The study adopted a purposive sampling approach to sampling the videos of public addresses of the President of Ghana [11]. The videos contained visual evidence of the cloths the President wore on each day of the speech and

⁴Blumer, Herbert (1969). *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall

serves as a documentation of the content of the speeches. These two criteria of the videos constitute the value of the data and warrants an exploration.

In view of this, videos relating to the COVID-19 Updates were relevant for the study. In order to understand the communicative function of the cloths worn by the President, it was important to solicit the opinions of the public and ascertain their understanding on the subject. To do this, a focus group was created. There were two separate groups. Each group was made up of five participants. This was done in order to adhere to ‘social distancing protocol’ as a requirement adhering to safety measures in the light of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Virtual one on one interviews were also conducted to solicit views concerning the need for men, especially, being particular about what they wear. Questions asked during the interview sessions were semi-structured with open ended questions to allow participants to freely express their opinions without obstruction.

4.1.2 Data Analysis Plan

The study was guided by the interpretation and constructed meanings from Ghanaian texts as names given to the wax prints as worn by the President of Ghana. Some of the names are inscribed on the fabrics. Others do not have the names on them but were named by the patrons of the fabric as a result of incidents that occurred during the time the fabric was manufactured. The study employed the use of Textual Analysis. Through Textual Analysis, researchers can analyse and interpret names of cloths worn by the President of Ghana. In textual analysis, meaning can be analysed from the perspective of the reader’s reaction and the cultural context in which the text was created or the contemporary cultural context in which the text is experienced today [12]. The paper rests on the findings of a qualitative study that looks at different perspectives within varied cultural contexts. The study also used Observation to gather and make meaning rendered on the use of the cloth. It paid particular attention to the contents of the speeches vis-à-vis the cloth worn by the President of Ghana at a point in time during the delivery of Updates to Ghanaians on national television. It is worth noting that the study took into consideration some subjective aspects related to the study owing to the fact that the perceptions of individuals are of great concern.

5.0 Delimitation

The study focused on nine (9) updates although as of the time of study, the President of Ghana, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo, had delivered Twenty-six updates of the measures taken to curb the state of COVID-19 in Ghana. The pandemic, still in season by August 2021, this study is limited to Update Number 3 which was delivered on March 21st, 2020 to Update Number 11 which was delivered on June 14th, 2020.

6.0 DISCUSSION

6.1 Research Question 1.

- 1) What hidden meaning is embedded in the cloths worn by the President of Ghana during the delivery of Updates on COVID-19 Cases in Ghana?

Ghanaian derive meaning in many things. One means of expressing what they desire to say is by how they dress. It is a common thing in Ghana for women, especially to communicate their thought, feelings and emotions through dressing. A woman’s way of tying the head gear is an indication of whether she is angry, in a happy mood or she is sad. Same goes with when they choose wax prints. A popular Ghanaian anecdote tells how a polygamous man had his two wives engaging in a subtle quarrel by using wax prints to communicate abusive words to each other. It went on for a while until the husband got them a similar wax print with same inscriptions to make peace in the home. This goes a long way to tell that, Ghanaians have a culture of finding ways to communicate via different means even with wax prints. The study will now discuss the cloths/wax prints worn by the President of Ghana during his delivery of updates concerning measures taken against the COVID-19 in Ghana. In all, eleven (11) Presidential updates were delivered at the time of the research. The first and second updates were delivered on March 11, 2020 and March 15, 2020 respectively. The President was seen wearing a dark coloured cloth in the first update and a plain green fabric in the second update. It was then spotted that, after the first and second updates, subsequent ones had him wearing wax prints. In the light of this, the analysis will begin from the Update 3 to Update 11.

- a) Update 3 (21st March, 2020)- The name of the cloth was ‘anibrensogya’ which literally means ‘the redness of the eye does not spark fire.’
- b) Update 4 (27th March, 2020)- The cloth worn during this update was very colourful and had patterns like the balloon. The name was eventually discovered as ‘Balloon.’
- c) Update 5 (5th April 2020)- During the delivery of this update, the President wore ‘Yaw Donkor’ which is a name of person. In Ghana, anyone called ‘Yaw’ was born on a Thursday- ‘Donkor’ is a ‘slave’ name. in Akan, the name denotes a slave. The cloth symbolises a slave who is relentless to serve his master regardless of the dying challenges. Owing to the fact that he serves well, it only natural that with time, his status as a slave will change to the better. The

name of this cloth is quite long, ‘akoasomsom pa a, obe di adie.’ To wits, ‘when a slave is selfless in the delivery of service, he becomes a master.’

- d) Update 6 (9th April, 2020)- The cloth worn on this day, like on that day of the Update 4, looked colourful. Similar to what was described as ‘sika’ in the introduction of the study.
- e) Update 7 (19th April, 2020)- ‘Obour fa, dadie fa’ was worn by the President.
- f) Update 8 (26th April, 2020)- This cloth may have two names. The youth mostly call it ‘macaroni’ because of the patterns but the original name is ‘afi bi ye esan’, which means ‘some years are cursed.’
- g) Update 9 (10th May, 2020)- The cloth was identified as ‘Kyemfre’
- h) Update 10 (31st May, 2020)- The cloth has a rather long name which may be translated as ‘forget what the animals have eaten, let’s protect what is left’ (neammoaedi no wonnennkonanea aka no yebebo ho ban).
- i) Update 11 (14th June, 2020)- One of the most ancient patterns called the ‘ABC’ was what the president wore during the delivery of update 11. This cloth has patterns of the letters of the alphabets and the Arabic numerals.

6.2 Research Question 2

- 2) How did the message in the cloth relate to the content of the messages delivered?
 - a) Update 3- The name of the cloth was ‘anibrensogya’ which literally means ‘the redness of the eye does not spark fire.’ On this day of update, the cloth worn by the President connotes seriousness. It likens seriousness to the redness of the eye. Although one may show intense seriousness just looking in the eyes, the cloth’s name again debunks the idea that, the redness of the eye will not ignite it into flames. The seriousness of the pandemic may have been life threatening, but then all is not lost. The President ended his update by saying: ‘This too shall pass.’
 - b) Update 4- The cloth worn during this update was very colourful and had patterns like the balloon. The name was eventually discovered as ‘Balloon.’ On this day, the President appeared calmer in a balloon patterned fabric. One would say he looked as though he was in a celebration mood. This was because on this day, the previous update had yielded some positive results and citizens were beginning to be careful about the COVID-19 virus. The President on this day, initiated some relief packages for citizens. Some included subsidising water bills, electricity bills among some other relief incentives.
 - c) Update 5- During the delivery of this update, the President wore ‘Yaw Donkor’ which is a name of person. In Ghana, anyone called ‘Yaw’ was born on a Thursday- ‘Donkor’ is a ‘slave’ name. in Akan, the name denotes a slave. The cloth symbolises a slave who is relentless to serve his master regardless of the dying challenges. Owing to the fact that he serves well, it only natural that with time, his status as a slave will change to the better. The name of this cloth is quite long, ‘akoasomsom pa a, obe di adie.’ To wits, ‘when a slave is selfless in the delivery of service, he becomes a master.’ Here, the President sees himself as a slave and the citizens are his masters. An emphasis on the fourth update to convince citizens to consider him in the next elections in December, 2020 to continue a second tenure of office.
 - d) Update 6- The cloth worn on this day, like on that day of the Update 4, looked colourful. Similar to what was described as ‘sika’ in the introduction of the study. One would say that; the President was in a celebration mood. Cloths with a ‘sika’ pattern are mostly worn to weddings, traditional marriage ceremonies and even parties.
 - e) Update 7- ‘Obour fa, dadie fa’⁵ was worn by the President. Calling on citizens on this day, he mentioned in his speech that the responsibility to curb the pandemic in Ghana is not the sole responsibility of the government. It is a collaborative effort of citizens and the government as a whole.
 - f) Update 8- This cloth may have two names. The youth mostly call it ‘macaroni’ because of the patterns but the original name is ‘afi bi ye esan’, which means ‘some years are cursed.’ This cloth, though the name sounds derogatory has been renamed by the youth of Ghana. It has patterns like cooked spaghetti. In view of this, the youth call it ‘Macaroni.’ However, its original name tells how unfortunate some days, months or years can be. The year during the outbreak of the pandemic is one of such periods. The president wore ‘afi bi ye esan’ to symbolise how unfortunate the year has been. On this day of update the lives of some prominent people were lost. These events were unfortunate.
 - g) Update 9- The cloth was identified as ‘Kyemfre’ One cloth that stood distinct in the study was the cloth ‘Kyemfre.’ During the interviews, most respondents could hardly relate to the name. It was not easy to tell what was the link to that choice of cloth to the update delivered by the President. Unlike the others, ‘kyemfre’ stood unique amongst all.
 - h) Update 10- The cloth has a rather long name which may be translated as ‘forget what the animals have eaten, let’s protect what is left’ (neammoaedi no wonnennkonanea aka no yebebo ho ban). The name of this cloth denotes a scenario in which one has given up on what has been lost and now ready to guard what remains. Of all the unfortunate eventualities such as the deaths caused by the COVID-19, the President’s cloth now presents a scenario

⁵ ‘Obour’ means Stone in Twi, a variant of the Akan languages of Ghana. ‘Dadie’ means Metal. ‘Obour fa, dadie fa’ means ‘A little piece of wood, a little piece of metal.’ That is to say a blend of what is lighter and a little of what is heavy will help in certain situations.

that seems to jealously guard the remnants of what has been taken away by the pandemic. This includes the loss of human lives and even the economy if the State.

- i) Update 11- One of the most ancient patterns called the 'ABC' was what the President wore during the delivery of update 11. This cloth has patterns of the letters of the alphabets and the Arabic numerals. This update was received with a lot of cheers and missed feelings. At this point, most Ghanaians had started reading meanings into the choice of wax prints worn by the president. As a result of the rise in the numbers of infections, schools had closed down temporarily. The appearance of the President wearing the ABC fabric caused quite a number of people interviewed saying that, they knew he was going to open the schools for academic work to continue. True to all predictions, the President announced the reopening of schools at some levels.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the discussions made so far, one will agree that the President of Ghana, during the delivery of speech to update citizens on measures taken against the spread of the Corona Virus in Ghana, took into the consideration the cultural elements and nonverbal cues of communication by using the wax prints to appeal to the reasoning of the citizens. Not only that, but he also dropped subtle clues of the contents of his message through the prints that he wore. Relating this to the Symbolic Interactionism Theory, it is evident that, producers of some of these cloths may not have named these cloths but the individuals living in the society have used their experiences and language to form their subjective opinions of these cloths. It is an undeniable fact that at the end of each speech, people were able to relate and conclude on his choice of a particular print for a specific day. With the knowledge of culture in mind, a deliberate and tactical effort were made not only deliver the speech but to find means of using the immediate and familiar communication tool to put across his message to the citizenry. Knowing that language is one of the primary tools of culture, there is a blend of the use of symbolism and language. The former to create a picturesque view in the minds of the viewers watching on the television and the latter to commit the message to memory. One may not forget that, the cloths earned commercial recognition to the extent that, textiles companies designed a special cloth for the COVID-19 and named it 'Fellow Ghanaians.'⁶

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⁶ The President, before every update greets the citizens with a popular introduction, 'Fellow Ghanaians.' The textiles company named the cloth designed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ghana.