

## **When Men of God Go Wild: A Study of Flaming in Sermonic Discourse on a Ghanaian Radio Network**

By

<sup>1</sup>*Wincharles Coker* and <sup>2</sup>*Theophilus Nartey*

Department of Communication Studies  
University of Cape Coast, Ghana

### **Abstract**

*Studies in sermonic discourse have increasingly shown that preachers are alive to face and politeness dynamics of communication as they seek to be persuasive to their audiences, thereby promoting an atmosphere of respect, tolerance and consequently peace in the Christian community. In this paper, however, we shift attention from persuasive strategies used in sermonic discourse in order to examine proclivities of verbal abuse by a prophet of God in self defence of an alleged accusation leveled against him by a supposedly rival clergyman on a live radio dawn broadcast in Ghana. Based on Becker's (1978) mosaic model of communication, the analysis showed three key findings. First, the prophet used a high voltage of invectives, threats and profanity to express his disgust at the conduct of the other rival clergyman. Secondly, the verbal aggression in the interaction was accentuated by the associate pastors who used a number of interruptions that were indicative of their total support of the prophet in his use of "dirty" language. Finally, the utterances culminated in a challenge to a physical brawl to win the fight for supremacy over each camp. The study bears implications for future research into impoliteness, conflict resolution in the Church and training of men and women of God.*

**Keywords:** *Flaming, sermonic discourse, mosaic model of communication, motif*

### **1. Introduction**

Foul language has no place in sermonic discourse. Studies have increasingly shown that the language of clergymen and women in the pulpit is alive to face and politeness dynamics of communication as preachers seek to be persuasive to their audiences (Dzameshie, 1992; 1993; Crystal, 1994; Coker, 2010). One significant reason is that sermonic discourse is a type of persuasive discourse intended to change attitudes or behaviours (Keane, 1997; Uhunwangho, 2000). In delivering their sermons, preachers usually employ such logical persuasive strategies as deliberate and evocative phraseology (Uhunwangho, 2000), interrogative and imperative utterances (Taiwo, 2005, 2007), lexico-semantic and syntactic features (Afful, 2007; Ziwu, 2009) as well as make passionate ethical and emotional appeals (Coker, 2010). Given the posture assumed by preachers and the nature of their vocation, it is uncommon to see them persuade their audience, using intemperate and indecent language because it is at variance with the faith they profess. In this paper, however, we shift attention from persuasive strategies typical in the extant literature in order to examine proclivities of flaming and profanity by man a of God in self defence of an alleged accusation leveled against him by a supposedly rival clergyman on a live radio programme in Ghana.

We define *flaming* as a verbal attack and aggressive communication via an electronically mediated medium which is aimed at threatening the face of a target. Whereas Landry (2000) refers to the phenomenon as "uninhibited and aggressive communication" (p. 139), Parks and Floyd (1996: 81) term it

"a verbal aggression, blunt disclosure, and non conforming behaviour". As well, Baym (2006), Coker (2011a) among others have contended that flaming is precipitated in electronically mediated modes of communication due to facelessness, social distance, lack of social accountability and anonymity/pseudonymy. Yankah's (1998: 40) remark to this effect is noteworthy:

As communication becomes more faceless, the indigenous norms of restrained discourse are bound to slacken, taken over by greater openness and candour where affront is inevitable. But this also deepens the communication crisis; for faceless communication on radio-phone in programmes, has yielded its fair share of emotionally charged contributions, which have sometimes been interpreted as discourtesy to authority.

Thus, it is clear that flaming is an insulting language. This is to say that insults are face-threatening forms of communication which are meant to cause mental pain, embarrassment or disgrace. According to Sekyi-Baidoo (n.d), insults are non-politeness or anti-politeness forms which usually cause the breakdown of social cohesion. (The veracity of this statement will be made evident in the ensuing pages of the paper). In most cases, the denotative meaning encoded by the propositional content of invectives equals its illocutionary force (Agovi, 1995, Sekyi-Baidoo, 1998; Agyekum, 2004), except in cases where insults are given and taken to bolster social cohesion (Radcliff-Brown, 1940; Yankah, 2002; Sekyi-Baidoo, n.d).

### ***Conceptual Approach***

The conceptual approach used in this paper involves the application of Becker's (1978) Mosaic Model of Communication (MMC). Unlike the classic politeness theories, such a theoretical shift is of significance because politeness theories "are generally not well equipped, conceptually or descriptively, to account for impoliteness. In particular, they tend to give the impression that impoliteness is either some kind of pragmatic failure, a consequence of not doing something, or merely anomalous behaviour, not worthy of consideration" (Bousfeld & Culpeper, 2008: 161).

Becker's (1978) MMC thus holds that radio and other mass media have a significant role as sources of information and socialisation in modern communication. Becker (1978) argues that communication can be conceptualised as information bits that are disseminated by mediated (radio, television, e-mail, SMS, newspapers) and non-mediated (churches, school, family) sources. The information bits about any particular topic interact with information in memory on that topic and related topics to help form 'pictures in our heads' and that these pictures become peoples's reality for that topic. Such a reality should receive our attention because "the content and style of such communication can reveal the insights about the psychological states of the individual actors... including personality traits and emotional states" (Hancock *et al.*, 2010: 108).

Central to the model is the role of the repetition of information bits. Some information bits are repeated frequently in many sources, mediated or non-mediated, whereas others receive limited circulation and repetition. According to Walker (2000), information bits that are frequently repeated, such as dawn broadcasts, and that are received by more people, "are more likely to be remembered and more likely to produce some cognitive, attitudinal or behavioural effects" (p. 108). It should, however, be noted that many of the effects of the mass media are gradual and less apparent over time (Schram, 1954 cited in Walker, 2000). Walker (2000) further posits that whereas one exposure to a message (such as a sermonic discourse immersed in flaming on radio) may have limited influence on deeply held beliefs and values, frequent repetition may produce significant and behavioural change.

Thus, the use of this theory is to examine recurrent trends of flaming in the discourse of the radio preacher in an attempt to bring to light how atypical his utterances and the inactions of his associate pastors have proven to be in a Christian society, in particular, and human society in general. In a study of profanity in video games, as an example, Ivory *et al.* (2009) remarked that " profanity's presence in media prompts

concern about its potential for eliciting imitative verbal aggression and inappropriate language in general” (p. 1). The authors also observed that frequent exposure to profanity may desensitize media consumers, leading to a greater general acceptance of profanity and verbal aggression in both media and real life.

Given the conceptual framework sketched above, two key questions were formulated:

- ✓ What motifs typify the extent of flaming in the discourse of the preachers?
- ✓ What is the communicative significance of the flaming in their discourse?

## 2. Data and Method

### *The Text and its Context*

The text used in the present study represents one of the defenses put up by Man of God X (original name withheld) and his associate pastors at one of the radio networks in Kumasi, the administrative capital of Ashanti Region, Ghana. The text was recorded from one of his live-dawn gospel broadcasts at the radio station whereupon he expended only three minutes sixteen seconds to put up a defence against the allegations levelled against him apparently by Man of God Y. Both clergymen belong to the movement of African Independent Churches or New Religious Movements, popularly christened *one-man churches*. Quite appropriately, the individual churches of these pastors are neocharismatic or neoprophetic in nature because they exhibit manifestations associated with charismatic or prophetic churches. (For a detailed discussion on this subject, see Hollenwenger, 1980; Atiemo, 1993; MacArthur, 1992; Barton-Odro, 2002; Burgrees & van Der Maas, 2003; Asamoah-Gyedu, 2004.)

The alleged story has it that X and Y traded allegations and counter-allegations of deceit of their respective congregations, and that the miracles wrought by them are fake and not of God. (Details have not been provided in order to conceal the identity of the two pastors on ethical grounds.)

### *Transcription and Translation of Text*

The spoken text, which was originally in Asante Twi, was transcribed using French’s (1992) level 2 longhand transcription method. (An Akan language, Asante Twi is arguably the most widely spoken Ghanaian language with over 60% of both natives and non-native speakers, Obeng, 1997; Nyarko, 2008). In order to reduce the bias of translation and increase its accuracy, the Twi text was then translated into English by a lecturer at the Department of Ghanaian Languages and Linguistics at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

## 3. Findings and Discussion

Available evidence from the analysis of the data reveals three basic motifs. These are a high voltage of insults and deprecation, a call to a physical brawl and counter-threats/flyting.

### *Insults and Deprecation*

The analysis brings to light a preponderance of insulting language used by X and his two associates. The use of this intemperate language could be classified into two major matrices: denotative insults and presupposed/inferential insults.

The denotative meanings of deprecation used by the men of God in the transcript were clear and basic in their communicative load. They sought to cause mental pain to the target (Agyekum, 2004), in this case the rival pastor. It is interesting to note that the descriptor *fool* and its variants were used by the prophet and his associates in the text as many as nine times in an interaction that lasted only three minutes sixteen seconds. It goes without saying that it is important to note that the word *fool* is a taboo word among in many ethnolinguistic societies not to speak of among the community of practising clergymen. Below is an illustration.

**Excerpt 1**

001 AP1:

Church elders, you should teach your pastors sense. When a pastor is fooling about teach him sense. Pastor's wife talk to you husband. Indeed, he is a fool. He is inviting troubles for you. If you are not careful, you will be in serious troubles. Master, as for Prophet X, if you say you are indeed a pastor, you should have known that.

001 AP1:

As[re mpanimfo], mokyer[ mo as]fo] nyansa, s]fo redi nkwiseas[m a kyer[ no nyansa. ]s]fo maame, kasa kyer[ wo kunu.Gyimi na wagyimi,]rek]ka ab[ka mo. Modi agor] a as[m b[to mo. Prophet X de[ massa, wose woy[ obi a woy[ s]fo paa, anka wob[hu s[n.

In this excerpt, the first associate pastor (AP1) throws to the wind the Bible's caution that we should not judge others lest God judges us. In plain words, he refers to Y as a fool because according to the former the bishop lacks sense. This is why he admonishes the elders of the church and wife of the bishop to bring him to order. A careful analysis of this excerpt, however, indicates that AP1 calls the bishop a fool perhaps because the latter is unduly inviting troubles upon himself when he is supposed to have known that pastors do not play where angels fear to tread. In other words, AP1 appears to be saying that Y is no match to X because the latter, according to AP1, wields more power and grace than the former. The incandescence of the utterances of the men of God in the interaction is further illumined in the following lines.

**Excerpt 2**

054 X:

Who can disgrace somebody in Ghana today? You and your pastors should remain indoors today. You are fools... 'under your mothers' vaginas seven hundred times' you are fools. Stop the matter you are talking about. Stop that matter, stop that matter.

054 X:

[nn[ Ghana naa y[te no hwan na ]b[tumi de obi anim ay[ fum? [nn[ wone w'as]fo monka dan mu moy[ nkwisea.... mo ni tw[ ase di seven hundred, moy[ nkwiseafo].

Here also, the choleric nature of X becomes manifest in the number of times he refers to Y and his pastors as fools. First, X believes that he is beyond reproach, ridicule and disgrace (*see line 054*). This deprecation on the personality of the bishop is followed by a warning to remain indoors in order to avoid any physical confrontation with X. The verbal aggression of the prophet is expressed in the level of profanity he employs: "*under your mothers' vaginas seven hundred*", which in its original Twi rendition reads "*wo ne tw[ ase seven hundred*" times. The use of this vulgarity or obscenity may be indicative that the prophet has little or no knowledge of euphemisms or social mores because it is a taboo in many traditional societies in Ghana. This is because studies have shown that the use of obscene language is permissible in certain situational contexts such as amongst homogeneous groups to bolster social cohesion (Jay, 1992, Mercury, 1995; Johnson & Lewis, 2010). For instance, Jay (1992) argues that those who swear successfully are usually mindful of the social restrictions placed on them in most situations, whereas those who usually offend their audiences typically are not. As well, Johnson and Lewis (2010) point out the significance of situational context in determining what constitutes dirty language. Mercury (1995: 30) comments on this issue thus:

All obscene language is taboo language because these expressions are restricted in some way for their use in public. These restrictions exist explicitly (e.g. television network censors who govern language on

television) or implicitly (parents who use euphemisms to describe sexual body parts or body processes when talking to their children...

**Counter-Threats**

Given the posture assumed by Man of God X and his team, it is not surprising that we see pockets of counter-threats in the text.

**Excerpt 3**

029 AP2:	Fool	029 AP: Kwasea
030 X:	It is a stupid power that you are talking about	030 X: Stupid power na woreka no
031 AP1:	Aaah!	031 AP1: Aaah!
032 X:	It is a stupid power that you are mentioning. Y you are threatening me.	032 X: Foolish power na worekeka no. Wo Y wore threate me
033 AP2:	It's a threat	033 AP2: [y[ threat

In this excerpt, X and his servants throw an equal measure of threats at Y. The prophet also refers to the source of the anointing of Y as a *stupid power*, and that the actions and inactions of the bishop amount to threat. It is important to note that the flyting or counter-threats dished out by X and his men are latent and implied. That is, although they do not at this stage of their broadcast come out clearly about, we can infer this from the tone and expletives (*See Aah!*) of the interactants as well as the background knowledge of the text. Fairclough (1992) refers to this phenomenon as *member resources*. Indeed, this threat is traceable from the very beginning of their broadcast as contained in this example.

**Excerpt 4**

008 X:	He has invited troubles for himself//	008 X:	]de bankye ab] ngo mu//
009 AP1:	When you invite troubles, you can't escape//	009 AP1:	]de bankye ab] ngo mu, agye s[ woka//
0010 X:	He has invited troubles unless he faces it//	0010 AP1:	ew] se ]ka
0011 AP1:	He has to face it	0011 X:	[se s[ ]ka
0012 X:	He has to face it	0012 X:	[s[ s[ ]no nso ka
0013 AP1:	So he too has to face it//	0013 AP1:	Enti [s[ s[ ]no nso ka//
0014 X:	Because of this if he said he would show me where power lies, I'm ready for you//	0014 X:	{no nti de[ ]b[kyer[ me no, power lies na ]b[kyer[ me no, I'm ready for you//

The extract above seems to suggest that X has an unforgiving spirit. His utterances appear to be antithetical as they parody the teaching of his Master Jesus Christ: “No one invites troubles to himself/herself and goes scot free” instead of “Come unto me with your troubles (problems) and I will set you free” (Matthew 11: 28, *paraphrase*). The issuance of the counter-threats by the prophet and his team is further accentuated by the number of interruptions in their dialogue. Contrary to the general belief that interrupting an interlocutor on the floor of conversation shows rudeness usually in dyadic relationships (Hutchby, 2008), some studies have shown that this same act in some instances depicts the readiness and attentiveness of members in a group about a subject matter. For instance, Coker (2011b) has demonstrated the relevance of this assertion among four female students involved in a group discussion in an English-medium university in Ghana. Like these females, the pastors interrupted one another in an attempt to cooperate in unleashing missiles of threats at their target, X although the relationship involved in the interaction was two-fold: horizontal and vertical. On the horizontal plane, it involved talking out of

turn among colleague associate pastors, and on the vertical axis, these pastors sometimes interrupted their superior, that is, X, when he held the floor, and vice versa.

*A challenge to a physical fight*

As would be expected, the counter-threats from the prophet and his team culminated into a challenge to a physical fight. The following provides an illustration.

<b>Excerpt 5</b>			you in this town. The things he is saying are very serious.
050 X:	Can you disgrace somebody in this town?	050 X:	Wob[tumi de obi anim ay[ fam w] kurom ha?
052 AP2:	If you joke, it will be physical indeed	052 AP2:	S[ wodi agor] a, physical paa
	Master, we will not give chance at all	054 AP2:	Y[remma chance koraa massa
056 AP1:	If today, you and your people try to come out in the afternoon	056 AP1:	Enn[ wob] mm]dem pae awia paa a, wone wo nkor]fo]
059: AP2	If you joke, master, you will see how we will deal with	059 AP2:	Modi agor] a massa dwuma a y[b[di mo w] kurom hano. Ns[m a [rek] so no ano y[ den.

At this stage the call to a physical brawl becomes clearer. We see a display of defiance for both the laws of the country and vocation these men of God have chosen for themselves. Perhaps, X have forgotten that ... the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of truth and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will (2 Timothy 2: 24-26, New International Version)

Again, this display of bravery and bravado by the prophet and his men is characteristic of gangsters or street talk. They challenge Y to avail himself so they could put up a fearless fight. Note that they describe the proposed brawl as one that would be physically tactical. In other words, the fight would be bloody and monstrous, and that no party should take chances.

**Conclusion**

This study has revealed that flaming and verbal aggression is not absent in sermonic discourse. The analysis has also shown that flaming manifests itself either in overt or covert ways. In whatever forms they appear and for whatever illocutionary effects, invectives are usually out of place in the profession of preachers. Future research in flaming in sermonic discourse in such areas as sociolinguistics and pragmatics will therefore be useful in order to illuminate our understanding of foul language amongst men and women who profess to be the oracles of God.

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