



## Semantically Incorrect? An Overview of some Akan Constructions

George Appiah

Department of Modern Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi  
Appiahgeorge95@yahoo.com

Charles Ofoosu Marfo

Department of Modern Languages, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi  
cmarfo@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

The use of particular constructions in Akan may be regarded as semantically incorrect through Feature Theory (e.g. Kaplan & Bresnan (1982)) and (semantic) feature analysis (e.g. Dalrymple *et al.* (1995), (Aitchison 2002)); i.e. they fail to conform to some semantic restrictions. We observe that, normally, this incorrectness is due to clash of features. In this paper, we identify some of such constructions in Akan, descriptively analyze them in terms of feature analysis, and proceed to provide the correct forms per proper feature description. Drawing clues from aspects of ethnography of communication theory (e.g. Gumperz (1972), Saville-Troike (2003)), however, we also strive to argue for the fact that these semantically incorrect or questionable constructions are accepted by the speakers of the language and that a semantic-defined yardstick cannot always solely be the determining factor of what is appropriate or not.

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Argument, Competence, Polarity, Semantic features, Tautology, Well-formedness

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## INTRODUCTION

The ultimate purpose of communication is the realization of an **understanding** between interlocutors whenever messages are conveyed and received. Often, these messages in any language at all are in the form of phrases and sentences, the seeds of which are words. In connection with semantic restrictions, specifically semantic feature specifications of individual words, the use of particular expressions in a language may be regarded as semantically and often grammatically incorrect. This incorrectness is often explained as due to a clash of certain semantic features or the same feature. For instance, in the English examples in (1) below, (1a) and (1b) are described as grammatically correct and incorrect respectively because of the representation of the same tense in the two verbs. In other words, the tense value of past (i.e. [+PAST] in feature terms) – a feature that should be realized in only 'do' (to become 'did') as in (1a) – clashes in (1b); i.e. in 'did' and 'came'.

- (1) a. Kofi **did** not come.  
\* b. Kofi **did** not **came**.

In this paper, we identify and look into certain expression in Akan that contain or exhibit some of these clashed semantic features and for which reason they are considered as having violated semantic order of grammar. It is important however to know that, while per their understanding of the individual words of Akan many speakers of the language could observe these feature clashes that should have describe them as incorrect or wrong, they do not believe that such constructions are incorrect at all. Many speakers of the language we spoke to explained that such supposed ill-formed constructions have been commonplace among speakers of the language. What is even more interesting is that, while they could not bring themselves to the understanding that these 'feature-clashed-contained' constructions may be incorrect or wrong forms, they could hardly explain why the constructions should be accepted except the position that these forms are commonplace among speakers of the language.

In this paper, we strive to observe the semantic aspects the said constructions in Akan through the Feature Theory (e.g. Kaplan & Bresnan (1982); Pollard & Sag (1992); Gazdar et al. (1985)), based on which one could suggest the semantic correctness or otherwise of a construction. Further, however, drawing clues from communicative competence (e.g. Gumperz (1972)) in particular and its parent theory ethnography of communication (e.g. Gumperz (1972), Saville-Troike (2003), Matei (2009)), we would attempt to explain that constructions may be acceptable to speakers of a language and would be frequently used by them. In other words, well-formedness could be based on communal (or speech community) acceptance rather than on (feature theory-based) grammaticality test.

The expressions or constructions in Akan that we intend to look into will be descriptively analyzed and, along with semantic feature insight, we will proceed to provide the 'supposed' correct versions or forms, which we believe could trigger more discussion from other scholars of the language in particular and linguists in general. From our analysis, the nuclear meaning of some particular words of the language would properly come to bear in the expressions within which they appear and how the so-called incorrect use of them has rather become the norm would also be explained. It is our belief that our analysis will go a long way to contribute to the preservation the language, explain some sense of language-specific changes that are evolving and ensure some sense of sanity in presentation in the use of in the language. The rest of the paper is organized as follows.

In the immediately following section, we observe the feature theory and its implications in the understanding of word meaning. Some supposed semantically driven ill-formed constructions in Akan and why they could be described as such are discussed in the next section. After that, we focus on aspects of community-based insight, specifically aspects of ethnography of communication, as against semantic restrictions in the observed constructions. The paper is then concluded.

## FEATURE THEORY AND SEMANTIC WELL-FORMEDNESS

In feature-based theories (e.g. Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) (Kaplan & Bresnan (1982); Dalrymple *et al.* (1995)), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) (Pollard & Sag (1992)) and Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (GPSG) (Gazdar et al. (1985)), lexical items are analyzed in terms of minimal semantic features. These features determine the structure of the lexicon. In other words, from the perspective of these theories, semantic knowledge of each member of the lexicon is composed of small units of information – i.e. semantic features (Aitchison 2002). Sekyi-Baidoo (2002) also suggests that language is a social organism and property which is not held to sway by any single individual at random and that individuals speak and make meanings, understand and get understood because they are members of a speech community and therefore share in that common properties through which members communicate to one another. These common properties that are shared by the speech community, he notes, are underscored particularly by a meaning-based system that has come to be called semantic features, which are established through semantic feature analysis.

Appealing to the feature theory, particularly through the semantic feature analysis, as exemplified in (1) with the English language, we emphasize here that normally the correctness or incorrectness of the use of a word in a construction is due to clash of specific semantic features. In Akan, an example of such questionable expressions is with the use of the (adverbial) particles **da** 'never' and **pen** 'ever', which in feature terms could be specified as [-AFFIRMATIVE] or [+NEGATIVE] and [+AFFIRMATIVE] or [-NEGATIVE] respectively. As will be dealt with in detail at various parts of this paper, one could immediately observe in the examples given below in (2) that **da** and **pen** cannot be used interchangeably and that the use of each one of them is captured and indeed guided by a certain semantic feature distribution. That is,



considering polarity, when the verb is in the negative, the particle that also encodes negativity – i.e. *da* – should co-occur with it. On the other hand, where the verb is in the affirmative, the particle that specifies for affirmative – i.e. *pen* – should co-occur with it. This explains the supposed semantic incorrectness of (2a) and (3a) and the correctness of (2b) and (3b). That is to say, in (2a) and (3a), there is a clash of (opposing) features.

- |     |  |    |   |
|-----|--|----|---|
|     | Wrong? <sup>1</sup>  |    | Correct   |
| (2) | a. <b>Kofi a-ka da</b><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>never</b><br>Kofi has said it never           | b. | <b>Kofi a-ka pen</b><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>ever</b><br>Kofi has said it ever.           |
| (3) | a. <b>Kofi n-ka-a pen</b><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>ever</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it ever. | b. | <b>Kofi n-ka-a da</b><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>never</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it never |

The theoretical foundation of the semantic feature analysis is Schema Theory (Rumelhart 1980), and the closely related knowledge hypothesis (Anderson and Freebody 1981), which suggest that knowledge is hierarchically organized. It allows us to decompose words into bundles of attributes in binary terms, such that a particular attribute is either present or not. So, in situations of language use where similarities and/or differences among a group of events, objects or ideas have to be established, semantic feature analysis becomes desirable. That is, it enables us to make predictions and master important concepts as the following example of nouns – *Kofi*, *Afua* (both personal names of one born on Friday) and *ɔkra* 'cat' – in (4) illuminate per the values human, gender, day of birth.

- |      |  |  |   |
|------|--|--|---|
| (4). | a. <b>Kofi</b><br>[+HUMAN]<br>[+MALE]<br>[+FRIDAY] | b. <b>Afua</b><br>[+HUMAN]<br>[–MALE]<br>[+FRIDAY] | c. <b>ɔkra</b><br>[–HUMAN]<br>? [±MALE] |
|------|--|--|---|

In our bid to ascertain the semantic correctness (and for that matter grammaticality) of the constructions in Akan in question, therefore, we employ the semantic feature analysis. For instance, revisiting example in (2) and (3), the negative and the affirmative concepts encoded in *da* and *pen* respectively are given in feature terms as [+NEG(ATIVE)] and [–NEG(ATIVE)]. This polarity are clearly explored in (5) and (6) below and in connection with the polar specification that pertains in the verb and on the basis of which an expression is describe as semantically correct or incorrect (or, to put it mildly, as semantically acceptable expression or semantically questionable expression).

- |     |  |    |  |
|-----|--|----|--|
|     | Wrong?   |    | Correct  |
| (5) | a. <b>Kofi a-ka<sup>[-NEG]</sup> da<sup>[+NEG]</sup></b><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>never</b> .<br>I have said it never           | b. | <b>Kofi a-ka<sup>[-NEG]</sup> pen<sup>[-NEG]</sup></b><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>ever</b> .<br>I have said it ever             |
| (6) | a. <b>Kofi n-ka-a<sup>[+NEG]</sup> pen<sup>[-NEG]</sup></b><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>ever</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it ever. | b. | <b>Kofi n-ka-a<sup>[+NEG]</sup> da<sup>[+NEG]</sup></b><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>never</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it never. |

We observe that the expressions in (5a) and (6a) are incorrect or wrong (as marked) in terms of clash of feature; i.e. NEG (negative) being present and absent in the same expression.<sup>2</sup> One could then say that this sentence and the likes cannot be in the affirmative and negative at the same time.

As has been noted earlier, it is interesting to reiterate here that, just like other constructions that will be brought into discussion in this paper, these expressions are attested in the language, and that is why we are cautious not to describe them as ungrammatical but mildly as semantically incorrect in terms semantic feature specifications. Following this, one is tempted to ask whether these attested but semantically incorrect constructions are due to language change, a position we will suggest through communicative competence and its parent or associate theory of ethnography of communication..

## SOME MORE SEMANTICALLY QUESTIONABLE EXPRESSIONS IN AKAN

In this section, examples of some semantically questionable expressions, including the adverbial particle-involved one we have noted already, are observed and discussed. Specifically three (3) categories of them based on the nature of the supposed ill-formedness each of them exhibits are discussed. These are category I: Ill-formed argument structure, category II: tautology-based ill-formedness and category III: ill-formedness based on *da-pen* polarity.

### Category I: Ill-formed argument structure

<sup>1</sup> '?' indicates native-speakers reservation as to the incorrectness of the constructions.

<sup>2</sup> Observe that this is an opposite case to the English case exemplified in (1); i.e., whiles in Akan the constituents involved (i.e. the verb and its adverbial particle) should both inflect or specify for a common feature value, in the English case, the auxiliary verb and the main verb should not specify for same tense value. In any of them, however, we suggest that there is an expression of feature clash based on language specificity.



The semantically questionable expression here has to do with agentive verbs that are also stative in nature and the kind of subject argument they take. For the fact that they are agentive verbs, we observe that these verbs with the specification of [+AGENT] in Akan require subject (argument) functions that specify for the feature [+ANIMATE] – i.e. a subject that could perform the action the verb in question is supposed to express according to the conception of that verb by native speakers of a speech community.<sup>3</sup> Even more appropriate, some of the subjects of these verbs should specify for the feature [+HUMAN]. That is to say, these verbs need subject functions of these specifications to express the desired or optimal meaning.

Some of the agentive (or [+AGENT]) verbs here are *kuta* 'to hold', *so(a)* 'to carry' and *hye* 'to wear'. So, as exemplified (7) below, we suggest that the expressions in (7a) are semantically questionable or, as noted earlier, incorrect considering the feature specifications of the subjects (i.e. [-HUMAN]) of the verbs, which specify for [+AGENT]. Considering the feature specification of the subjects in (7b) on the other hand, the sentences are semantically sound and/or correct.<sup>4</sup> In other words, with these verbs, the subject function should specify for [+HUMAN].

| (7)  | *a   | b   |
|------|--|---|
| i.   | <b>Sekan</b> <sup>[-ANIMATE]</sup> <b>kuta</b> <b>Yaw</b><br>Cutlass hold.Stat. Yaw<br>Cutlass is holding Yaw.                     | <b>Yaw</b> <sup>[+ANIMATE]</sup> <b>kuta</b> <b>sekan</b><br>Yaw holds.Stat. cutlass<br>Yaw is holding cutlass. |
| ii.  | <b>Ɔkra</b> <sup>[-HUMAN]</sup> <b>no</b> <b>kuta</b> <b>sekan</b><br>Cat DEF. hold.Stat. cutlass<br>The cat is holding a cutlass. |   |
| iii. | <b>Nnooma</b> <sup>[-HUMAN]</sup> <b>so</b> <b>Kofi</b><br>Load carry.Stat. Kofi<br>Load is carrying Kofi                          | <b>Kofi</b> <sup>[+HUMAN]</sup> <b>so</b> <b>nnooma</b><br>Kofi carry.Stat. loads<br>Kofi is carrying a load    |
| iv.  | <b>Ataadeɛ</b> <sup>[-ANIMATE]</sup> <b>hye</b> <b>Ɔsee</b><br>Cloth wear.Stat. Osei<br>Cloth is wearing Osei                      | <b>Ɔsee</b> <sup>[+ANIMATE]</sup> <b>hye</b> <b>Ataadeɛ</b><br>Osei wear.Stat. cloth<br>Osei is wearing cloth.  |

In short, one could realize that the subject functions of the sentences (7b) are animate and, specifically, human which have what it takes – e.g. physiological organs like the hand and, in the case of human, intellect – to perform the agentive role that the verbs encode; i.e. *kuta* 'holding', *soa* 'carrying' and *hye* 'wearing'.

## Category II: Tautology-based Ill-formedness

The semantically questionable construction under this category has to do with the representation of a concept in the verb, which is inherently or etymologically expressed or captured by an argument function of the verb already; i.e. repetition of same concept in a verb and its function, specifically the object function in the case of Akan. We observe some of examples as follows.

| 7.   | *a  | b   |
|------|---|---|
| i.   | <b>Kofi re-kye nkyenam.</b><br>Kofi Prog.-fry fried-meat<br>Kofi is frying fried-meat.                    | <b>Kofi rekye enam.</b><br>Kofi Prog.-fry meat<br>Kofi is frying meat.                  |
| ii.  | <b>Toto/dwo borɔdedwo ma me.</b><br>roast.Imp. roasted-plantain give me<br>Roast roasted-plantain for me. | <b>Toto/dwo borɔdeɛ ma me.</b><br>roast.Imp. plantain give me<br>Roast plantain for me. |
| iii. | <b>Yaa be-noa nsuohyee.</b><br>Yaa Fut.-cook hot-water<br>Yaa will heat hot-water.                        | <b>Yaa be-noa nsuo.</b><br>Yaa Fut.-cook water<br>Yaa will heat -water.                 |
| iv.  | <b>Ye-a-wɔ fufuo.</b><br>1Pl.-Prf.-pound fufu<br>We have pounded fufu.                                    | <b>Ye-a-wɔ aduane.</b><br>1Pl.-Prf.-pound food<br>We have pounded food.                 |

Just as we saw with the *Category I* sentences or expressions, the sentences here under (7a) are syntactically correct, just as those in (7b). However, through the spectacles of our semantic feature analysis, the issue of semantic correctness becomes paramount. There is a semantic difference between (7a) and (7b) in the sense that one cannot disregard the expression of tautology contained in the sentences under (7a). In other words, unlike those under (7b), they are semantically anomalous and are therefore incorrect in the strictest sense of feature analysis. Of course, as we have also

<sup>3</sup> By agentive verbs, we mean verbs that actually require their subject functions to have the semantic role of Agent, particularly agents that have intellect and conscience to perform.

<sup>4</sup> As could also be seen in (7), note that Akan is rigidly a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) language in the basic clause.



earlier noted, the sentences in (7a) are commonplace among the speakers of the language. So, perhaps, we cannot entirely describe them as incorrect.

Explaining the semantic incorrectness of the data under (7a), however, we observe with (7a (i)) for examples that, indeed, in the conceptualization of the word *kye* 'to fry' in Akan, what has already been fried cannot be re-fried (or fried-fried). In other words, *kye* in the word *nkyenam* 'friend meat' specifies for the feature [+FRIED] (and/or [+DONE]). Explaining further, it could therefore be argued that, all things being equal, what has been fried is not expected to be friend again; rather it may be heated or warmed, which is captured by the phrasal verb *ka ... hye* 'to heat' or 'to warm'. So, the sentence **Kofi reka nkyenam hye**, as glossed in (8) would have been more appropriate and for that matter semantically correct.

- (8) **Kofi re-ka nkyenam hye.**  
 Kofi Prog.-warm fried-meat warm  
 Kofi is warming the (fried-) meat.

### Category III: Ill-formedness based on da-pɛn polarity

As looked at in sections 2, the use of *da* 'never' and *pɛn* 'ever' could also evolve semantically questionable construction if they are not used well. We noted that while *da* specifies for [+NEG] in feature terms, *pɛn* also specifies for [-NEG] and that the semantically questionable constructions that their uses may bring about are due to clash of features between them – i.e. either [+NEG] or [-NEG] – and the verb's inflection for polarity; i.e. negative or affirmative. Examples to illustrate this case were given in section 2, which are given again below as (9) and (10) for ease of reference. That is to say, in this case, there must be [+NEG]-[+NEG] in verb-adverbial particle correspondence as in (10b) or [-NEG]-[-NEG] in verb-adverbial particle correspondence as in (10a) in order to realize semantic well-formedness.

- |    |    |  |    |   |
|----|----|--|----|---|
|    |    | Wrong?   |    | Correct   |
| 9  | a. | <b>Kofi a-ka</b> <sup>[-NEG]</sup> <b>da</b> <sup>[+NEG]</sup><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>never</b> .<br>Kofi has said it never.        | b. | <b>Kofi a-ka</b> <sup>[-NEG]</sup> <b>pɛn</b> <sup>[-NEG]</sup><br>Kofi Perf-say <b>ever</b> .<br>Kofi has said it ever.          |
| 10 | a. | <b>Kofi n-ka-a</b> <sup>[+NEG]</sup> <b>pɛn</b> <sup>[-NEG]</sup><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>ever</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it ever. | b. | <b>Kofi n-ka-a</b> <sup>[+NEG]</sup> <b>da</b> <sup>[+NEG]</sup><br>Kofi Neg.-say-Perf <b>never</b><br>Kofi hasn't said it never. |

### SEMANTICS-DEFINED OR COMMUNITY-DEFINED?

It has already been observed several times that the supposed semantically incorrect forms, as given above, are commonplace. During a fieldwork mission purposely to look into this, we observed that these forms are commonplace because they are the forms speakers have become used to, although respondents admitted the supposed semantically correct forms are not reclusive either. We contend that, the use of the semantically questionable forms by speakers follows from the fact that when one learns a language, one uses it in order to attain certain goals, particularly for communication. If forms one learns are what are made available to him or her and with which those certain goals are attained, then one would obviously maximize benefits here by speaking what is being spoken to him or her as the socially acceptable form. Indeed, as in the cases we have pointed out, one would use these socially acceptable forms despite certain linguistic (competence) restrictions they may violate. We suggest that this phenomenon could be captured by communicative competence as Gumperz (1972) explains it against linguistic competence as follows.

"Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes his ability to select, from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters."

Gumperz (1972: 205)

Following the above quote from Gumperz (1972), we explain that it is one thing to learn a particular language, but it is quite another to learn how to do a specific thing in and with that language; e.g. asking for something or how something is done in a particular language. To do the first – i.e. to learn a particular language – you need a certain linguistics competence, but to do the latter – i.e. to learn how to do a specific thing in and with that language – you need communicative competence. Following Gumperz, we also suggest that more is involved in achieving communicative competence than learning how to construct sentences. Hymes (2001) also suggests that there are several sectors of communicative competence, of which the grammatical is just one. He continues that judgments are said to be of two kinds in linguistic theory; of grammaticality (with respect to competence) and of acceptability (with respect to performance). These insights require that explicit distinctions are made within the notion of 'acceptability'. Hymes (2001: 63) then suggests the following four distinctions for language and for other forms of communication as follows.

- Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
- Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.



Among the four distinctions, the last two – i.e. (c) and (d) – are significant to us and to the present analysis. From (c) and (d), one could understand why the semantically questionable forms are commonplace among the speakers of the language. That is to say, with distinction (c), we explain that based on whatever context, for instance in relation to speech community based register (rather than semantic-defined restriction) and on the basis of which they are widely evaluated as correct, we should defined them as acceptable and for that matter correct. Also, considering distinction (d), it could be explained that because the so-called semantically questionable forms are widely spoken or performed and their imports are clearly understood, we should defined them as acceptable and for that matter correct. From these insights, it seems pretty sound to suggest that the acceptance of the semantically questionable forms by the speakers of the language is not far-fetched. Indeed, from the perspective of the theories of language change, they could also be described as aspects of semantic change in Akan. Indeed, Ahmad (2000) on nonce-formation and its institutionalization observes that a speaker may consciously invent or accidentally produce a word and where it is adopted by the speech community into the language, by definition, it ceases to be 'nonce'.<sup>5</sup> Following Ahmad, since the supposed semantically questionable constructions in Akan are generally accepted by the language's speech community, they could be ceased from being described as such.

Also, from the perspective of ethnography of communication (e.g. Gumperz (1972), Saville-Troike (2003), Matei (2009)), which subsumes communicative competence, one could explain the acceptance of the semantically questionable forms. Saville-Troike (2003) defines ethnography of communication as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group or what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community. In other words, research here presupposes the acknowledgement of the inextricable link between language and the extra-linguistic or socio-cultural context (Matei 2009). It is not concerned simply with language structure, but language use, with rules of speaking, the ways in which speakers link particular language topics, modes of speaking, message forms and registers with particular socio-cultural settings. That is to say, besides linguistic competence, other competences like communicative competence also matter. Matei (2009) further observes a wide range of communicative behavior among which is how language is used in real situations with particular reference to a speech community and communicative competence. Thus, the acceptance of a form or, in the present case, a sentence should not always be determined only by purely linguistic benchmarks but by socio-cultural determinants as well; e.g. general acceptance by a speech community.

## CONCLUSION

We have looked at three categories of constructions in Akan – i.e. ill-formed argument structure, category, tautology-based ill-formedness and category, ill-formedness based on *da-pen* polarity – in terms of semantic status correctness or appropriateness and, in the spirit of the Feature Theory, with which the attributes of individual units (in this case, words) are comprehensively spelt out through analysis and in the present case, semantic feature analysis. We have observed that, although these constructions could be attested in the everyday use of the language, considering the semantic feature analysis we have made, clearly, they are or they could be rendered semantically questionable and indeed be described as such. Accordingly, this paper has questioned the correctness and acceptability of these constructions in Akan. Through feature analysis, it has been suggested that, normally, the incorrectness or otherwise of a construction is due to clash of features and/or incorrect distribution of these features.

Through ethnography of communication and communicative competence, however, we have also observed why these (so-called) semantically ill or questionable constructions are accepted by the speakers of the language. Accordingly, it has been contended that semantic-defined yardsticks cannot always solely determine what is correct and/or acceptable or not. We believe we have opened Pandora's box by raising issues on the correctness of the constructions we have observed in Akan. However, we also believe that we have set the stage for variously analysis of them, which would all contribute to an exhaustive and comprehensive look at them and other 'provocative' constructions in the language.

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<sup>5</sup> A nonce word has variously been described as a linguistic form which a speaker consciously invents or accidentally does on a single occasion; e.g. see Crystal (1977).



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### Authors' biography with Photo



**George Appiah** is currently an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana. He possesses M.Phil in Applied Linguistics from the University of Education, Winneba, B.Ed Akan from the same university and a 3-year Teacher Certificate 'A' from the Ofinso Training College. His research interests include aspects of sociolinguistics, language change and Akan oral literature.



**Charles Ofori Marfo** graduated from the University of Hong Kong with Ph.D in Linguistics. He also has M.Phil in Linguistics from the University of Tromsø in Norway and B.A. (hons.) from the University of Ghana. He is currently a senior lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Ghana. He has had a stint as a Visiting Professor at University of Potsdam and University of Hong Kong. His research interests include various aspects of language and communication. He also enjoys commenting on socio-political and other national issues in the media, particularly on radio.