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Put Weight on Top: The Language and Literature of Corruption in West Africa

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Outline

- Introduction
- Theoretical Approaches to Corruption
- The Expression of Corruption in West African Languages: Methods, Data, Analysis
- Towards a Linguistic and Literary Anti-Corruption Agenda
- Conclusion





1. Introduction

John Zibiri:

“I worked and lived in Accra for over 20 years. I ran my own private company from 2001 until 2018.

[...]

- 👉 Everything is wrong with Ghana.*
- 👉 The Director won't give you contract except you pay up front.*
- 👉 The banks won't give you loan except you concede a certain percentage.*
- 👉 The man supervising the contract won't pass the job except you play ball.*
- 👉 The clerk won't pass your file for payment except you rob his palm.*
- 👉 The accounts department won't raise your payment voucher or cheque unless you see them. I can go on and on.*

- 👉 The worst thing is that it has become a norm that nobody sees anything wrong with.*
- 👉 If you think otherwise, they begin to think you are sick and not normal.*
- 👉 If you try to stand in their way, you put your life at risk.*
- 👉 If you get killed there is no justice system in place to seek redress and bring the perpetrators to book.*
- 👉 The police is corrupt, the Judiciary is the same.*
- 👉 Even the religious circle is not spared.*
- 👉 Everything in Ghana revolves around corruption.”*



- The name `Ghana` can just be replaced with any (West) African country and John Zabiri's observations will be true for that country.
- John Zabiri's comments have been the subject of a game on social media where people now clean off `Accra` and `Ghana` and put in their place names like `Ajuba` and `Nigeria`.
- A typical example is at this link:
<https://www.nairaland.com/3623796/what-john-zibiri-said-nigeria>
- All of this means that corruption is prevalent in much of Africa, and it is important that intellectual discussions focus on it to clearly define it and find a way to stop it.



- **Three questions:**

- What is corruption and what are the theoretical approaches to the question of instability and corruption in West Africa and beyond?
- How is corruption expressed in indigenous West African languages, and in literary works by African writers?
- How can linguists and literary scholars contribute to anti-corruption activities based on their academic research and writing?

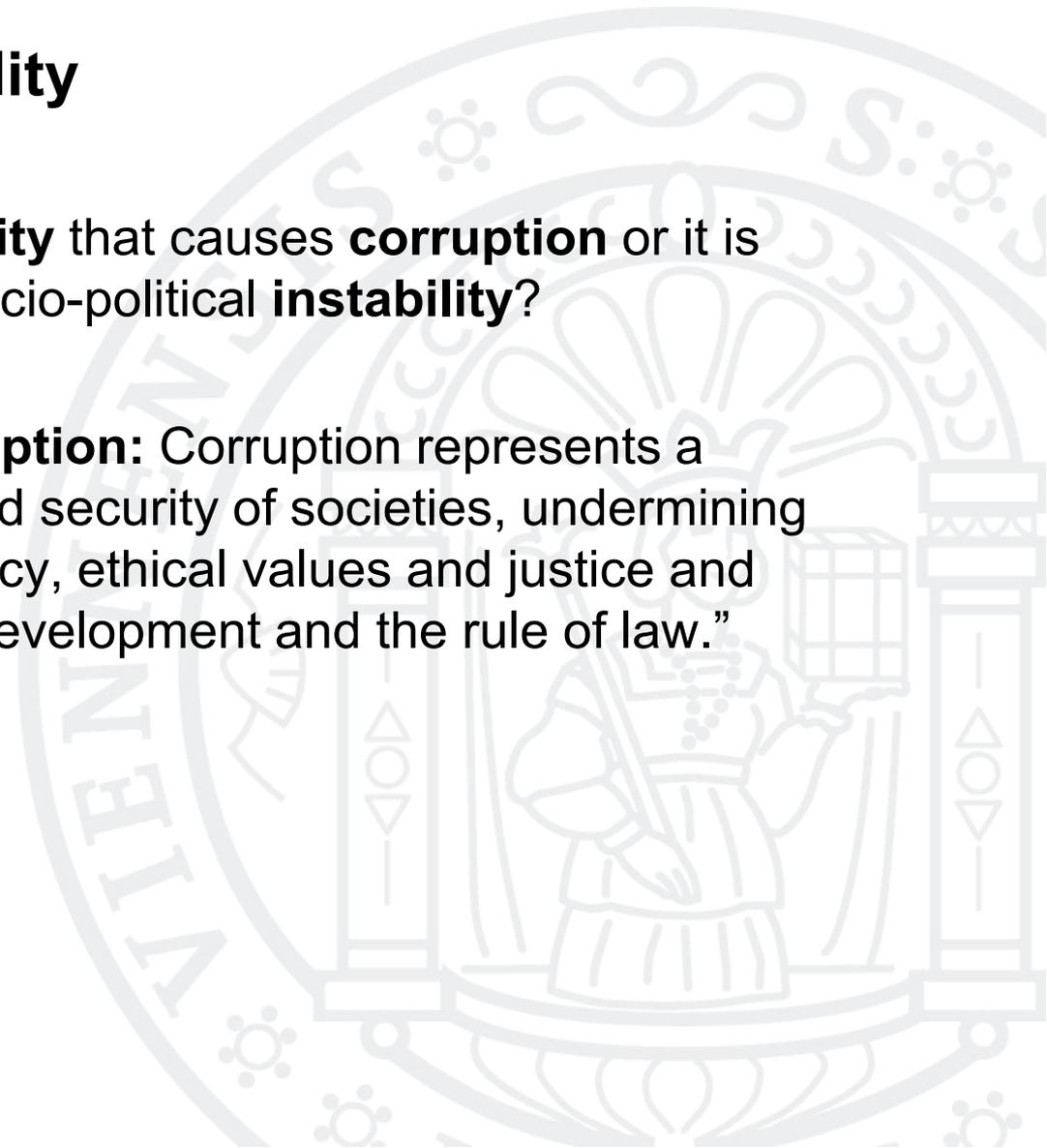
- **Several approaches to the definition of corruption:**

- Gulting et al (2013): corruption as “the use of public office for the purpose of private gain”
- Hira et al (2016): corruption as “... any breach of trust, malfeasance of intended duty, or failure to deliver in both practice and spirit for any agreement when the purpose is the gain of just one of the parties”
- Dimant, E., & Schulte, T. (2016) discuss the effects of corruption at the micro, meso, and macro levels



Corruption and Instability

- Is it socio-political **instability** that causes **corruption** or it is **corruption** that causes socio-political **instability**?
- **UN Convention on Corruption:** Corruption represents a threat “...to the stability and security of societies, undermining the institutions of democracy, ethical values and justice and jeopardizing sustainable development and the rule of law.”





2. Theoretical Approaches to Corruption

- What makes people corrupt? What explains corrupt behaviour?
- **Rational Choice Theories:**
 - Dupuy and Niset (2018): “Rational choice theory ... explains corruption as the function of calculating, strategic, self-interested behaviour. In this view, corruption is particularly likely to occur in situations of power asymmetry, where some individuals (agents) hold power over others (principals)”
 - Jon Mercer (2005): Rational choice theories “explain how one should reason, not how one actually reasons” and they do not adequately explain how people “make decisions to reach an outcome”
- **Cognitive scientists** instead propose explanations to corruption based on notions from psychology, political psychology, and behavioural economics



- Dupuy and Niset (2018): **Alternative to rational choice theory** based on five notions

1. *Power*

According to this theory, individuals holding power are more likely to act corruptly.

Implications:

- a) support information and sanctioning mechanisms targeted at power holders to prevent and punish corrupt acts
- b) support integrity measures for power holders
- c) ensure transparent and accountable decision-making processes to check power
- d) provide clear definitions of corrupt actions to prevent ethical sliding



2. *Personal gain and self-control*

According to Dupuy and Niset (2018), individuals are more likely to act corruptly when they stand to gain personally, have lower self-control, perceive that corruption will only cause indirect harm, and when they work in organisations where unethical behaviour goes unpunished.

Implications:

- a) supporting institutional mechanisms that limit the ability of power-holders to gain materially from their position
- b) supporting integrity measures for power holders, including reward systems.



3. ***Loss aversion and risk acceptance***

Individuals are likely to be more risk-acceptant to offset losses, and risk averse to preserve gains. Uncertainty is likely to increase the likelihood of acting corruptly.

Implications:

- a) support information provision about the negative outcomes of corrupt behaviour to reduce uncertainty and mitigate risk-acceptant behaviour designed to offset potential losses
- b) pay attention to how information and situations are framed, and avoid negative framing



4. **Rationalisation**

Rationalisation narratives seem to make corruption more acceptable.

Implications:

- a) provide clear definitions of corrupt actions (and enforce them) to prevent rationalisations and normalisation.

5. **Emotion**

Emotions such as guilt may make it less likely for individuals to act corruptly.

Implications:

- a) support information provision about the negative outcomes of corrupt behaviour to encourage a sense of moral responsibility.



- While these theories may help explain why people become corrupt, we still need to know how these corrupt states of mind are expressed. We will still need linguistic insights into the outcomes of behaviours whether governed by rational choice theories or cognitive science theories.
- There are cultural linguistic approaches like Polzenhagen and Wolf (2021) which use a metaphor framework to talk about corruption in what they term as '**African English**'.
- This present paper focuses on how corruption occurs in **indigenous African languages**.

3. The Expression of Corruption in West African Languages: Methods, Data, Analysis

- **Netnography**

- **Online research method** that originates in ethnography
- In netnography a significant amount of the data originates in and manifests through the **digital traces** of naturally occurring public conversations recorded by contemporary communications networks.
- Netnography uses these conversations as data. It is an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques of anthropology to the study of interactions and experiences manifesting through digital communications. (Kozinets 1998)
- In an era of pandemics, where it is not easy to do in-person interviews and fieldwork, netnography has become an important method of collecting data for linguistic and other analyses.



- **Transactional linguistic cues of corruption (TLCC)**

- *put weight on top* (in West African English)
- *toa kitu kidogo* ‘remove something small’ (in Swahili)
- *ashaan-ash-shay* ‘pay for tea’ (in Egyptian Arabic)
- *yε biribi* ‘do something’ (in Akan)
- *Kasa yayi karfi, shei ka wani abu* ‘This land is hard, you have to do something’ (in Hausa)
- *se owo kúndúrú sí mi* ‘hand something to me discreetly’ (in Yoruba),
- *Megharia ahu* ‘shake/adjust your body’ (in Igbo).



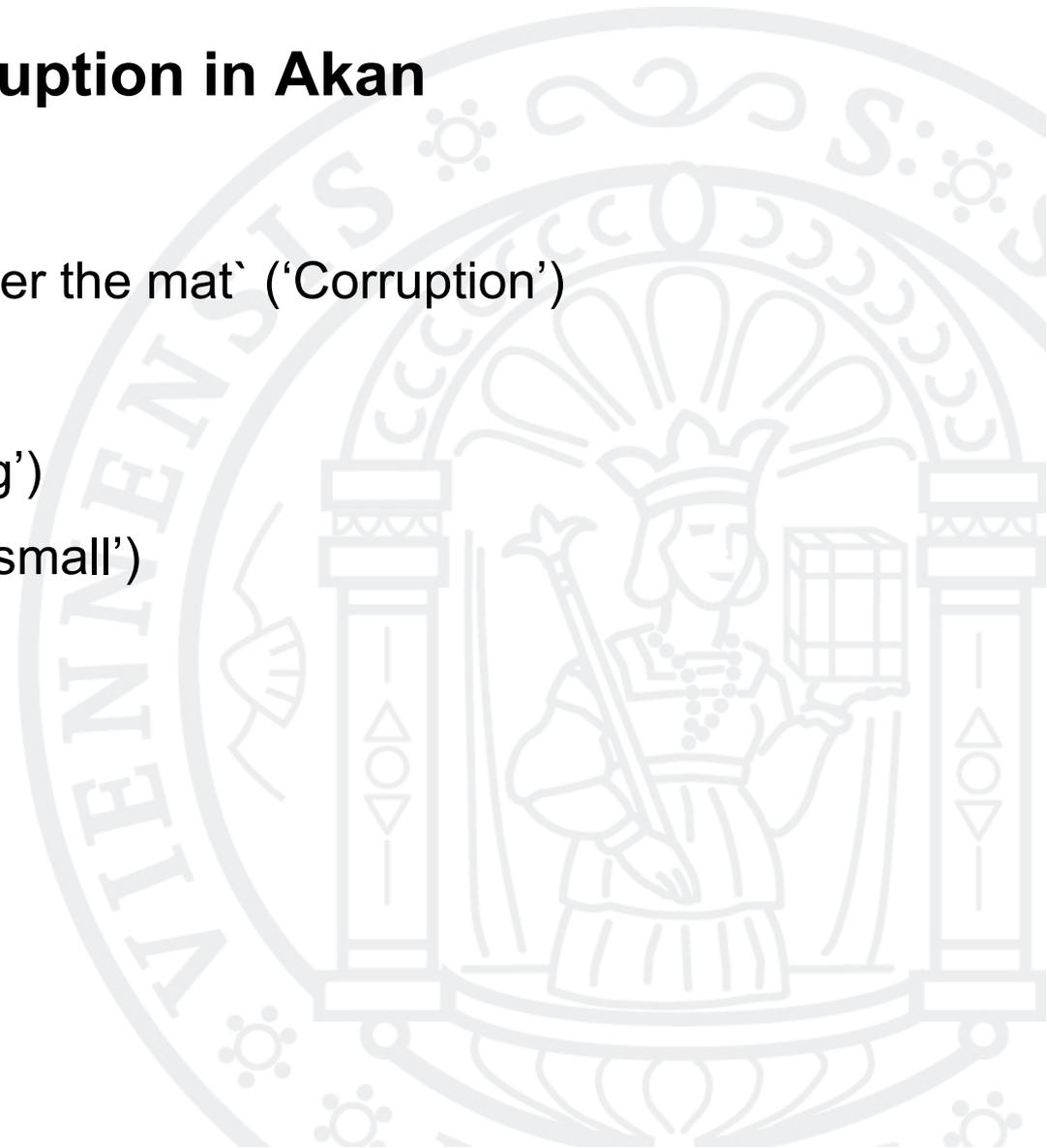
The Expression of Corruption in Dagaare

- Póóròng: ‘rotten entity’ (‘Corruption’)
- Fínńóo: ‘cheating’ (‘Corruption’)
- **TLCCs of Corruption:**
 - Ñ dóó, bǝ̀ bèláá kó má. (‘My friend, get something small for me.’)
 - Máásà, séé ká fó kàà kàà nyé yòò (ká lè nááné à kòng yí yélé). (‘Master, you must look into it (or else nothing will come out of this).’)
 - Ñ mã, è éébó kàngá. (‘Mother, do something!’)
 - Tùng kòré, ñ bâ. (‘Dip into your pocket, my friend!’)
 - Séé ká té gàà pól à némbéré nòè. (‘We must go and oil the mouths of the important people.’)
 - Bà kòré lá à bà núúri ánáng só ká bá dié sèr’kúú ní. (‘They have scratched their hands, that’s why they are coming up with a useless judgement.’)
 - Dóó, è kà à fò gánè tàá zégròng kà lè nááné sàsée nà fú ó lá lóó. (‘My friend, put weight on top of your paper, else the wind will blow it away.’)



The Expression of Corruption in Akan

- Keteasehye: ‘Put/hide under the mat` (‘Corruption’)
- **TLCCs of Corruption:**
 - Ye biribi (‘Do something’)
 - Hu yen kakra (‘See us small’)





The Expression of Corruption in Igbo

- òpù na ághùghò: Corruption and cheating ('bribery and corruption')
- Ànyị nà-èkpé èkpéré mégídé òpù nà ághùghò ('We are praying against bribery and corruption.')
- Nruru aka ('Corruption')
- iri ngari ('take a bribe')
- O nyere aka azu ('He gave a bribe')
- O nara aka azu ('He took a bribe')
- In some of the cultures, it is claimed that corruption is **hardly ever expressed explicitly**.
Examples: 'adjust or shake the body' 'Megharia ahu' or 'play the card' 'Tuo okwe'. The context is what defines it as a bribe.



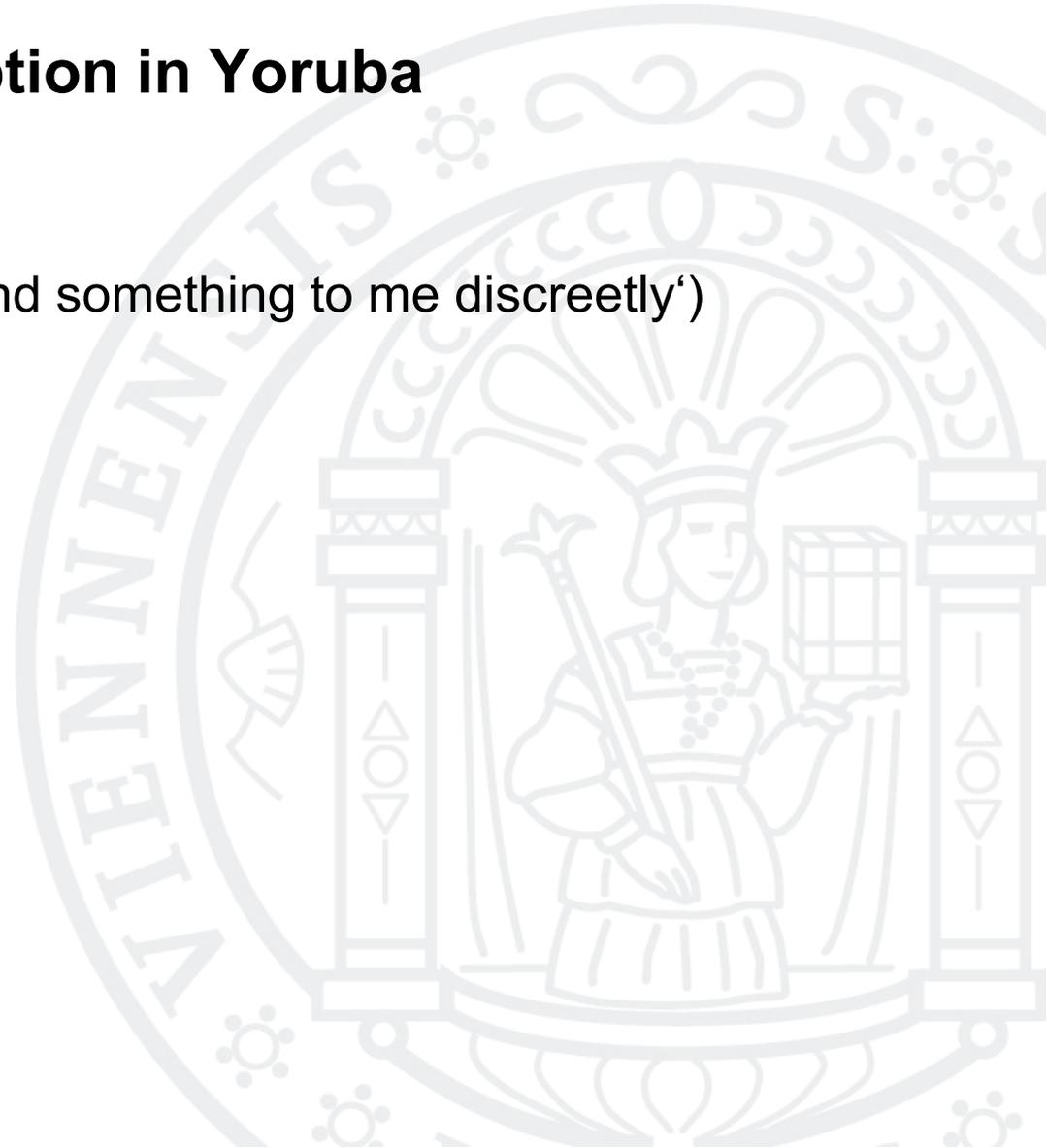
- **TLCCs of Corruption in Igbo:**

- Chọ́ọ́ yá mmā́ ('Beautify it')
- mèghárijá áhù́ ('shake/adjust body')
- chọ́ọ́-lù́ m̄ nwáńchọ́chọ́ ('Give us something small')
- Tìnyé áká na àkpà ('Dip your hand into your pocket')
- Tìnyé-lù́ Fádá íhé nà búùtù ('Put something in the boot for the priest')
- Ó nyè-rè áká ázū́ ('S/he gave a bribe.')
- Ọ́ nà-rà áká ázū́ ('S/he collected a bribe.')



Expressions of Corruption in Yoruba

- ìwàbàjé
- 'se owo kúndúrú sí mi' ('hand something to me discreetly')





The Expression of Corruption in Oral Literature and Beyond

- Some of the TLCCs we have seen so far are just plain linguistic constructions whose meanings are quite transparent. Others too have a bit of indirection attached to them.
- However, one can explore further literary expressions whose meanings are far more oblique than even the indirect TLCCs. I refer to these as idiomatic or **proverbial TLCCs**.
- Proverbs are an important aspect of the oral literature of Africa. I illustrate this with Kusaal (Mabia, Niger Congo, spoken in Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo).



• TLCCs of Corruption in Kusaal

- Máálím sí'él (´Do something´)
- Nú'úniàà pù kpíngìd búgúm ('An empty hand does not quench fire.')
- Quenching fire is certainly a metaphor for a difficult task and one needs something more than an empty hand to accomplish the task.
- Pυ´mpɔ´ɔ´g pù dɔ´ níd zààlím (´A housefly does not follow a human being for nothing.´)
- In this proverb, what is meant is that if I am going to go all the way to helping you achieve something then it is that I am looking for some spoils, just as the housefly will jump on anything that is around.
- Káη ε`enti lúne´ ká káηn lú ká dí`émà nɔ´bíg ('One falls and the other also falls for the game to continue'.)
- The 'falling in turns' proverb is basically requesting that it is important to play ball, so to speak.



- Beyond oral literature, there is also some research analysing how corruption and corrupt practices are **portrayed in written literary works** (poetry, novels, and drama) by African writers.
- For instance, Oden, Christantus Oden in an undated work does pragmatic analysis of conversational breach in the literary work of Frank Ogodo which is titled *Harvest of Corruption*.
- Need for a research agenda to systematically unearth how the concept of **corruption** and related notions like **bribery** are **expressed in West African languages**, with a particular focus on “transactional linguistic cues of corruption (TLCC)”



4. Towards a Linguistic and Literary Anti-Corruption Agenda

- How can **linguists** and **literary scholars** contribute to anti-corruption activities based on their academic research and writing?
- Research and systematically record or invent terms for expressing corruption
- **Document Filtering** (computational linguistic analysis)
 - Forensic method to scan documents, recorded conversations and any kinds of discourses to identify segments of the text that might contain any of the TLCCs of corruption
 - A rigorous identification and analysis of these TLCCs can be incorporated into training programmes for anti-corruption staff
 - Indeed, this is where linguists and literary scholars must be involved, not just only as translators of materials into and from African languages, but as resource persons for training anti-corruption staff about TLCCs.



Discussion

- At a rather formalistic linguistic level, one could think of how the **word ‘corruption’ and its manifestations in various languages** could be represented across levels, including the phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels
- What also needs to be looked at is **what people say when they want to bribe an official or a person in a position of responsibility.**

Example in Dagaare:

ñ bâ, nàng sòng má wè. (‘My friend, please help me.’)

These kinds of solicitations to bribe (and they may indeed not actually mean the person wants to give a bribe) appear to us less common than the rampant cases of people demanding bribes, hence our choosing to concentrate on that.



Discussion

- **Other approaches to the language of corruption:** Adegaju (2003) analyses what he calls “...language (ab)use evident in the lexico-semantic constructions and reconstructions that are tactically deployed to configure and.... to conceal Nigeria’s debased value system.”
- The work acknowledges the fact that the depravity of Nigeria’s social order is alarming and unhealthy for national development and thinks that the linguistic options that Nigerians use to code all kinds of unacceptable behaviour are as threatening to the cause of national development as the practices themselves.
- The author thus proposes that “...any crusade that is geared towards sanitizing the Nigerian society should not be directed only at the manifestations of the country’s perverse world-view but also at the linguistic expressions that serve as their ‘life support’ system”.
- Our approach is different in that we are looking at the expressions used, whether seen as bad or good, and suggesting that we can understand the nature of corruption from this study and use that to find ways to combat corruption. Our approach does not involve waging war on the linguistic codes themselves.



5. Conclusion

- **Language and literature of corruption** in West African languages
- Corruption, which is a major scourge on the socio-economic well-being of the African, has been analysed from an **interdisciplinary perspective**
- **Functional and cognitive approaches** to the theoretical analysis of corruption
- Identifying the **various ways in which corruption is expressed in the indigenous languages of Africa**. Data from Dagaare, Akan, Igbo, Yoruba and Kusaal tell us that there are numerous transactional linguistic cues of corruption (TLCCs) in West African languages, and also in the oral literary practices of West Africans
- **Ways in which linguists and literary scholars can contribute to anti-corruption campaigns** by identifying potential cases of corruption through the analysis of texts and using these methods to train anti-corruption staff



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Barka!
Medaase!
Na gode!
E dupe!
I meela!

*Thank
you*





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