

Body Parts Idioms as Linguistic Tool for Polite Communication among the Nzema

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines body parts idioms as politeness strategy in Nzema communication. Figurative devices such as proverbs and euphemisms have received quite an appreciable amount of study in connection with verbal politeness in Nzema. Little or no attention however has been given to idioms, particularly their communicative functions in the language. This paper seeks to discuss the communicative functions of some body parts related idioms in Nzema with special focus on idiomatic expressions involving the limbs, the body/skin, the heart/chest and the stomach that are used in daily discourse. The analysis is based on primary data obtained through participant and non-participant observation. The data comprise audio recordings of traditional arbitration and everyday conversations among the Nzema. The paper demonstrates that, these culturally constructed body parts related idioms are deliberately employed to avoid any straightforward language that seeks to undermine and threaten the face of an addressee and also serve as politeness device for the speaker. The paper draws on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.*

KEYWORDS: Culture, communication, body parts idioms, politeness, indirection

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1. Introduction

Using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as theoretical basis, the paper examines body parts idioms as politeness strategy in Nzema communication.

Politeness is a common feature of social interaction in any human society (Temidayo 2017: 116). In the Nzema socio-cultural contexts, politeness and indirection go hand in hand. Figurative expressions such as proverbs, euphemisms and idioms serve as politeness and indirection strategies in Nzema. Communicative situations where these expressions are mostly employed among the Nzema include arbitration at the chief's palace or traditional court, borrowing and lending and at marriage ceremonies. The essence of their use in Nzema discourse is among other reasons, to save both the speaker and the addressee's face. This enables the interlocutors to communicate politely and therefore secure their interpersonal relationships. Effective use of figurative expressions as indirection strategy means that one is competent in the language. This paper explores some Nzema body parts idiomatic expressions that are used as politeness and indirection devices.

Idioms, by their nature, hardly ever mean exactly what the words say. In general terms, they are meant to embellish and reinforce expressions in any communication event. We argue that the body parts are a rich source of linguistic discourse in the domain of idiomatic expressions. The body parts comprise the head and its parts which include mainly the eyes, the nose, the hair, the lips, the tongue, the throat and the teeth. Other parts include the neck, the arms, the legs and the feet. Apart from these, there are other internal organs which are equally vital to human and other animates' virility. They include: the heart, the lungs, the kidney, the bile, the brain and all other glands of the body. The current paper, however, discusses idiomatic expressions which relate to the limbs, the body/skin, the heart/chest and the stomach. For instance, if a speaker (X) refers to an addressee (Z) as *ε nwo eletudu* 'your body is flying', the speaker sounds polite and also saves the face of the addressee by not exposing him/her directly as in *ε nwo elebo*, 'you are stinking'. The idiom *ε nwo eletudu* 'your body is flying' implies that one does not keep his/her body tidy, and so the person diffuses bad smell into the atmosphere. Thus, by means of idiomatic expressions, a speaker can alleviate the shame and pain his statements may bring upon himself and other people.

1.1 Nzema as a language and people

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 Dwɔmɔlɔ (Nzema West), ɛlɛmgbɛɛ (Nzema Nzema Central), Adwɔmɔlɔ, Egila and ɛvalɔɛ (Nzema East) (Annan 1980; Kwaw 2008); with Dwɔmɔlɔ as the standard dialect that is studied from Basic to the Tertiary level of education in Ghana. The speakers and their geographical location are also referred to as Nzema. The Nzemaland is bordered to the West by Ivory Coast (also known as the La Côte d'Ivoire), to the East by the Ahanta, to the North by the Aowin (or Anyi) and Wassa, and to the South by the Gulf of Guinea. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (2021), the population of the Nzema people in Ghana is 342,090. Some of the Nzema speaking communities can also be found mostly in the western part of the La Côte d'Ivoire (Kwesi 1992). These communities include: Apolonu, Maama, Agyekɛ, Mouah (Mowa), Ngyeme, Noi (Noe), Akpanye, Anzeasawu, Manvea (Mafia), Bassam, Kakusuazo, Kpɔketi, Poso (Border town), Nzɔbɛnu, Mgbɔsɛya and Eboko. Their traditional capital is Bassam (also known as Grand Bassam) (Nyame 2019).

2. Politeness and indirection

Politeness can be defined as proper social conduct, awareness of etiquette and tactful consideration for others (Agyekum 2019: 9). Grundy (2000) posits that polite expressions are properly and appropriately carried out in social interaction so as to avoid being offensive. This means that in communication, interlocutors take into account each other's feelings and public self-image in order to avoid embarrassment. Politeness in communication therefore appears to be a complicated practice in all cultures. Yule (1997) sees politeness as a universal phenomenon that shows one has good manners and consideration for other people. This coincides with Tolmach's (1990) definition. He explains politeness as a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by decreasing the conflict and confrontation in all human interchanges (Tolmach 1990). Goffman (1955) defines politeness as the actions of a person who is pledged to protect both his own 'face' and the 'faces' of others in social interaction. His submission is in line with Brown and

Levinson (1987) who state that politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer's 'face'. Face refers to "the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and the maintaining of 'self-esteem' in public or in private situations" (Huang 2008: 96). Yule (1996) views politeness as the means employed to show awareness of another person's face.

Brown and Levinson (1987) further state that there are two aspects to this self-image: one is positive face, the other is negative face. Positive face refers to the wish of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. Negative face refers to the wish of every 'competent adult member' [of a society] that his actions be unimpeded by others. It is therefore not impossible to say that politeness can be understood as a socio-cultural phenomenon, a vehicle to achieve good interpersonal relationships, and a norm imposed by social conventions. An act or utterance which may be considered polite in one culture may not necessarily be regarded as polite in another culture. It is therefore obvious that in trying to be polite, it is necessary to consider the socio-cultural background of the interlocutor, as well as the communicative situation.

Indirection is a communicative device employed to avoid speaking plainly about things or going straight to the point but rather revolve around the main purpose of the interaction; however, with the intention of putting the message across. Oyetade (2000) views (verbal) indirection as a strategy of communication in which interlocutors avoid directness so as to prevent crises, so as to achieve 'certain communicative momentary goal'. Thus, verbal indirection manifests in expressions such as proverbs, metaphors, subtle or polite insults, euphemisms, circumlocutions, honorifics, among others. According to Obeng (1994: 42), indirection is "a communicative strategy in which interactants abstain from directness in order to obviate crises or in order to communicate 'difficulty' and thus make their utterances consistent with face saving and politeness." In the opinion of Hope (2015), (verbal) indirection is "a speech form which avoids speaking directly about things or going straight to the point but rather moves around the main purpose of the interaction; still, with the intention of putting the message across." From this assertion, it is clear that interactants employ indirection in their speech to prevent crises and conflicts.

In her book, *talking from 9 to 5*, Deborah Tannen indicates that indirection is a fundamental element in human communication (Tannen 1994). She further explains that we all use indirect communication strategies at times

and in certain circumstances – we mean more than we say, and we gather meaning from others beyond the words they use. Though indirection is used in almost all cultures, Tannen (1994) points out that indirection is “...one of the elements that varies the most from one culture to another, and one that can cause confusion and misunderstanding...” (Tannen 1994). This implies that even in cultures where the phenomenon exists, the degree and type of indirectness vary. Indirect communicators try as much as possible to obviate conflict, tension and situations that may cause discomfort. The purpose of the communication exchange is maintaining harmony and saving face (Joyce 2012).

Supporting Joyce’s (2012) view, Peace Corps (2012) explains that in a high-context culture, which may be relatively homogeneous and tends to emphasize interdependence and social relationships, people develop deep and often unconscious understandings of what is expected in that culture. Because of shared expectations about behaviour, the context can be altered by the speaker to convey information without creating tension and uncomfortable situation.

According to Hope (2015), Fante uses indirection to indicate communicative competence in socio-cultural context and to avoid face threatening for both the speaker and his listeners and to show respect or politeness. This is so because, in our daily conversations, interlocutors usually obey cooperative socio-cultural principles and appropriate strategies so as to avoid misunderstanding or communication failure.

Ajayi (2018) did an ethno-pragmatic analysis of verbal indirection in Yoruba to ascertain whether politeness expressions are really face-saving strategies in their contexts of use or not. His study revealed that, rather than the expressions functioning as face-saving devices, they are actually deliberately employed by interlocutors as face-threatening strategies. This means that in the Yoruba language and culture, expressions that can function as face saving, can as well be used as face-threatening devices.

3. Data and methods

This qualitative study uses data from both primary and secondary sources. The data were gathered between December 2021 and February 2022 in the three districts of Nzema, namely; Nzema West, Nzema Central and Nzema

East. We gathered (hand-recorded) some Nzema expressions which involved idioms from spontaneous natural speech contexts. Sometimes, as participant and non-participant observers, we sought permission as matter of ethics and tape-recorded proceedings of traditional arbitration and everyday conversations where the use of idioms was pervasive. Interviews with four competent indigenous/native speakers of Nzema were conducted for useful information and clarification on the data gathered. In order to obtain reliable information, we considered older people between the ages of fifty (50) years to seventy (70) years for the interview. The rationale is that the aged, especially in the African context, are seen as the custodians of socio-cultural knowledge, including language use due to their experiences (see Rababa'h and Malkawi 2012; Thompson and Agyekum 2015). The data were transcribed and translated for analysis. We categorised and analysed the data based on connected themes that emerged.

4. Theoretical framework: (Brown and Levinson, 1987)

Brown and Levinson's politeness model is grounded on the notion of face. The concept of politeness and face go hand in hand (Adegbite and Odebunmi 2006). Politeness describes and explains the means by which discourse participants recognize the 'face' of one another. Here, 'face' is defined technically as the 'public self-image of a person' or the 'positive social value a person effectively claims for himself' (Goffman 1967, Brown and Levinson 1987, Thomas 1995, Yule 1996). Brown and Levinson (1987) aver that politeness is best expressed as the practical application of good manners and etiquettes. They perceive politeness as a courteous manner that respects accepted social usage within a cultural context. Politeness is a culturally constructed phenomenon that operates within defined social norms and helps to maintain social relationship among people (Temidayo 2017).

The politeness theory deals extensively with face threatening act, which run contrary to the face want of the addressee and/or speaker (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65). Politeness theory and face theory seem to offer a common explanation and assumption (Redmond 2015). Central to politeness theory, however, is the phenomenon of 'indirectness'. Thus, Brown and Levinson outline four main types of politeness strategies

including bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record (indirectness). The authors explain indirect strategies as ‘roundabout’ language employed by speakers through the use of metaphors, being ironic, using contradictions, overstatements and displacements among others. In a discourse encounter, these strategies help to prevent speakers from potentially imposing embarrassments and discomfort on the listener in the communicative process. The Nzema consider some explicit terms as abusive and obscene, and so they try to ‘sanitise’ such expressions through indirect strategies as shall be highlighted in section five (5) of this paper. Hence, we consider the politeness theory useful to underpin this study.

5. Results and Discussion

This section deals with the analysis of data. We focus on the presentation and analysis of data based solely on body-parts associated with the limbs, body/skin, heart/chest/ and stomach to engage in the discussion. We present the various idioms used for the analysis in table 1. The idiomatic expressions are provided in Nzema, followed by literal meaning and their figurative-idiomatic meaning. The various discourse contexts where these idioms are employed are also presented and discussed.

Idioms related to the limbs	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning
i. Ɛ sa wale	You have longer hands	You are a thief
ii. Woli twea gyake	You have eaten dog’s legs	You are a vagabond
iii. Onle ɔ sa	He/she has not got hands	He/she is a sorcerer
iv. Ɛ sa nu ye se	You have a hardened palm	You are stingy

Idioms related to body/skin	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning
i. ɔ nwo enle ɛkɛ	His body does not exist She has never stretched herself	He is impotent She is barren/infertile
ii. ɔtetwenle ɔ nwo ɛle	You are skinless	You are indigent
iii. ɛ nwo enle abonle	You have spoiled yourself	Your dress is soiled with blood/faeces
iv. ɛ nwo ɛɛkye		
Idioms related to heart/chest	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning
i. a. Ye ahonle ɛnye se	His/her heart is not hard	He/she is not brave
b. ɔ kɛnra ɛnye se	His/her chest is not hard	He/she is not brave
c. ɔnle ahonle	He/she has not got a heart	He/she is not brave
ii.a. ɛle ahonle	You have got a heart	You are very quick tempered
b. Wɔ ahonle bikye wɔ	Your heart is closer to you	You are very quick tempered
c. Wɔ ahonle gyegye wɔ	Your heart disturbs you	You are very quick tempered
Idioms related to stomach	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning
i. Yeye ɔ ko	She has removed her stomach	She has aborted her baby
ii. ɛ ko ɛleda wɔ kake	You are indebted to your stomach	You are very hungry

Table 1. Idiomatic expressions and their interpretations

5.1 Idioms related to the limbs

The Nzema live by idiomatic expressions concerning hands and legs, which are usually deployed in place of undesirable utterances during conversations. Let us consider the conversation below in which idiom relating to the hand is used.

Excerpt. 1 (28/12/2021 at Kɛnrɛne, Nzema West)

Mother (at the market, calls her son for interrogation): *Anwɛɛ ezukoa ne wɔ ni?* ‘Where is the money meant for buying onions?’

Son: *Metɛfale o!* ‘I have not taken it.’

Mother: *Nienwu a ɛnyianle ezukoa ne mɔɔ ɛvale ɛdɔle wɔ fonu fofolɛ ne a?* ‘Where did you get the money with which you bought your new phone?’

Son (hesitates): *Me deɛ metɛfale wɔ ezukoa biala.* ‘I have not taken any money belonging to you.’

Mother: *ɛ sa wale, nea ɛ nwo boɛ kpale.* ‘**You have longer hands**, therefore be very careful.’

From the conversation, the mother who suspects that her son has taken the money set aside for buying onions, calls and demands the money from him. The son, however, denies taking the money. Probing further, the mother realises that her son is not telling the truth. Crucially, the idiom *ɛ sa wale*, ‘you have longer hands’, is used to avoid the direct expression *ɛle awule* ‘you are a thief’, which is disgracing to the son. Therefore, considering the fact that there are other people around, and that her son is a young adult, she subtly uses the idiom *ɛ sa wale*, ‘you have longer hands’ to save the face of her son. This is not to say that the Nzema condone theft, but the expression is used in order not to embarrass the addressee. Possessing ‘longer hands’ implies that the individual, no matter the distance where an item is hidden or placed, ‘stretches or lays the hands on it’; in other words, he/she goes to steal it.

Excerpt. 2 (30/12/2021 at Nsein, Nzema East)

A (enters the residence of B (the mother of C) and asks the whereabouts of C (A's friend)): *Ɔmɔ, mekpa wɔ kyɛlɛ C wɔ ɛkɛ ɔ?* 'Mother, please is C around?'

B (spreads her arms): *Enɛ anwo zo kenle nsa ene, metenwunle ye.* 'He left home three days ago without my knowledge.'

A: (meets C while leaving the gate). *Ayi, ehɔle ni mɔɔ bɔ zo mɔɔ ɛleba sua nu a?* 'Friend, where have you been all this while?'

C: *O! Mengɔnlile me gyima bie.* 'O! I went to check on one or two things.'

A (chuckles): *Wɔli twea gyake bɔkɔɔ. Ɛ nli se ɛvile sua nu la, enɛ le kenle nsa na mebiɔa wɔ a engola engɔ deɛ kpɔkyee mɔɔ ɛyele la ɔ?* 'You have eaten dog's legs. Your mother

says it has been three days since you left home and you cannot tell me exactly what you went there to do?'

From the conversation, C is unable to give his friend a tangible reason for being away for three days. Moreover, C fails to inform the mother before leaving home which is unacceptable. In order not to directly describe C as an aimless wanderer, A uses the idiomatic expression *wɔli twea gyake* 'you have eaten dog's legs'. Among the Nzema, a person who wanders aimlessly is disliked. Such a person is directly referred to as *ɛkulo akpɔsa somaa*, 'you wander aimlessly'. Therefore, to save the face of C, A subtly deploys the idiom *wɔli twea gyake*, 'you have eaten dog's legs'. Here, the action of the vagabond (C) is compared with a dog that is neither at home to protect nor at the farm to hunt but roams for nothing

Excerpt. 3 (03/01/2022 at Anagye, Nzema East)

X (in a quarrel with Y, a neighbour who is perceived to be possessing evil powers): *Gyakyi wɔ subane etane ne.* 'Desist from your bad habit.'

Y (pointing finger at X): *Wɔmɔ, nea ɛ nwo boɛ. Saa ɛye me aholoba a, ɛbanwu ye.* 'You, be careful. If you insult me you will see what will happen to you.'

X: *Wɔmɔ a le nwane, eze ke mesulo wɔ ɔ?* ‘Who are you, do you think I am afraid of you?’

Z: (calls X and advises him): *Nea ε nwo boε wɔ ɔ nwo na ɔnlε ɔ sa.* ‘Be careful about him because **he has not got hands.**’

In the conversation, Y warns X not to insult him otherwise he will deal with him. In the Nzema context, when one warns an opponent to be careful, it has dire implications such as harming the opponent physically or spiritually. It is against this backdrop that Z who perhaps knows that Y attacks opponents with fetish powers, calls and admonishes X to retreat because Y ‘has not got hands’. In an explicit utterance, however, Z will describe Y as *ɔle kodiawu*, ‘he is a murderer/sorcerer’, a straightforward utterance which undermines and embarrasses Y. Thus, Z employs the idiom *ɔnlε ɔ sa*, ‘he has not got hands’ to indirectly refer to Y that he is fond of raining curses and using juju to kill others. This expression therefore does not mean that Y’s hands are amputated, rather, it is a polite way of criticizing him.

Excerpt. 4 (06/01/2022 at Awiane, Nzema West)

X (spots Y and Z at the restaurant. He approaches): *Berale eke la ehye ɔ? Belie alee ne bie bema medame noko ε?* ‘Have you guys been here for long? Can you buy some of the food for me?’

Y (turns to face X): *Yerale eke la te ene bie ɔ, noko yetedile ehwee. Ene mɔɔ ɔse ɔdaye ɔbadua kake ne la, yemɔ a yetete eke la.* ‘We have been here for some time now, but we have not eaten anything. He promised to pay for today’s meal, however, he is unable to order for anything till now.

X: *Yemɔ ɔdaye ɔbahola yeadua be mu nwiɔ be alee kake. Wɔye ke enze ke ɔ sa nu ye se la.*

‘He cannot afford to pay for both of you. You seem to forget that **he has a hardened palm.**’

From the conversation, the setting is a restaurant where the three friends X, Y and Z usually meet to eat. X comes to meet Y and Z and requests that they buy him some of the food because they (Y and Z) have already eaten. Y reveals to X how long they (Y and Z) have been at the restaurant yet Z,

who promised to pay for their bills is unable to place an order. X's response implies that this is not the first time Z is reluctant to order food for his friends. Consequently, X describes Z as having a 'hardened palm', which means that Z is a miser. It is a common practice among the Nzema to share and also give alms. Visitors are usually welcomed by first serving them with food or water before they are made to tell the purpose of their visit. Neighbours who visit are also treated thus. As a result, every Nzema is expected to be magnanimous. Any individual who always hesitates to offer support, especially financially to the needy, and also feels reluctant to spend on him or herself even when there is money, is described directly as *akyebe*, 'closefisted', a name that does not only make the individual to lose face, but also makes him or her feel insulted. This follows from why X, in criticizing Z on his conduct, employs the idiomatic expression, *ɔ sa nu ye se*, 'he has a hardened palm'. Thus, having 'a hardened palm' means that nothing comes out of Z's hand easily.

5.2 Idioms related to body/skin

The excerpts 5 to 8 exemplify the use of body/skin-related idioms in Nzema communication.

Excerpt. 5 (11/01/2022 at Adoabo, Nzema Central)

X (meets Y at the community information centre and asks about his presence there): *Na eke nwonlomɔ mangyee ye ε? Ebadɔ ayile bie ɔ?* 'What have you come here this early morning to do? Have you come to buy medicine?'

Y: *Ekulo ke εsele me ɔ? Se eze deemɔti meta meba eke nwonlomɔ nu la noko elebiza me.* 'Do you want to make a mockery of me? You know the reason I usually come here in the morning yet you are asking.'

Z (interrupts): *Saa yebiza wɔ a se ɔnye debie, anzεε εfea yεme nu ɔ?* 'Is there anything wrong with his question, or are you hiding something from us?'

X: *Enze ke ɔ nwo enle eke ɔ? Ɔzɔho ke ɔbadɔ ye ewule ne anwo ayile.* 'Are you not aware that **his body does not exist**? Maybe he is here to get some medicine to treat his sickness.'

In the above excerpt, Y, who has a special health issue is said to be visiting the information centre to buy herbal medicine. X, who is already aware of Y's condition intentionally provokes Y to confess that he (Y) is impotent which is embarrassing. The Nzema value procreation so much, and so married couples who are not able to bear children do not live comfortably in the society because people sometimes make a mockery of them. When a man is unable to get his wife pregnant, he is described directly as *ɔ toa ewu*, 'his penis is dead (impotent)'. This condition (impotence) come with embarrassment, thus, the Nzema use an idiom like *ɔ nwo enle eke*, 'his body does not exist' to describe the condition. Thus, in order that Y's face is not threatened, X employs the idiom *ɔ nwo enle eke*, 'his body does not exist'. The *nwo* 'body' in the above idiom represents the male sex organ. In essence, the expression is deliberately employed to save the face of Y.

Excerpt. 6 (05/02/2022 at Bolfo, Nzema East)

Daughter (Approaches home with tears).

Mother (Comes out of the kitchen and makes inquiries): *Duzu ezunle ɔ? Nwane a ebo wo a?* 'Why are you crying? Who has beaten you?'

Daughter (Mentions the name of a 50-year-old woman who beat her for insulting an elderly person).

Mother (Exclaims): *Nwane! Ese ɔmɔ (X) a ebo wo a? Raale zɔhane mɔɔ ɔdaye ɔtetwenle ɔ nwo ele la . . .* "Who! You said madam (X) has beaten you? That woman **who has never stretched herself before . . .**"

In the above excerpt, the mother describes Madam (X) indirectly as *ɔtetwenle ɔ nwo ele* 'she has never stretched herself before', an idiom used to avoid unpleasant utterance such as *ɔle mota* 'she is barren'. Among the Nzema, child bearing is considered important. A woman who does not bear a child when she is due, especially in terms of age, usually does not feel comfortable in the society. The

idiom thus saves the public self-image of Madam (X). The analogy of the idiom is appropriate in the sense that during child delivery, the expectant mother somewhat ‘stretches’ herself in the course of ‘pushing’.

Excerpt. 7 (30/01/2022 at Ezinlibo, Nzema West)

A (Meets his siblings (B, C and D) to discuss the means to get money to perform their mother’s funeral): *Kekala mesuzu ke ɔwɔ ke awie ko biala tua mgbe abulanwɔ (GHS2,000.00) na yɛava yɛaye ɛzɛne ne* ‘Now I suggest that each of us pays an amount of Two Thousand Ghana Cedis (GHS2,000.00) to enable us perform the funeral.’

B (Nods): *Medie medi ke ɔle nzuzule kpale* ‘I think that it is a laudable idea.’

C (Shakes the head in disapproval): *Ezukoa koatee zɛhae yemɔ menrenyia ye* ‘I will not be able to provide such a huge amount of money.’

D: *Adiema, yɛze ke ɛ nwo ɛnlɛ abonle ɔti medame mebadua wɔ ɛdɛɛ ne meamaa wɔ.* ‘My brother, we all know that **you are skinless** so I will pay yours in addition to mine.’

The Nzema use the idiom *ɛ nwo ɛnlɛ abonle*, ‘you are skinless’ as a roundabout expression to escape impoliteness, and to save the face of an addressee. As evidenced from excerpt 7, D uses the idiom to avoid the harsh statement *ɛle ehyianli*, ‘you are indigent’, an expression that undermines the positive face of C and causes serious embarrassment. The former expression, does not necessarily suggest that C has not got a skin on his body; rather, ‘skin’ represents money in the sense that just as it protects the body against some infections, so does money protect humans and serves as a major determinant for good living. With money, basic necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare among others are easily accessed. Thus, money which serve as the fulcrum of human existence, is metaphorically linked with skin in the above idiom.

Excerpt. 8 (08/02/2022 at Esiama, Nzema Central)

A (meets her brother (B) with his wife (C). She greets and goes to stand at the back of C): *Maa menea, debie wɔ wɔ teladeɛ ne anzi.* 'Excuse me, there is something at the back of your dress.'

B (interrupts): *Na duzu ɔ?* 'What is it?'

A (notices blood stain, she taps her sister-in-law's shoulder): *ɛ nwo ɛzɛkye.* *Ɔwɔ kɛ ɛkakyi wɔ teladeɛ ne.* '**You have spoilt yourself.** You will have to change your dress.'

From the excerpt above, A observes that there is blood stain in C's (her sister-in-law) dress. A draws the attention of C, but indirectly because other people are around. A does that to save C from embarrassment. This strategy is the nice way the Nzema use to 'refine' discourses concerning bodily effluvia and excretion such as defecation, urination and menstruation. When someone inadvertently defecates and soils his/her attire, the Nzema try to desist from direct statements such as *wɔnene ɛ nwo* 'you have defecated in your attire'. In the same vein, the Nzema avoid notifying a woman who has soiled her dress with menses directly as *ɛ nwo ɛye mogya*, 'there is blood in your dress'. Consequently, in saving the face of C who has soiled her dress with menses, A subtly employs the expression *wɔzɛkye ɛ nwo*, 'you have spoilt yourself'. This subtle expression can prevent people who may be dining at the same setting from losing their appetite, since menses is an eyesore according to the Nzema.

5.3 Idioms related to heart/chest

Other Nzema idioms that emerged were those related to the heart or the chest. These body-part related expressions are used to discourage timidity and also to rebuke people who are quick-tempered, as can be seen in excerpt 9 and 10 respectively:

Excerpt. 9 (20/02/2022 at Mgbɔtɛba, Nzema West)

Uncle (reminds his nephew about their upcoming night hunt): *Sɛ ɛkakye kɛ mese yɛbahɔ nɔsolɛ dɔne bulu ɔ?* ‘Do you remember that I said we shall be leaving by 10:00pm?’

Nephew (hesitates): *Mɛ wuvuanyi, ɛyeka ɛdɛɛ ɛɛɛ, . . . Menrɛhola bie kɔ.* ‘Uncle, as for night hunt, . . . I cannot be part of it.’

Uncle’s friend (addresses Uncle): *Wɔ awozoa ne edwekɛ kile kɛ ye ahonle ɛnyɛ se ɔti maa ɔlie ɔ menle bie.* ‘Your nephew’s response indicates that **his heart is not hard** so let him be.’

From excerpt 9, the uncle who is a hunter reminds his nephew about their intention to go hunting in the night. The nephew’s response shows that he is not brave enough to join in the night hunt. The uncle’s friend realises that, and therefore describes the nephew indirectly as *ye ahonle ɛnyɛ se*, ‘his heart is not hard’. *Ye ahonle ɛnyɛ se*, ‘his heart is not hard’ is used to avoid the direct expression *ɔle foanvoanle/sulosulo*, ‘he is not brave’. Brevity is a virtue that every male Nzema is expected to show in the performance of challenging tasks such as hunting in the night. Whoever lacks this quality is seen not to be a ‘real man’ which belittles the individual. This is why the uncle’s friend uses the mild expression *ye ahonle ɛnyɛ se*, ‘his heart is not hard’ in order not to threaten the face of the nephew. Similar polite expressions that can minimize the harshness of *ɔle foanvoanle/sulosulo*, ‘he is not brave’ are *ɔ kɛnra ɛnyɛ se*, ‘his chest is not hard’ and *ɔnlɛ ahonle*, ‘he has not got a heart’. *Ahonle*, ‘heart’ and *kɛnra*, ‘chest’ in this respect, symbolise brevity and courage which the Nzema admire.

Excerpt. 10 (16/02/2022 at Elubo, Nzema West)

Husband (meets his debtor in the market, holds him and demands his money): *Wɔmɔ, medie me ezukoa ne eke ala.* ‘You, give me my money now and here.’

Wife (addresses debtor): *Ɛnɛ yemɔ, tua ezukoa ne na yɛla wɔ yɛhyɛ.* ‘As for today, you are going to pay the money because repayment is long overdue.’

Debtor (tries to free himself): *Gyakyi me na eleboda me. Ele ahonle somaa, meha mehile wɔ kɛ maa me meke ekyii na mebadua yemɔti . . .* ‘Leave me, you are hurting me. **You have got a heart**, I have told you to give me some time to pay so . . .’

In talking about people who are quick tempered, the Nzema try to sound polite because quick temperedness is a disliked behaviour. From the excerpt, the debtor describes his creditor (husband) as *ele ahonle* ‘you have got a heart’. This idiom is employed to avoid the direct and harsh expression *engye na wɔava eya fee*, ‘you are very quick tempered’ which threatens the face of the creditor. Other milder expressions used to mitigate the aforementioned harsh expression are *wɔ ahonle bikye wɔ*, ‘your heart is closer to you’ and *wɔ ahonle gyegye wɔ*, ‘your heart disturbs you’. In this context, ‘you have got a heart’, ‘your heart is closer to you’ and ‘your heart disturbs you’ respectively does not suggest that other people do not have hearts or that the proximity of the person and his heart is closer than that of other people or that the individual is hypertensive. Rather, the Nzema use these idioms to imply that one is easily exasperated.

5.4 Idioms related to stomach

The data further revealed Nzema idiomatic expressions that incorporate stomach. In this category, stomach is metonymically used to indicate that abortion is illegal among the Nzema. Stomach is further personified as a creditor who chases debtors to pay their debts. These are illustrated below in excerpt 11 and 12 respectively:

Excerpt. 11 (22/01/2022 at Ayisakulo, Nzema East)

Husband (during arbitration at the chief’s palace, reveals his intention to divorce his wife): *Ɔdi ɔ ti anwo ɔye debie biala. Mame mengulo zɔhane subane ne, ɔti mese meɔ ye ewole.* ‘She does everything without consulting me. I can no longer bear it, so I want to divorce her.’

Chief’s spokesperson (calls the woman): *Raale ye, ε hu se eye debie biala a enzuzu nwo engile ye, na kɛ ese ε?* ‘Your husband

says you do everything without his notice, what do you have to say?’

Wife: *Mesele wɔ, biza ye saa ɔle dasele a. Duzu a medi me ti anwo meye a?* ‘Please ask him if he has any evidence. What do I do without informing him?’

Husband (explains to the spokesperson): *Yeye ɔ ko wɔ meke mɔɔ yeambɔ me amaneɛ a.* ‘**She has removed her stomach** without first informing me.’

Wife: *Okile ke, mɔɔ mevia ye dekele la eza menwo ɔ nzi ɔ? Ehye ati a ebɔ me nolo wɔahile maanlema la ɔ?* ‘Do you expect to have another child when our first child is yet to toddle?’

Excerpt 11 shows that the Nzema use *ko* ‘stomach’ to represent conception. From the conversation, the husband uses the idiom *yeye ɔ ko* ‘she has removed her stomach’ to swerve the direct expression *yezekye kakula ne mɔɔ la ɔ kunla la* ‘she has aborted her baby’. Among the Nzema, aborting an innocent baby is tantamount to causing a deliberate murder, and so the society disdains women who engage in such uncouth practice. Since people speak ill of women who abort babies, the husband resorts to the idiom *yeye ɔ ko* ‘she has removed her stomach’, a subtle way to expose his wife of her evil action. Through this idiom, the husband sounds polite and also saves the face of his wife.

Excerpt. 12 (14/02/2022 at Aziema, Nzema Central)

A (calls his friends, B and C to attend another friend’s party): *Na be rele evi ke ene a yekɔ ekponledole ne ɔ? Bɛmaa yehɔ ɛ.* ‘Have you forgotten that we are attending the party today? Let us go.’

B: *Ehɛe o! Bɛmaa yehɔ ɛ, na bebɔ dɔne nye kekala?* ‘Oh yes! Let us go, what is the time now?’

C: (pulls up his shirt to expose his stomach while addressing A): *Nea me kunlu mɔɔ ekulo ke mefa mekɔsi agole a.* ‘Look at how flat my stomach has become that you expect me to go and dance.’

A: *Ese enreyɛ gyima la, yemɔ a ɛ ko elɛda wɔ kake la.* ‘Since you do not want to work, **you are indebted to your stomach** all the time.’

From the excerpt, C pulls his shirt to expose his stomach, a common practice among the Nzema that implies that one has not eaten anything. The Nzema believe in industriousness, and so people who entertain laziness are not tolerated. The Nzema also think that it is only laziness that makes a youth or an adult who is not incapacitated to complain of hunger. Therefore, to them, it is not normal for a healthy man or woman to always complain of hunger. To conveniently talk about such persons, speakers say *ε ko elēda wɔ kakε*, ‘you are indebted to your stomach’. This is seen from excerpt 12, where A uses the above idiom in addressing C. This expression is used instead of the direct expression *εhɔne elεku wɔ*, ‘you are very hungry’ since the latter explicitly indicates that C is indolent, a statement which is derogating.

6. Conclusion

Within the purview of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, the current study has examined the communicative functions of some Nzema body parts idiomatic expressions. As the data have revealed, the Nzema use a lot of idiomatic expressions that relate to body parts such as hands, legs, body, skin, heart, chest and stomach. It has been shown that, these culturally established body parts related idioms are deliberately employed to save the face of the addressee and also to make the speaker sound polite in order to maintain social relationship and promote peaceful societal coexistence.

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