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Twisting Traditional Proverbs to Suit a Pandemic Situation: A Study of COVID-19 Postproverbials among the Nzema

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Abstract

Based on the theoretical assumptions of ethno-pragmatics, this study examined some “twisted” proverbial expressions used to offer advice to members of the Nzema society to adhere to the COVID-19 preventive measures. Drawing on primary data recorded during discourse situations among people in a number of Nzema communities, the study aimed to explore and highlight the specific advisory functions of the COVID-19 postproverbials. The findings revealed that the Nzema people consciously and strategically employed such radical proverbial expressions to inform members to be mindful of the presence of the virus. Crucially, they resorted to such expressions to persuade people to adhere to the protocols, such as staying indoors (the lockdown experience), wearing of face masks, regular washing of hands, and the use of hand sanitisers. The study found some metaphoric conceptualisations of COVID-19, such as COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY, COVID-19 IS A MERCILESS HUNTER, and COVID-19 IS A CONTAGIOUS AGENT. This study indicates that the Nzema people used figurative and persuasive language in advising members to adhere to the measures that were laid down to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Ghana.

Keywords: communication; COVID-19; ethno-pragmatics; Nzema culture; postproverbials

1. Introduction

Nzema is a Kwa language spoken in the south-west part of the western region of Ghana, West Africa. The dialectal components of Nzema are *Dwɔmɔɔɔ*, *Elɛmgbɛɛ*, *Adwɔmɔɔɔ*, *Egila*, and *Evaloɛ* (Kwaw 2008). Among these, *Dwɔmɔɔɔ* Nzema is recognised as the standard dialect; it is studied from the basic to tertiary level of education in Ghana (Nyame 2019). The people (speakers of Nzema) are also called “Nzema.” According to Ghana’s 2021 population and housing census, the total number of Nzema stands at 342 090 (Ghana Statistical Service 2021). Most of the Nzema population are farmers who engage in subsistence agriculture (Yakub 2022). Some also engage in fishing, since Nzemaland stretches along the coast. Aside from farming activities, the people also take delight in trading to supplement their livelihood.

Studies have shown that the Nzema people, like other African cultures, use proverbs profusely in their social interactions (Ibrahim et al. 2022; Yakub 2023). As people who are culturally conscious and communicatively competent, the Nzema rely on their environment, experiences, and life trajectories to compose proverbial expressions to educate, encourage, console, persuade, advise, warn, or admonish people (Yakub 2023). As one might expect, they formulated a number of radical proverbs (newly-formed proverbial expressions) to advise members during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, I explored ways in which Nzema proverbs were altered to communicate cautionary messages relating to COVID-19 prevention.

In March 2020, when the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, Ghana placed restrictions on face-to-face teaching and learning and social gatherings, and subsequently closed her borders. The president of the republic of Ghana regularly updated the citizenry on the nation’s COVID-19 situation, and how Ghanaians were coping with the virus in order to strengthen the possible measures to combat it. By way of enforcing adherence to the various safety protocols, the Nzema people “twisted” some of their traditional proverbs to suit the COVID-19 pandemic for advisory purposes. This study examined a collection of such expressions used among Nzema-speakers to create awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic and how the virus could be curtailed.

Following Aragbuwa (2020) and Raji-Oyelade (1999, 2022), this study focused on what I have described as “COVID-19 postproverbial expressions” that were carefully crafted by speakers of Nzema in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The concept of “postproverbial,” as Raji-Oyelade (2022, 226) observes, “is derived from the phenomenon of twisting and extending the forms of the conventional [indigenous] proverbs.” According to Raji-Oyelade (2022, 226), “postproverbial” is a reference to both the theory and practice of “proverbial transformations”—a term that is an apparent parallel to the term “anti-proverb,” which was initially espoused and popularised by the works of Mieder and Litovkina (1999) and Mieder (2007). Raji-Oyelade (1999, 76) considers postproverbials “as parallel, modernist recreations that are derived from and exist side-by-side in rather equal phonocentric status with traditional proverbs.” Thus,

“postproverbials or supplementary proverbs can be defined as alternate creations derived from traditional proverbs” (Raji-Oyelade 1999, 75). They are seen as a playful blasphemy, and are associated with cultural dynamism (Raji-Oyelade 1999, 2012, 2013). From the Yoruba cultural context, Raji-Oyelade (1999) exemplifies postproverbial constructions in (1b) and (2b) and their original proverbs in (1a) and (2a) as presented below:

(1a) *Eni t’òjìn sí kòtò, kó ará iyókù lógbón*

“He who falls into a pit, is a lesson to others.”

(1b) *Eni t’òjìn sí kòtò, ojú è ló fò*

“He who falls into a pit is blind.”

(2a) *Òwú iyá gbòn, l’pmp ó ran*

“The cotton that the mother harvests is what the child would spin.”

(2b) *Òwú iyá gbòn, yó fí hunsoni*

“The cotton that the mother harvests, she would use to weave cloth.”

Commenting specifically on the proverbial expressions in example (2), Raji-Oyelade (1999, 80) contends that while the traditional proverb (2a) employs textile imagery to speak about inheritance and filiation, its postproverbial other (2b) simply focuses on procedure or sequence in textile technology.

Among the Nzema, the specific proverbs attributed to COVID-19 also constitute twisted or distorted versions of existing traditional proverbs. They are alternate proverbial forms (with a modernist touch) meant to supplant conventional proverbs in a resistive manner, and may therefore be called supplementary proverbs.¹ These radical proverbial expressions emerged as a way of persuading inhabitants of the Nzema society to take cognisance of the deadly virus, and to strictly observe the various preventive measures in order to overcome the pandemic. This study sought to highlight the ethno-pragmatic import of the existing proverbs, and to show how these are communicated in the radical expressions which were aimed at entreating listeners to abide by the preventive protocols that were laid down to curtail the spread of COVID-19.

2. COVID-19 and Previous Studies

“COVID-19 stands for Coronavirus Disease 2019, a transmittable respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus which first broke out in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, on November 17, 2019” (Raji-Oyelade 2022, 225). Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19 affected the global world, several studies have been conducted

1 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out to me this additional insight in describing the COVID-19 “postproverbials” among the Nzema.

concerning, for instance, encounters in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Csajbok-Twerefou and Lomotey 2021), public messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic (Koller 2021), the way in which people created humour around the pandemic, despite its associated danger (Marfo et al. 2021; Ofori et al. 2024), how COVID-19 male survivors expressed their fear and anxiety (Diabah et al. 2021), how COVID-19 safety protocols are framed in Kusaal music health communication (Abubakari et al. 2021), and how the COVID-19 pandemic was metaphorically conceptualised as war (Quainoo and Ansah 2021; Sarfo-Kantanka et al. 2021).

Owing to limited space, an in-depth overview of the existing literature on COVID-19 is not provided here. However, Raji-Oyelade's (2022) study closely relates to the present study and thus needs some highlighting. Raji-Oyelade (2022) discussed a range of radical sayings derived almost directly from traditional proverbs from a number of African languages. He presented pairs of proverbial sayings, for example, proverb (a) and proverb (b). As organised, each pair of proverbs analysed contained the conventional proverb and the postproverbial retort engendered by the disease. The study showed that, in the basic structural pattern of the postproverbial act, a part of the conventional proverb—clause, phrase, or lexis—is suspended and replaced by a newly-extracted clause, phrase, or lexis which directly presents the coronavirus as an agent. In other constructions, the conventional proverbs remained intact, but were supplemented by a postproverbial retort. The set of COVID-19 postproverbials examined by Raji-Oyelade (2022) were evidenced to be verbal reflections on the reality of the pandemic—the experience of lockdown, social distancing, and hygiene, as well as the invocation and reification of the morbid potential and presence of the virus in the community. As Raji-Oyelade emphasised, the lockdown was the first major regulatory act of governments and attendant upon it were other restrictions including self-isolation, quarantine, face-masking and social/physical distancing. In illustrating how some radical proverbs were “invented” from conventional Yoruba, Ibibio, and Igbo proverbs to advise people to adhere to the lockdown imposition, Raji-Oyelade (2022, 230–231) presented examples (3), (4), and (5), respectively:

3 (a) *Ibi orí dá'ni sí làá gbé.*

“A man's home is where he should reside.”

3 (b) *Ibi orí dá'ni sí làá gbé, núí gba'ni l'ówọọ àtánkálẹ̀ kòrò.*

“A man's home is where he should reside. Thus, one is saved from the spread of coronavirus.”

4 (a) *Akpa sangha isang isi diagha se mbon ufok edia.*

“The one who walks about does not eat what those at home consume.”

4 (b) *Akpa sangha isang abi m^m COVID-19.*

“It is the one who walks about that will contract COVID-19.”

5 (a) *Ukwu n'aga wam wam wam marakwa na anya n'aga wam wam wam na eleya.*

“The leg that walks about should know that the eye that looks around is watching it.”

5 (b) *Ukwu n'aga wam wam wam mara kwa na COVID-19 na eche ya.*

“The leg that walks about should know that COVID-19 is waiting for it.”

In examples (3–5), the expressions in (a) are the conventionally established proverbs, whereas the newly-created proverbs appear in (b). In example (3), for instance, as Raji-Oyelade (2022, 230) points out, “the conventional saying is a philosophical reference to the destiny as well as the contentment of a person who must submit to the natural order of birth.” Inferring from this, the postproverbial retort indicates the need for a person to stay within their location in order to be protected from the deadly virus (Raji-Oyelade 2022). “The sense of the spiritual (fate) in the first proverb is replaced by the sense of the physical (home) in the prosthetic proverb. This truly is a lockdown postproverbial” (Raji-Oyelade 2022, 230). In example (5), while the original proverb (a) talks about the adventurous nature of a person, the postproverbial (b) points to the adverse consequence of roaming carelessly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taking significant insights from Raji-Oyelade’s (2022) study, the present study contributes to our understanding of Nzema proverbs and proverbial expressions in relation to how the Nzema people “strategised” through figurative language to ensure effective adherence to the COVID-19 preventive modes.

3. Proverbs among the Nzema

Proverbs are witty sayings that reflect the world-view of a people. They are an embodiment of a certain group’s beliefs, values, and mores; a watchdog of public morality (Ademowo and Balogun 2015, 14). As an oral genre, proverbs form part of the cultural heritage of the Nzema people (Yakub and Owu-Ewie 2023). They are based on the words or wisdom of the elderly, which are transmissible across generations. Quarm and Kwesi (1998) and Kwesi (2007) have ascertained that many of the Nzema philosophical principles and values are portrayed via their oral tradition and genres such as riddles, folktales, short stories, dirges, and proverbs—the most prominent one being the proverb. The Nzema garnish their discourses lavishly with proverbs. As Kwesi (2007) and Yakub (2023) observe, hardly would a culturally-oriented and communicatively competent member of the Nzema society utter a few sentences without “injecting” an appropriate proverb into the conversation.

Nyame and Tomekyin (2018, 96) point out that traditional proverbs among the Nzema can undergo—and indeed, some have undergone—“neological developments.” They contend that some recent Nzema proverbs have arisen as a result of the departure from their original forms. Nyame and Tomekyin (2018, 97) illustrate their observation using examples (6a) and (6b) as conventional and contemporary proverbs, respectively:

- 6 (a) *Raale sie boane a nrenyia a pε ye bole a*
 Woman keep sheep PART man FOC cut 3SG price PART
 “If a woman rears a sheep, it is a man who determines how much it should be sold.”
- (b) *Raale ε-n-zie boane na nrenyia ε-m-pε ye bole*
 Woman EMPH-NEG-keep sheep CONJ man EMPH-NEG-cut 3SG price
 “A woman does not rear a sheep for the man to tell the price.”

Nyame and Tomekyin (2018, 94) mention that these Nzema proverbs have come about for several reasons:

Some arise from simple apophthegms and platitudes which over time are raised to the status of a proverb. Others have emerged from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident; some are based on a story or fable, while others are variations of existing proverbs. Others have also come about as a result of things in the environment. Yet, there are others that have come about as a result of the observations of the habits of men and others triggered by the conditions of life.

Gleaning specifically from Nyame and Tomekyin’s (2018, 94) postulation, one observes that the coinage of new proverbs can be “triggered by the conditions of life.” This aptly foregrounds why the Nzema consciously “composed” some recent proverbial expressions in the midst of COVID-19, which were designed to foster efforts to combat the virus by persuading members of the society to adhere to the preventive protocols. The thrust of this study, therefore, was to examine the advisory significance of these radical proverbial expressions in relation to the original forms, and to determine what they sought to tell people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Methods and Theoretical Framework

The article adopted a qualitative research approach with ethnographic design. Hancock and Algozzine (2006, 10) explain an ethnographic study as follows:

A type of qualitative research that investigates intact cultural or social groups to find and describe beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behaviour, language, and interactions of the group. Findings are based primarily on observations by the researcher, who is immersed in the group’s setting for an extended period of time. The researcher observes and records group member’s voices with the goal of creating a cultural portrait.

The above assertion indicates that in ethnographic research, the researcher looks at people in their cultural setting with the aim of producing a narrative account of the behaviours of that particular culture. As a native speaker of Nzema and a cultural insider who has lived with the Nzema people for over 30 years, I had the opportunity to observe the socio-cultural patterns and speech practices of the people for a long period of time. The primary data for this study were gathered based on ethnographic methods, using observations and semi-structured interviews as research instruments. Using a smart

phone, I audio-recorded some naturally occurring speech events among the Nzema people in a number of communities² from June 2020 to September 2021. I obtained the data within this period because this was the period when COVID-19 was on the rise in terms of rapid spread. I sought permission from the discourse participants as a matter of ethics and had the opportunity to record the conversations. However, in a few spontaneous speech contexts, I hand-recorded some of the data incognito, that is, without the knowledge of the interlocutors. Here, my interest as a researcher was only to extract such newly-constructed proverbial expressions that were meant to remind people of the persistent existence (spread) of COVID-19 and its deadly nature. I further conducted semi-structured interviews with four native Nzema scholars who are traditional leaders, and are also competent in the use of proverbs. I contacted the respondents separately in their homes at their convenience and explained the purpose of the interview to them. Each contact lasted about 15–20 minutes. The aim of the interviews was to authenticate the data, and for me to gain significant clarifications on the ethno-pragmatic interpretations of the original proverbs in relation to the postproverbial expressions. The informants comprised two males and two females, aged between 65 and 75 years. I contacted two males and two females because, unlike some other cultures, the Nzema perceive women as also being competent users and interpreters of proverbs. As part of the data analysis procedure, the transcribed and translated data are presented in various excerpts in section 4 to ensure the flow of the analysis.

The study is theoretically based on Goddard’s ethno-pragmatics paradigm to drive the analysis and interpretation of data. The basic tenet of ethno-pragmatics is that speech practices are best understood from the cultural context (Goddard 2006, 2). In other words, ethno-pragmatics is an approach to the study of cultural peculiarities and meaning in language in terms of culturally constructed beliefs or insiders’ perspectives. It focuses on the increasing understanding of discourse in terms of what makes sense to the people concerned (Agyekum 2019; Goddard 2006; Goddard and Ye 2015; Mensah 2023). Duranti (1994) indicates that the “ethno” component of ethno-pragmatics is significant, as it relates to the socio-cultural context of language use, which includes an understanding of specific linguistic activities based on the shared values, beliefs, norms, priorities, and assumptions of speakers, rather than any presumed universals of understanding discourse. Central to ethno-pragmatics is the notion of *cultural scripts*. Wierzbicka (2015, 339) explained that “cultural scripts are representations of cultural beliefs and norms that are widely held in a given society and are reflected in language.” Since the ethno-pragmatic approach emphasises the importance of culturally constitutive ideas in the use of language, this study finds it useful for offering effective

2 I obtained the data from the following Nzema communities: *Ayesakro*, *Edelesuazo*, *Bolɔfo*, *Kegyina*, *Nsein*, *Salman*, *Teleku Bokazo*, and *Yediyesele*. These communities were visited because most of the dwellers are native speakers of Nzema, and these places have road access which enabled me to reach the interactants and observe their discursive strategies concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.

explanations for the conventional Nzema proverbs that were altered during the COVID-19 situation to become suitable for advice-giving.

5. Presentation of Excerpts and Data Analysis

This section covers the analysis of proverbs and postproverbial expressions. The ethnographic contexts as well as the excerpts that contain the use of proverbs are presented. In each excerpt, the original (conventional) proverbs and the postproverbial expressions are bolded, and are numbered as (a) and (b), respectively. The data are categorised based on common themes that emerged as relevant.

5.1 COVID-19 is Highly Contagious

Medical experts indicated that COVID-19 was very contagious. It spreads very quickly and affects many people within a short time. The data revealed that the Nzema relied on some existing proverbs and reconstructed recent proverbial expressions to create awareness of the contagious nature of the virus. Consider the ethnographic background and excerpt in 1.

Excerpt 1

Background: ([At *Yediyesele*, on 6 February 2021]: A man tried to leave home without a face mask. His wife reminded him to wear a mask before leaving. This excerpt illustrates what transpired, indicating the proverbial expressions that were employed.)

Husband *Mekɔ meahɔlie me ezukoa wɔ kpavole ne mɔɔ vilile me kukue ne la lɔ meara kekala.* “I am going to take my money from the gentleman who credited my coconut and be back in a jiffy.”

Wife *Yoo mede, na kemɔti a wɔanva akpolo be bonyi e? Kakye ke bese saa fele ko dɔ sonle a ɔsalo be muala (a); kekala noko sonla ko nyia COVID-19 a ɔsalo ye suanu amra amuala (b).* “Okay, but why haven’t you taken a face mask? Remember the saying that **when a single fish is infected by maggots, all the remaining fish become affected (a);** in the same way, **when one person is infected by COVID-19, the whole household becomes affected (b).**”

Analysis

7 (a)	<i>Fele</i>	<i>ko</i>	<i>dɔ</i>	<i>sonle</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ɔ-salo</i>	<i>be</i>	<i>muala</i>	
	Fish	one	become	maggot	PART	2SG-affect	3PL	Every	
	“When a single fish is infected by maggots, all the remaining fish become affected.”								
(b)	<i>Sonla</i>	<i>ko</i>	<i>nyia</i>	<i>COVID-19</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ɔ-salo</i>	<i>ye</i>	<i>suanu</i>	<i>amra amuala</i>
	Person	one	get	COVID-19	PART	3SG-affect	3SG household	people	every
	“When one person is infected by COVID-19, the whole household becomes affected.”								

Example (7a) is a traditional proverb among the Nzema which uses the imagery of a fish which becomes infected by maggots to portray how a person's problems may affect others who are closely related to them. The ethno-pragmatic interpretation of the proverb is better appreciated when one realises that the Nzema engage in fishing activities to supplement their livelihood. Obviously, when smoked or fried fishes are packed into a basket (container) and one fish becomes infected by maggots, the remaining fishes will be infected. The import of proverb (7a) is also communicated in (7b), which is specifically intended to remind the hearer of the contagiousness of COVID-19. Victims of COVID-19 sometimes did not "suffer" alone. In most cases, their families, relatives, and friends were identified through contact tracing and were also quarantined, an experience that brought many inconveniences. In Ghana, for instance, people who got infected by the virus were stigmatised, as were their family members. Even the emotional and psychological trauma was not left to the patients to suffer alone, but also their relatives. All these factors made the postproverbial expression in (7b) a veritable tool for informing people to beware of the virus, since people did not encounter its adverse consequences alone.

5.2 COVID-19 is No Respector of Persons

The data also showed that the Nzema reminded one another that COVID-19 could infect anybody, irrespective of one's health, gender, occupation, religion, education, ethnicity, or financial status. Consider excerpt 2 below.

Excerpt 2

Background: ([At *Teleku Bokazo*, on 21 March 2021]: Two brothers, KO and JK (JK is an amputee), decide to travel. KO insists that they both wear their face masks, but JK seems not to listen to his brother's advice.)

KO *Mele me akpolo be bonyi edee wɔ eke, ɔti kɔna bie bela maa yehɔ.* "I have my face mask here with me, so go and bring one for us to leave."

JK *Me diema, maa yehɔ bie na meamkpolo bobɔ a ehwee enɛye me.* "Brother, let us move on, nothing will happen to me even if I don't put on a mask."

KO *Me diema, kakye ke erele ne se bɔvole enze nane mɔɔ ati ku ye la (a); nwu ye noko ke COVID-19 enze fakye (b).* "Brother, recall that the proverb says **the hunter does not spare any animal, not even the sick one (a)**; and note that **COVID-19 does not spare any person (b).**"

Analysis

- 8 (a) *Bɔvole e-n-ze* *nane* *mɔɔ* *ati* *ku* *ye* *la*
 Hunter EMPH-NEG-know animal COMP head ache 3SG PART
 "A hunter does **not** spare any animal, not even the sick one."

- (b) **COVID-19** *ε-n-ze* *fakye*
 COVID-19 EMPH-NEG-know forgiveness
 “COVID-19 does **not** spare any person.”

A proper ethno-pragmatic interpretation of proverb (8a) is realised based on the Nzema engagement in farming and hunting. A hunter in the forest does not spare any animal that crosses his path. Metaphorically, a HUNTER is likened to COVID-19 as evidenced in (8b). The mercilessness of the hunter is projected to describe the compassionless nature of COVID-19, which also does not discriminate among humans, whether one is disabled or not. The negative marker/morpheme {n} “**not**,” which manifests in both expressions, also underscores their semantic and pragmatic relatedness. This postproverbial expression was intended to remind hearers that COVID-19 is no respecter of persons, and so everyone must do their best to prevent being infected.

5.3 COVID-19 Does Not Forewarn

The fact that the virus could attack a person at any time without warning is also highlighted in the proverbial expressions as excerpt 3 demonstrates.

Excerpt 3

Background: ([At *Salman*, on 22 November 2020]: A boy was leaving home for school (after the restrictions and bans on social gatherings had been lifted). His father advises him on the need to recognise the presence of the virus, and the fact that the virus gives no signal before attacking someone.)

Son *Egya, melekɔ sukuɔ o.* “Father, I am leaving for school.”

Father *Yoo, emomu mmamaa ε rele fi ke COVID ne tɛwɔ eke. Mgbanyima zele ke fɔsele ezule embɔ kɔkɔ (a); zɔhane ala yeε COVID-19 embɔ kɔkɔ na yeahye awie a (b).* “Okay, but don’t forget that COVID is still hanging around. Our elders said that **in the rainy season, the rains do not give prior notice before falling (a);** similarly, **COVID-19 does not give prior information before a person becomes infected (b).**”

Analysis

- 9 (a) *Fɔsele* *ezule* *ε-m-bɔ* *kɔkɔ*
 Rainy season rains EMPH-NEG-give notice
 “In the rainy season, the rains do **not** give prior notice before falling.”
- (b) **COVID-19** *ε-m-bɔ* *kɔkɔ* *na* *ye-a-hye* *awie*
 COVID-19 EMPH-NEG-give notice CONJ 3SG-EMPH-catch somebody
 “COVID-19 does **not** give prior information before a person becomes infected.”

The ethno-pragmatic interpretation of proverb (9a) is anchored on the Nzema cultural conception that “abundant rains are ‘accumulated’ in the sky during the rainy season,” as a respondent pointed out. The Nzema think that, in the rainy season, the rains can fall

without necessarily forming clouds. As a respondent emphasised, in the typical rainy season, there is “uncertainty” as one cannot tell the exact time that the rains will fall. In (9b), the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as being “accumulated” or “diffused” within the atmosphere. Therefore, a person cannot foretell when they may be infected by the virus. One cannot simply determine who carries the virus, or who can transmit it to another person. Both (9a) and (9b) incorporate the negative polarity marker {m} “not,” which seeks to foreground the communicative link between the conventional and radical expressions. The negative morpheme {m} drives home the message (caution) that COVID-19 spreads randomly with no prior notice, just as the rains may fall randomly in its typical season with no clouds as a signal.

5.4 COVID-19 Easily Attacks People With Existing Health Problems

The data suggested that the Nzema employed proverbial expressions to remind members about the fact that the virus easily “killed” those who had underlying health conditions. This is evidenced in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 4

Background: ([At *Kegyina*, on 30 April 2021]: A woman, who was already on medication (receiving treatments for hypertension), tried to leave the house without hand sanitisers and face masks. Her husband cautions her as can be seen in their dialogue below.)

Wife (Sets off without a mask or hand sanitiser) *Metɔ anwee nee tomandese bie wɔ gua nu lɔ meara kekala*. “I am going to get some onions and tomatoes from the market and be back very soon.”

Husband *Bɔ mɔdenle kɔva debie kpolo ɛ bonyi. Kakye ke ɛɛɛ ne se dadeɛ enye na a te konwo nwo ɔ (a); ɔti saa COVID-19 enye awie a te mɔɔ ɛnde kpɔke la ɔ (b)*. “Kindly go back for a face mask. Remember that the proverb says: **No matter how blunt a knife may be, it can chop up the banana fruit easily (a); and so, even if COVID-19 is not highly infectious (in Ghana), it can easily attack a sick person (b).**”

Analysis

10 (a)	<i>Dadeɛ</i>	<i>ɛ-n-ye</i>		<i>na</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>konwo</i>	<i>nwo</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	
	Knife	EMPH-NEG-make		sharp	PART	NEG	banana.fruit	self	FOC	
	“No matter how blunt a knife may be, it can chop up the banana fruit easily.”									
(b)	<i>COVID-19</i>	<i>ɛ-n-gye</i>	<i>awie</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>te</i>	<i>mɔɔ</i>	<i>ɛ-n-de</i>	<i>kpɔke</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>ɔ</i>
	COVID-19	EMPH-NEG-catch	somebody	PART	NEG	NEG	COMP	EMPH-NEG-has health	PART	FOC
	“Even if COVID-19 is not highly infectious (in Ghana), it can easily attack a sick person.”									

The basic sense of proverb (10a) points to the fact that even if a knife is not sharp, it can chop up the banana fruit (because of its softness). The ethno-pragmatic interpretation of

proverb (10a) is what becomes evident in (10b). In (10b), COVID-19, which is seemingly not highly infectious in Ghana, is construed as A BLUNT CUTLASS. Also, A PERSON WITH ANY UNDERLYING HEALTH CONDITION, such as hypertension, is considered “weak/soft” and likened to BANANA FRUIT. The postproverbial expression cautions that people who already have certain health conditions must be “extra careful” with COVID-19. This is because no matter how “blunt” COVID-19 might be, regarding its lower infection rate in Ghana, the vulnerable (those living with some health conditions) are at a higher risk of contracting the virus.

5.5 The Need to Adhere to all the Preventive Measures

The Nzema have proverbs that encourage a person to attend to all activities at their disposal. The import of such proverbs was extended to create other didactic expressions in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, which entreated members to adhere to all the safety measures. Consider the following excerpt.

Excerpt 5

Background: ([At *Ayisakro*, on 9 October 2020]: A girl returns from senior high school to meet her mother at home. On her arrival, her mother resorts to proverbial expressions to advise her to immediately wash her hands before she touches any item at home.)

- Mother** *Kemɔ wɔra la, bɔ mɔdenle wowo ɛ sa anwo kpale na wɔazɔ debie nu wɔ eke.* “As you have returned from school, try and wash your hands thoroughly before you do anything here.”
- Daughter** *Mefa “sanitiser” meye me sa anwo meke biala, ɔti ehye angome enwie munli di ɔ?* “I use the hand sanitiser very often, isn’t that enough?”
- Mother** *Kyekye! mgbanyima se saa wɔ awule zonle a ɛye ɔ muala (a); ɔti saa wɔ COVID-19 nwo ngyehyelee zonle a edi ɔ muala azo (b).* “No! Our elders said **one that has multiple farms must attend to all and work on them (a)**; similarly, **one that is faced with multiple COVID-19 preventive measures must abide by them all (b).**”

Analysis

- 11 (a) *Wɔ avule zonle a ɛye ɔ muala*
 2SG farm/plantation many PART 2SG-do 3SG all
 “One that has multiple farms (activities) must attend to all and work on them.”
- (b) *Wɔ COVID-19 nwo ngyehyelee zonle a ɛ-di ɔ muala azo*
 2SG COVID-19 self directives many PART 2SG-follow 3SG all top
 “One that is faced with multiple COVID-19 preventive measures must abide by them all.”

The conventional proverb in (11a) touches on fairness, in terms of giving equal attention to activities that one needs to undertake. It employs *avule* “farms/plantations” because the Nzema, as has been hinted at earlier, mostly engage in subsistence farming. The Nzema encourage hard work and perseverance; people who entertain indolence and

idleness are not cherished (Yakub and Osei 2020). The ethno-pragmatic implication of proverb (11a) thus points to the virtue of hard work, saying that people must endeavour to attend to all the tasks required of them. The advisory relevance of the proverb in (11a) is noticeable in the postproverbial version in (11b), which reminds hearers to observe all the COVID-19 safety protocols. Since all the preventive measures “go hand-in-hand” to ensure success in combating the disease, people are encouraged through the radical expression to adhere to all the measures that have been put in place.

5.6 The Need for Continuous Adherence to the Safety Protocols

One of the Nzema traditional proverbs that advocates perseverance and resilience also provided the basis for people to create a COVID-19-related expression. The conventional proverb and its radical version are seen in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 6

Background: ([At Nsein, on 16 August 2020]: A boy prepares to leave home for a boarding school. He claims he is not comfortable with the wearing of a mask, and that he is fed up with the COVID-19 preventive measures. His father crafts a COVID-19 related proverb based on an existing Nzema proverb to advise him.)

Son *Ɛhɔle mɔɔ melekɔ la COVID nyehyelee ne yee medwenle nwo a, akpolobebonyi ne bobɔ yemɔ akee mengola ye kpolo bieko fee.* “As I leave, my worry is how to cope with the COVID preventive measures, especially the wearing of face mask does not make me comfortable at all.”

Father *Enrehola enregyakyi ehye mɔ eyele wɔ meke mɔɔ ewule ne tɛwɔ maanle nu la. Mgbanyima erele ne se saa mɔɔ doa wɔ la etefeɛle a enga ke wɔvɛ (a); yee saa COVID-19 etefeɛle a enga ke wɔvɛ (b).* “You can’t stop these preventive measures, since the virus continues to live around us. Our elders said that **once the enemy that is running after you is not tired, you don’t say you are tired (a)**; and so, **once COVID-19 is not tired (of infecting people), you don’t say you are tired of its safety measures (b).**”

Analysis

12 (a) *Mɔɔ doa wɔ la ɛ-te-fele a ɛ-n-ga ke wɔ-vɛ*
 COMP chase 2SG PART PERF-NEG-tired PART 2SG-NEG-say COMP 2SG-tired

“Once the enemy that is running after you is not tired, you do not say you are tired.”

(b) *COVID-19 ɛ-te-fele a ɛ-n-ga ke wɔ-vɛ*
 COVID-19 PERF-NEG-tired PART 2SG-NEG-say COMP 2SG-tired

“Once COVID-19 is not tired (of infecting people), you do not say you are tired of its preventive measures.”

The ethno-pragmatic import of proverb (12a) entreats people not to give up in difficult times. It teaches resilience and continuous efforts until one achieves success. The “enemy,” as used in example (12a), is a *part-for-whole* metonymy (Agyekum 2018; Ochieng 2022) which represents all things that can cause harm and inconveniences to a

person. The proverb advises that once you have something that continues to be an obstacle in your life, and for that matter tries to make you uncomfortable, you must strive persistently to combat it. In example (12b), therefore, COVID-19 is framed as an ENEMY. This radical expression was used to encourage the hearer to withstand any inconvenience caused as a result of the (government's) imposition of the COVID-19 preventive measures. The expression inspired people to continue "fighting" the pandemic, since the virus continued to spread and harm people.

5.7 The Need for Individuals to Receive the COVID-19 Vaccine

Aside from the paramedical measures taken to combat the pandemic, it became necessary for people worldwide to receive a vaccine against the virus. Through figurative language use, the Nzema persuaded members to recognise the significance of getting vaccinated against the virus.

Excerpt 7

Background: ([At *Bolɔfo*, on 23 July 2021]: A young man informs his sister that he has already received the COVID-19 vaccine. The lady puffs, not wanting to hear about any COVID-19 vaccine. The young man tries to convince his sister through the use of proverbial expressions.)

Brother *Adeima raale, mame mehɔwɔ me COVID-19 agbuyia edee o, ɔti bɔ mɔdenle na kɔwɔ bie.* "Sister, I have received my COVID-19 vaccine, so do well to also receive yours."

Sister *Saa wɔhɔwɔ bie a, enee noko ɔdaye ne ala ene.* "If you have been vaccinated against the virus, then it is enough."

Brother *Kyekye! Me edee ne embɔ ε nwo bane eza. Kakye ke erele ne se awie enlo ayile emmaa wuleravole (a); zɔhane ala yee awie enwɔ COVID-19 agbuyia emmaa awie a (b).* "No! Mine doesn't protect you too. Remember the saying that **one does not swallow a pill for the sick person (a)**; similarly, **one does not receive the COVID-19 jab to protect another person (b).**"

Analysis

13 (a)	<i>Awie</i>	<i>ε-n-lo</i>	<i>ayile</i>	<i>ε-m-maa</i>	<i>wuleravol</i>
	Someone	EMPH-NEG-drink	medicine	EMPH-NEG-give	patient
	“One does not swallow a pill for the sick person.”				
(b)	<i>Awie</i>	<i>ε-n-wɔ</i>	<i>COVID-19</i>	<i>agbuyia</i>	<i>ε-m-maa</i> <i>awie</i>
	Someone	EMPH-NEG-pierce	COVID-19	injection	EMPH-NEG-give someone
	“One does not receive COVID-19 vaccine to protect another person.”				

The postproverbial expression in (13b) reminds the lady to take the COVID-19 vaccine for her personal protection. The advisory content of (13b) is derived from what is communicated in the traditional proverb in (13a), which informs people to always get to the heart of an issue at hand. The ethno-pragmatic implication of the proverb points to the Nzema belief in getting straight to the point and tackling a problem directly in order to provide appropriate solution to the problem. Medication can best achieve its

efficacy if a patient takes the dose themselves. Under no circumstance can somebody else swallow a pill to cure any sickness for a patient who did not take the medication themselves, as a respondent stressed in light of example (13a). Thus, the expression in (13b) uses this notion to inform listeners to individually receive their vaccinations against the virus. Interestingly, both expressions use the negative markers {**n, m**} “**not**,” which points to the impossibility of someone else (a healthy person) taking medication for the sick.

5.8 The Essence of Handwashing and Use of Sanitisers

Other twisted proverbial expressions emphasised the need for people to wash their hands properly with soap, and also to use hand sanitiser. We see this in excerpt 8.

Excerpt 8

Background: ([At *Edelesuazo*, on 15 September 2020]: A boy returns from the football park and rushes for his food from the kitchen. His mother twists an original proverb to advise him on the need to do thorough hand washing before eating, especially when COVID-19 has “diffused” everywhere in the atmosphere.)

Son (Picks the food and sets to eating it without washing his hands) *Ehɔne elepe me ti* “I am very much hungry.”

Mother (Shouts angrily) *Sie alee ne eke! Saa wɔanva saminla wɔanwowo ɛ sa anwo a mmadi alee ne. Bese saa kakula wowo ɔ sa anwo kpale a ɔ nee mgbanyima di alee (a); kekala yemɔ saa awie wowo ɔ sa anwo kpale a COVID-19 engye ye (b).* “Put the food down! You won’t eat it until you have used soap to wash your hands thoroughly. It is said that **a child who washes his hands very clean gets the privilege to dine with adults (a);** now, the saying is **whoever washes his hands very clean is privileged not to be infected by COVID-19 (b).**”

Analysis

14 (a) *Kakul wowo ɔ sa anwo kpale a ɔ nee m-gbanyinli di alee*

Child wash 3SG hand around well PART 3SG CONJ PL-adult eat food

“A child who washes his hands very clean gets the privilege to dine with adults.”

(b) *Awie wow ɔ sa anwo kpale a COVID-19 ɛ-n-gye ye*

Someone wash 3SG hand around well PART COVID-19 EMPH-NEG-catch 3SG

“Whoever washes his hands very clean is privileged **not** to be infected by COVID-19.”

The example in (14a) uses “a child who washes his hand very well/clean” metonymically to represent all positive behaviours of a child that can attract rewards. The rewarding aspect of the proverb transcends the primary notion of getting the privilege to eat with adults. According to Nzema ethno-pragmatics, as a respondent explained, proverb (14a) actually implies that a child who has good conduct and demonstrates cognitive maturity may even be invited to participate in adult decision making. In excerpt 8, the mother dwells on the traditional proverb and carefully

generates the expression in (14b), which is intended to reprimand her son. Crucially, the mother employs the (post)proverbial expression with the use of {**m**} “**not**” to inform her son that the benefit of thorough hand washing is that one may not be infected by COVID-19.

5.9 The Need to Stay Indoors

The lockdown experience was meant to restrict people’s movements so that they did not roam and get infected by COVID-19. The data showed that the Nzema contributed their part in persuading members to stay indoors during the lockdown period.

Excerpt 9

Background: ([At *Bolɔfo*, on 30 June 2020]: A young man who lives with his father in the same apartment leaves home in the morning and returns late in the evening. The father expresses his displeasure at his son’s attitude, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In rebuking his son, the father employs the proverbial expressions indicated here.)

Son *Egya, anlu oo.* “Good evening, father.”

Father *Eya. Na tie eke, mekyi wɔ akpɔsa mgbanemgbane ne. Kakye ke mgbanyima bule erele ke saa ekola nwɔnla a endo ε nli funli (a); εne meke ye yemɔ ekola nwɔnla a eyia COVID-19 (b).* “Good evening. But listen, I detest the unnecessary roaming. Remember the saying that **whoever can wander does not return to meet his mother’s corpse/funeral (a)**; these days, **whoever can wander would meet COVID-19 (b).**”

Analysis

15 (a)	<i>ε-kola</i>	<i>nwonla</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ε-n-do</i>	<i>ε</i>	<i>nli</i>	<i>funli</i>
	2SG-can roam		PART	2SG-NEG-meet	2SG	mother	corpse
	“Whoever can wander does not return to meet his mother’s corpse/funeral.”						
(b)	<i>ε-kola</i>	<i>nwonla</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>ε-yia</i>	<i>COVID-19</i>		
	2SG-can roam		PART	2SG-meet	COVID-19		
	“Whoever can wander would meet COVID-19.”						

The proverb in (15a) captures the phrase “mother’s corpse/funeral” which, according to a respondent, is based on the fact that the Nzema also practise a matrilineal system of inheritance, and so mothers must be given special treatment. Its ethno-pragmatic implications point to the fact that the mother should be highly venerated, although the father is recognised for performing many responsibilities. In the Nzema cultural context, missing one’s mother’s burial ceremony is tantamount to missing a great opportunity in life. This proverb speaks against unnecessary wandering, especially when the wanderer returns home empty-handed. It incorporates the expression “does **not** return to meet ...” to indicate that such lost opportunity would not be easily replaced. The expression in (15b) is “coined” out of the original proverb (15a) to admonish the young man of fruitless roaming. Unlike (15a), (15b) is an affirmative construction that reminds the

young man (and everyone) that the wanderer, in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic, would “meet” an infection.

6. Conclusion

From an ethno-pragmatic perspective, the article has examined the advisory role and significance of some traditional Nzema proverbs and their equivalent radical expressions related to COVID-19. The article aimed to discuss how the Nzema had carefully constructed such postproverbial expressions in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to advise people to abide by its preventive protocols. It is apparent that the postproverbial retorts closely resembled the conventional proverbs in terms of similarities in the messages which they encoded. Grammatically, some of the original proverbs as well as their radical forms incorporate the negative markers {**n**} and {**m**} “**not**” in Nzema, which helped to remind people to refrain from unacceptable behaviours. For instance, the study revealed that some of the newly-crafted expressions informed listeners not to wander aimlessly, and to desist from getting into crowded places during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that some of the expressions were employed to advise hearers to adhere to all the preventive measures, including thorough handwashing with soap under running water, use of alcohol-based hand sanitisers, and wearing of face masks. It was found that the Nzema not only persuaded members to adhere to paramedical means of combating the virus, but also motivated them to take doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. It was also found that metaphoric and metonymic features permeate both the conventional proverbs and the postproverbial expressions, which drive home the advisory messages intended to be communicated. Some characteristic features and/or conceptualisations of COVID-19 were evidenced, such as COVID-19 IS A MERCILESS HUNTER, COVID-19 IS AN ENEMY, COVID-19 IS HIGHLY CONTAGIOUS, COVID-19 IS NO RESPECTOR OF PERSONS, COVID-19 DOES NOT FOREWARN, and COVID-19 EASILY ATTACKS THE WEAK (SICK). Some of the expressions reminded people and cautioned them based on these attributes of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study shows that the Nzema used figurative and persuasive language to reenforce adherence to the COVID-19 preventive measures that were laid down in Ghana.

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