Emotions and the Body in Twi

Across the world's languages, the body is invoked to describe emotional states (Owiredu, 2021; Ponsonnet, 2014). In Twi, several emotions are primarily expressed using verbal phrases in which a specific body part takes on the subject role, while others are expressed with ho constructions in which the entirety of body/self is invoked as the subject, occasionally with the person experiencing the emotion taking on the role of the object. By examining these Twi constructions in comparison with other languages, we can gain new understanding about the commonalities in emotional expression across cultures as well as the diverse manners of expressing the relationship between ourselves, our bodies, and our emotions.

Asante Twi is one of twelve mutually intelligible dialects of the Akan language. It is spoken primarily in Ghana and in neighboring Côte D’Ivoire. The language has millions of first and second language speakers; nearly half of Ghana's 24 million citizens belong to the Akan ethnolinguistic group (Dzokoto et al., 2018). The language consultant on this project is Rosia Aning, an undergraduate student at Western Washington University who is studying Law and French. Asante Twi is her first language, and she uses it daily in conversation with family and friends from Ghana.

The body is invoked in many emotional expressions in Twi. Several emotions, including anger, sadness and shame, are primarily expressed using idiomatic body phrases which pair a body part with an action or state. Some of these verbal phrases can be easily understood as expressions of the somatic reactions that our bodies have to various emotional states. For example, to express anger, one literally says in Twi that their ‘chest grows’ (1), using the verb *afu[[1]](#footnote-17377)* (to grow),which can also describe the growing of hair, trees, flowers, etc. This depiction is logically linked to the physiological effects of anger: the increased heart rate and blood pressure which can cause one’s chest to feel as if it were swelling and becoming larger (Hendricks et al., 2013).

(1) Me bo afu

1s.POSS chest grows

‘I am angry/upset/mad’, literally ‘my chest grows’

(2) Me tiri nwi afu

1s.POSS head hair grows

‘My head hair grows’

The origin of other emotion idioms in Twi is less clear as their strictly compositional meanings appear less linked to obvious somatic reactions. For instance, to describe the feeling of happiness one uses the verbal phrase “my eyes take.” Like in *me bo afu* (my chest grows)*,* the verb used here is also found in non-emotional contexts, but interestingly these contexts reveal it to be a transitive verb (4) and so (3) seems to leave one wondering what exactly one’s eyes are taking. It may be that in emotional contexts the *gye* verb takes on a different transitivity/aspect. This process has been demonstrated to occur with verbs in a related Akan language when they are used in emotional idioms (Ansah, 2011).

* 1. m'- -ani- -a- -gyeɛ

1s.POSS- -eyes- -ASP- -take

‘I am happy’, literally ‘My eyes take’

* 1. gye sika no

Take money DET

‘Take the money’

In addition to these body-part expressions there exist in Twi other structures for emotional expression which invoke the entirety of the body/self as the subject, using the word *ho* (one’s self or body). Some emotions are expressed using a copula construction to describe how one’s body/self is: *me ho yɛ (*I’m fine, literally ‘My self/body is’). Intensifier particles *paa* and *papaapa* can be added to the end of the phrase to intensify the meaning to ‘I’m doing well’ and ‘I am really really well’ respectively.

* 1. Me ho yɛ

1s.POSS body/self is

‘I’m fine’

To express other emotions such as sickness, frustration, and apprehension/dread one’s *ho* is once again invoked as the subject, but this time the predicate includes a direct object: the person experiencing the emotion. Thus, the structure of these emotion expressions conveys the sense that the body/self is doing something to the person.

* 1. Me ho n- -fa me

1s.POSS body/self NEG- -take/bring 1s.OBJ

‘I am sick', Literally: 'my body is not bringing/taking me'

* 1. Me ho re teetee me

1s.POSS body/self PROG frustrates 1s.OBJ

‘I am frustrated/worried’ ‘my body/self worries/frustrates me’

These *ho* forms as well as the previous body part expressions firmly house emotion in the body, either in a distributive (anger in the chest, happiness in the eyes) sense or in a holistic sense (frustration as an action your body perpetrates on you). Twi can use another structure to retain this link made between emotion and the body while placing the individual back in the subject position so that the act of feeling/perceiving the emotional state is attributed to the person as a whole. The resulting nested forms are more dramatic expressions of emotion according to our consultant and express the sense that one feels, or feels in their body, a certain emotion. Interestingly, not all emotions can be felicitously paired with these nesting forms. A survey and analysis of these use restrictions could be an interesting focus for future study.

* 1. me te nka sɛ me ani- -gye

1s.NOM hear emotions COMP 1s.POSS eyes take

‘I feel happy’, literally ‘I feel that my eyes take’

* 1. Me- -te nka sɛ me ho n- -fa me

1s.NOM-hear emotions REL 1s.POSS body/self NEG-take/bring 1s.OBJ

‘I feel that I am sick’, literally ‘I feel that my body is not taking/bringing me’

(10) Me- -te nka wɔ me nnipadua mu sɛ me bo afu

1s.NOM-hear emotions are 1s.POSS body in COMP 1s.POSS chest grows

The use of body terminology in emotional expression is common across languages (Huang 2002), however the ways in which that body/emotion connection manifests in each individual language are unique and can provide different perspectives on the human emotional experience. For example, Twi’s tendency to assign emotional agency to the body rather than the individual (by putting a body part or one’s *ho* in the subject position) appears to portray certain emotions as states enacted upon us by our bodies or *ho*’s. This portrayal rings true for many who struggle with depression or anxiety, for whom it often feels like there is an antagonistic force acting upon them from within (Lawson, 2021). More research on this topic could investigate to what degree these linguistic forms correlate with sociocultural perspectives on emotion in Twi-speaking communities.

Citations

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1. Twi data is presented in the standard orthography. [↑](#footnote-ref-17377)