Investigating Bamanankan Corruption Euphemisms among the Malian Academic Community

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Abstract— *This paper explores the use of euphemisms in the corruption vocabulary of Bamanankan language in Malian higher education. Research in the Malian context has paid little attention to the phenomenon. So this investigation is conducted to unveil corruption euphemisms among the Malian academic community. The study combines Goffman's (1972) Face Work Theory and Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) Politeness Theory. The qualitative method has been advocated for data collection and analysis. The findings have revealed seven euphemism typologies according to gender, the social status and occupation of the people involved. They have equally uncovered that Bamanankan is the preferred language for using those euphemisms for all the research participants.*

Keywords— *Bamanankan, corruption, euphemism, higher education.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Several Malian higher education actors have developed euphemistic strategies to hide their corrupt practices. In this context, the euphemisms developed by students, parents, teachers and administrators in describing their corrupt acts become inspiring in that their analysis can help gain better insights into the phenomenon. This paper focuses on the types of euphemisms developed by the Malian academic community to conceal their corrupt academic practices.

The present paper analyses euphemisms in the corruption vocabulary of the Malian academic community. It specifically aims to i) determine the types of euphemisms used in Malian higher education; ii) explain their contexts of use and iii) analyze their semantic underpinnings. These objectives are reached by responding the following research questions: What are the types of euphemisms used among the Malian academic community? What are their contexts of use by the different academic stakeholders? And what are their semantic underpinnings?

The paper combines Goffman's (1972) *Face Work Theory* and Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987)

Politeness Theory. The Face Work Theory relies on the concept of *face* used in the phrases *to lose face* and *to save face*. Goffman (1972, p.13) finds: "poise is one important type of face-work, for through poise, the person controls his embarrassment and hence, the embarrassment that he and others might have over his embarrassment". The essence of E. Goffman's theory is that in society, participants involved in communicative interaction often attempt, not only to save their own face, but also to save the face of others.

Politeness has been conceptualized especially as strategic conflict-avoidance or even as strategic construction of cooperative social interaction (Wilkki, 2006). In this sense, it helps fight off conflicts between sides, ensures smooth conversational interaction, social balance and friendliness and mitigates the threats to the face of the hearer. Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) Politeness Theory, based on Goffman's (1967) Face Work Theory, represents Fraser's face-saving view (Wilkki, 2006). Locher and Watt (2005) even find that the two theories are not so distinct. Shortly put, minimizing the hearers' negative face and maximizing their positive face remain the key considerations of politeness (Pour, 2010).

Therefore, in this paper, euphemisms are presented and analyzed as both face-saving and linguistic politeness strategies used in communicative interaction to avoid face-threat and face-loss, and therefore maintain face.

II.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study makes use of a qualitative research design. The data collected are qualitative (interview and focus group discussion). Scholars like MacSwan (1999) and Ziamari (2008) have applied only the qualitative method that they have found most appropriate to their studies. In the same vein, Mallinson et al. (2013) have proved that a qualitative method is used to identify language in use in relation to the setting and argue:

The data for qualitative sociolinguistic research are of widely diverse types, but labeling qualitative data as language in use perhaps captures a coherent element in the diversity. There are much more concerns about revealing the social context under which the data were produced: who was speaking to whom, what was the setting, what was the relationship between the interlocutors, what roles in the group do the interlocutors have and any other aspects of the occurrence of the utterances that are considered to be relevant to the analysis (p.14).

The research population is made up of university administrators, lecturers, students and students' parents in Bamako. A research population is known as a well-defined collection of individuals known to have similar characteristics. A sample is the specific group of informants that a researcher uses to collect data. The sample size is always less than the total population.

Regarding the sampling procedure, Milroy and Gordon (2003, p.25) argue that random sampling attempts to allow the whole population to have equal chance to be part of the investigation. They maintain: "the guiding principle of random sampling is that anyone within the sample frame has an equal chance of being selected". Such a sampling procedure is significant for the present study because it helps keep participants on equal-footing.

The participants for the study are fifty (50) people forty (40) of whom have been purposively selected from two universities in Bamako, namely ULSHB (université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako) and USJPB (Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako). The sample is made up of twenty (20) students, ten (10) students' parents, ten (10) teachers and ten (10) administrators. Besides, ten (10) student parent

participants were randomly selected from outside and added to the rest of the participants. The participants are from either sex and were sampled according to gender and occupational affiliation. The table below describes the study sample:

Occupation	Universities		Outsider	Gender	
	ULSHB	USJPB		Male	Female
Students	10	10	/	10	10
Students' Parents	/	/	10	6	4
Teachers	5	5	/	5	5
Administrators/Staff	5	5	/	5	5
Total	50				

One focus group discussion was held with students in each of the two selected universities. The aims of the study were explained to the student-participants after a brief introduction. Permission from the participants was a requirement for their participation. After reassurance that their information will be kept confidential, permission was granted. The focus group session started with an introduction of the members and the topic of discussion. Then, the researchers reviewed the main points with the respondents to make comments on or ask questions.

The interviews were conducted with teachers, students' parents and university administrators. They were contacted individually to obtain their consent to participate. Both focus group discussions with students and interviews with students' parents mainly focused on the identification of corruption euphemisms in Bamanankan used by teachers and administrators to encourage students and their parents to negotiate grades and/or admission. The interviews with teachers and administrators focused on the identification of the corruption euphemisms used by students and their parents to negotiate their grades and admission.

Both the interview and the focus group were audio-recorded. According to Silverman (2005, p.33): "audio-recording is a technique employed in qualitative research to capture, in detail, the naturalistic interactions of the participants in the research field". Labov (1972, p.180) suggests that in a sociolinguistic investigation, the researcher has to use "large volumes of well-recorded natural data". The audio recordings of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed, and the researchers employed constant comparison analysis for coding and

grouping the responses by paying attention to terms, contexts, meanings, and the described categories used by informants. During the data analysis, responses in Bamanankan were not distorted so as to preserve authenticity before their translation into English. In other words, the participants' utterances contain some instances of borrowing and code-mixing which are kept in Bamanankan as they are. The names of the participants have all been coded.

III.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Corruption has been demonstrated to be an illegal practice recognized as universally shameful; that is why people involved in the practice usually tend to be discreet in both their acts and the language associated with those acts the use of euphemisms). Ogal and Macharia (2019, p.42) perceive euphemism as: "a mild and indirect expression that avoids being offensive because blunt mention of such would be quite embarrassing and obscene". In the words of Ojo, Ayandele and Egbeleye (2020, p.73), citing Tittenburg, Gladney and Stephensen (2016): "Euphemism is a figure of speech that cleverly hides the truth of its reference and is designed to avoid confrontation, hurting people's feelings, or as a substitute for profanity". It is basically used to make a sensitive, unpleasant or offensive linguistic behavior more acceptable to the hearer. Corrupt people, for instance, make use of this linguistic strategy to skillfully pass across their messages making them incomprehensible to those who are not initiated to the code. In this vein, Agbota, Sandaker and Ree (2015,p.142) quoting Anand, Ashforth and Joshi (2004, p.47), argue: "one of the most important factors that abet rationalizing and socializing is the use of euphemistic language, which enables individuals engaging in corruption to describe their acts in ways that make them appear inoffensive". Euphemistic language is used to drive and conceal corruption and consequently helps perpetuate corrupt practices. In the same way, lecturers, students and administrators (and even parents) in Malian higher education involved in academic corruption have developed linguistic euphemisms aiming at concealing their socially unacceptable behavior (social taboo).

The findings of this study have displayed several instances of linguistic euphemisms of corruption and corrupt practices developed by teachers and administrators, students and students' parents. The instances have been classified into typologies as follows: i) students trading sex for grades euphemisms ii); students' examination malpractices proverb or jargon-like euphemisms; iii) students' euphemisms for bribing teachers and administrators with money; iv) teachers

trading grades for sex euphemisms; v) teachers trading grades for money euphemisms; vi) teachers' examination malpractices proverbial euphemisms vii) parents' euphemisms for bribing teachers and administrators with money.

3.1. Students' corruption euphemisms

The interview findings from teachers and administrators have displayed three student corruption euphemism sub-typologies:

3.1.1. Students trading sex for grades euphemisms

These euphemisms have been classified into four categories:

- **appointment euphemisms** -TAR1: *Karamɔgɔ, n b'i wele kɔfɛ* (Sir, I will call you later). This type of discreet, face-saving and decent language (euphemism) is generally used by female students vis-à-vis their male lecturers to express their own readiness for corrupt acts including sex relations. Its principal aim is basically to have an appointment with the teacher. It is also a psychological preparation meant to assess the lecturer's level of readiness to embark on carrying out such immoral acts. In plain words, taboo language which looks face-threatening and more direct is avoided, and to face-save and adopt polite language, euphemisms are developed. Obviously, the student sells sex for grades and other services.

- **address location euphemisms**-TAR2: *Karamɔgɔ, ika so bɛ mi?* (Sir, where is your house?). This discreet, less face-threatening language is also employed by female students to know where a male lecturer lives, but more significantly, to determine his degree of psychological readiness for conducting the corrupt act she is discreetly proposing. The taboo language *I am readiness to go to your house to trade sex for grades*, more face-threatening, is avoided because hurting, unpleasant and not polite, and is replaced by a softer, more pleasant and less socially risky language. The use of such a euphemistic language aims to conceal the immoral nature of the proposed corrupt act, and make it more socially acceptable.

- **promise of a non-specific present euphemism**-TAR3: *Karamɔgɔ, n bɛ na i ladiya* (Sir, I will give you a present). This euphemistic strategy is still adopted by female students towards their lecturers; very close to the previous ones, it is also used to exchange sex for grades with a male teacher, but at the same time, to check up the lecturer's degree of readiness to undertake such types of corrupt acts. Obviously, the nature of the proposed present has not been specified (specification will be conducive to taboo language); the student has preferred to be polite vis-à-vis her teacher and to face-save on both sides.

- **new deal proposal euphemisms**-TAR4: *Karamɔgɔ, anw bɛ se ka ŋogɔn famuya cokoya wɛrɛ la* (Sir, we can understand each other in a different way). This is definitely covert language that can be used by both male and female students to make immoral offers to their teachers, both male and female. It can involve students from either sex proposing to exchange sex or money for grades with teachers from either sex. A close look at this student's language shows that a first attempt has failed, and now somehow desperate, the student is coming back with a new neutral and discreet proposal which can include anything that the lecturer may desire from him or her (sex included). The student did not want to run risks in his language use as there are some social norms to account for.

3.1.2. Students' examination malpractices proverb or jargon-like euphemisms

Corruption euphemisms equally include proverbs and adages and the creation a jargon which, all together, constitute a form of cover-up language meant to ensure linguistic politeness (Agbota et al, 2015). The findings of this study disclosed five types of euphemisms; they mainly relate to students' practice of corruption in examination halls and are generally proverb jargon-like euphemisms:

TAR5: *Karamogo, kana ji kɛ anw ka mugu bara la, a to anw ka mugu ci dɔni* (Sir, do not pour water in the gunpowder storehouse, let us shoot a little bit). This involves a situation where students are asking the invigilator to let them freely cheat. For that the students do not hesitate to create metaphors which stand as forms of euphemisms; the use of *mugu bara* (the gunpowder storehouse) refers to all the arsenal made ready by students for cheating. In the same vein, *ka mugu ci* (to shoot) has been developed by students to refer to the concrete act and process of cheating, using all the means made available in the gunpowder storehouse. The use of these two expressions demonstrates that the speakers wanted to observe decency in their language, given the university social milieu where they are expected to politely behave.

The same holds true for students' use of *Sabali, a to anw ka jinɛ bɔ* (please, let us show up the devil) (TAR6) addressed to the invigilator asking for his/her permission to use their cheating material. The term *jinɛ* (the devil) is expected to create fear; but the students are using it in a sense which makes it more acceptable (given the specific context of use) instead of *cheating material* the use of which hurts, looks vulgar and impolite and therefore not face-saving. While this type of language developed by students clearly appears as a form of jargon,

it equally helps them face-save, and consequently stands as a form of euphemism developed and used to talk about their everyday corrupt practices.

This student language shift to a proverb jargon-like form of euphemism may not readily be accessible to everyone, but to a limited group of initiated people. In this sense, it becomes a form of jargon; but, since it also serves as a cover-up language which aims to alleviate, mitigate and maintain decency, it becomes a form of euphemism.

3.1.3. Students' euphemisms for bribing teachers and administrators with money

It involves an act of corruption brought about by students in bribing teachers and academic staff with money (use of *money transfer*). Students develop euphemistic strategies which aim to hide some social taboos they are breaking and the taboo language describing them.

TAR7: *Karamɔgɔ, n be se ka ika orangi numero sɔrɔ wa?* (Sir, may I have your orange number?). Some students like to do business buying grades and admission with money. Unfortunately, some academic staff in charge of result processing accepts money from those students to deliberately change their original failing grades to passing ones. Since it would be unpleasant or even taboo to go and give envelopes of money to those teachers and staff members, the students have come to skillfully develop some more socially decent language with the use of the request *Sir, may I have your orange number?* which rather looks neutral except that the idea behind still remains a taboo (*Sir, I am planning to send you money or credits via orange money after the exams in exchange for admission*). In other words, the students on the hand and the teachers and staff on the other hand, are engaged in the corrupt practice of exchanging money and credits for admission, but using the language of social decency.

3.2. Teachers' corruption euphemisms

The focus group and interview findings from students and their parents have unveiled that lecturers make use of a variety of corruption euphemisms to disguise their corrupt acts. Those euphemisms have been classified into categories as follows:

3.2.1. Teachers trading grades for sex euphemisms

The findings from both the students' focus group discussions and the parents' interviews have revealed that some male lecturers request sex relations with female students in exchange for grades; they also make sexual gratification a condition for getting passing grades. In this sense, three euphemistic expressions have been recorded:

- **address reminding euphemisms**-SPR1: *I bɛ ne siyoro don* (You know where I sleep);

- **desire reminding euphemisms**-SPR2: *I b'a don ne bɛ mi fɛ* (You know what I like);

- **euphemisms related to forced choice between two acts**-SPR3: *bilema walima glɛn* (The red one or bed).

The context of use of the first two euphemisms is usually the same. For instance, *I bɛ ne siyoro don* is a grade harassment euphemistic strategy used by some male lecturers vis-à-vis their female students. It often involves a situation where a female student asks her teacher for a passing grade that she does not deserve. In response, the teacher would ask her to invite him for sex relations; if the student does not accept the teacher's offer, but is still asking him for this favor, the lecturer's reaction would be (linguistic taboo terms) *if you want me to give you a passing grade, you have to come to my house for sex relations.* It appears that the proposed act is a social taboo that cannot be bluntly expressed. To cover it up and make it more socially and linguistically pleasant, *I bɛ ne siyoro don* is used by the lecturer. *I b'a don ne bɛ mi fɛ* falls in the same context in that the male lecturer is softly telling the student (linguistic taboo words) *if you want me to give you a passing grade, you have to accept sex relations with me.* Again, given the taboo nature of the requested act, taboo language is replaced with euphemistic language to make the shameful act and the associated language softer, milder and less hurting to the hearer, recognizing that there are degrees of softness and mildness.

The phrase *bilema walima glɛn* symbolizes the forced choice that some female students have to face from some male teachers; the teacher proposes the red pen which symbolizes a failing grade or bed that represents sex relations and the symbol of a passing grade. Report from a female student testifies that a lecturer from her school used to give two options to female students: sex relations in exchange for passing grades or refusal that will result into failing grades. Admittedly, the language still looks harsh, but the user has tried to make it more polite and more face-saving because the corrupt act it is associated with is shameful, and is a social ban.

3.2.2. Teachers trading grades for money euphemisms

The findings have revealed four categories of euphemisms used by teachers. The process consists for some teachers in deliberately inviting students or their parents to exchange passing grades for money. Given the taboo nature of the corrupt act requested, a number of euphemistic expressions have been created to conceal, cover up, alleviate and mitigate the negative image that hearers may develop.

-Euphemisms related to the teacher giving information on his house building - SPR4: *Ne bɛ so jɔ la* (I am

building a house). The process usually involves the teacher giving failing grades to all students, the good ones included, and then asking everyone to reset the exam or pay money. All those who pay in the reset exam will get passing grades regardless of their true performance. The practice is a social taboo, and the taboo language the use of which the teacher has avoided is *I am building my house; I need money; if you come with money, I will sell you grades.* Given the shame surrounding the use of such an immoral act and the language describing it, the lecturer has skillfully devised and used *Ne bɛ so jɔ la* to observe social decency, linguistic politeness and be face-saving.

- **Euphemisms related to frightening students to buy grades** - SPR5: *Respon ka lisi bɛ ne bolo* (I have the class monitor's list) / *Bɛ minɛ la, respon* (Everyone is caught, class monitor). On behalf of the lecturer, the class monitor usually writes up a list of students who are ready to buy grades. In class, the teacher trying to frighten the students and obliging them to pay makes constant reference to that list. The taboo language the use of which the teacher has concealed looks like *from the list made by the class-monitor, I have the name of everyone; if you do not come and pay, I will give you failing grades. Respon ka lisi bɛ ne bolo*, as used by the teacher, aims at making the language softer and less hurting to conceal the taboo act the teacher is describing.

The teacher using *Bɛ minɛ la, respon* is addressing his/her speech to the class monitor, but the very target audience is the whole class. This indirect linguistic strategy (coupled with the type of neutral expression used) has a euphemistic taste in that the speaker does as if s/he is addressing somebody other than the true addressee. That makes the language used less harsh and more acceptable. This language use from the teacher shows that s/he is obliging the students to come and buy passing grades.

- **deal proposal euphemisms** – SPR6: *Anw ka jɛ ka ko lajɛ ŋogonfɛ* (Let's agree and examine the issue together). This involves a situation where a teacher is encouraging low level students to propose a solution (i.e. to pay money) in order for him to give them passing grades. It specifically involves a selling and buying business where a teacher sells passing grades to students and students buy passing grades from a teacher. The type of language adopted by the teacher is definitely euphemistic in that it shows politeness, decency and looks face-saving for either side. The teacher's stylistic choice shows his level of awareness about the context of the conversation and the participants involved.

3.2.3. Teachers' examination malpractices proverbial euphemisms

The findings from the students' focus group discussions have displayed only one euphemistic expression used in different ways by teachers. For instance, a corrupt invigilator may avoid detecting and denouncing a low level student copying a brilliant one after the two sides have already made a deal; the instance below is an illustration:

-**invigilator ignoring cheating students** - SPR7: *N tena ji kɛ mugubo la bisa* (I am not going to shed water in the gunpowder today). After money has been collected from students in the examination hall, the invigilator guarantees students' free access to each other's exam papers; in plain words, the lecturer accepts gratification in exchange for creating a free atmosphere for cheating and provides students with a code. The language used to describe this taboo act is the proverb *N tena ji kɛ mugubo la bisa*, meant to cover up and say what cannot overtly be said. Proverbs often carry this euphemistic taste in that they sometimes stand as a polished up style aiming inter alia, to preserve decency and facilitate communicative interaction (M. Minkailou (2016).

3.3. Students' parents' corruption euphemisms

The analysis of the findings from teachers and administrators has unveiled that parents practice corruption with both teachers and administrators and use euphemisms to sugarcoat their evil practice. The phenomenon and the euphemistic language adopted to talk about it are described below:

3.3.1. Parents' euphemisms for bribing teachers and administrators with money

The teachers and administrators' interview analysis has uncovered two bribing euphemistic categories describing the corruption language used by students' parents:

-**offering money as the kola price** -TAR8: *Worosɔngon minɛ; I k'i hakili to a la* (Take the kola price; keep him/her in mind). In fact, linguistic euphemisms are not only used to grease discourse but also to establish and strengthen social cohesion and stability because language devoid of euphemistic sugarcoats is considered as a blemished code of communication. That is why Dholuo speakers of Kenya, Ogal and Macharia (2019) note, use a series of metaphors as bribe euphemisms, namely, *tea* because of its taste, *petrol/oil* as an energizer, *mouth of a pen* especially among administrative offices, *opening eyes or shedding light on someone* to ensure calmness and confidence in carrying out action.The parent proposes, not money, which implies corruption (a social taboo to avoid), but the 'kola price', *Worosɔngon minɛ*, to hide his corrupt

act, which is truly unveiled in his second sentence, *I k'i hakili to a la*. In taboo terms, his intention would be *accept money from me and give a passing grade to my child.*

In fact, *woro* (kola nut) is often used for socialization in Africa, especially during visits paid to people. It helps break barriers and ensures easy social and communicative interaction. Therefore, offering *woro* or even *worosɔngon* should be perceived as a good social practice. However, its use in the education setting usually connotes the practice of sugarcoated corruption with the aim of talking about a corrupt act that cannot be bluntly presented because face-threatening. Therefore, since interaction requires decency and face-saving, the use of *worosɔngon* helps respect those social principles.

-**making an appointment** - TAR9: *Anw ka ŋogɔn ye I den ka ko la* (We need to meet about the case of your child) /*Anw bɛ se ka ŋogɔ ye kɔfɛ* (We can meet later). A parent proposes to meet a teacher (usually no matter the place) to discuss (to negotiate) his child's admission. The parent's language use shows the absolute necessity for him to hold the meeting. Money is not overtly mentioned because of decency; yet, what is actually expected is a meeting to negotiate admission in exchange for money.

In fact, both sides understand the contextual meaning implied in the sentence *Anw ka ŋogɔn ye I den ka ko la*, but at the same time, both sides implicitly agree to face-save and put in more socially acceptable words, what cannot be overtly expressed. Neither the true nature of the topic to discuss, nor the negotiation points have been unveiled. A closer look at the structure of *Anw ka ŋogɔn ye I den ka ko la* shows that the speaker (the parent) euphemistically uses the term *I den* (your child, instead of my child) as if the child belongs to the listener/hearer. It is true that in African traditional society, the child belongs to everyone, especially when education is concerned. Yet, in the present context, the parent is telling the teacher that his own child is also his (the teacher's), and therefore, if he does good to his own child, he should do so for this child. This style is one particular characteristic of corruption euphemisms (*your child, your son, your daughter, your father, your mother, etc.).* The use of '*my child'* would not be appropriate in this context.

IV. CONCLUSION

Corruption remains a practice that characterizes Malian higher education institutions. Given its taboo nature, the academic community (and even students' parents) has come to develop linguistic euphemisms to talk about and describe corrupt practices. This study has disclosed the euphemism typologies that Malian higher education

stakeholders use to discuss what cannot overtly be mentioned. The euphemisms displayed include students trading sex for grades, students' examination malpractices proverb or jargon-like euphemisms, students' euphemisms for bribing lecturers and administrators, lecturers trading grades for sex euphemisms, lecturers trading grades for money euphemisms, teachers' examination malpractices proverbial euphemisms and parents' euphemisms for bribing teachers and administrators with money. The study has equally revealed that the type of euphemisms used by actors depends on on determinants such as gender, the social status and the occupation of the speaker (i.e., teacher, student, administrator, parents). The paper notes that while French is the main language of education, Bammankan is preferred as the language in which speakers can '*save their faces'.* The findings of this paper will certainly help increase the awareness of the academic community and other stakeholders about the existence of corruption in higher education and the euphemisms developed by corrupt actors to veil their acts. Further research is encouraged in the field in order to gain new and better insights into the issue.

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