

Sweetheart, Kay, Babe, and My Dear: A Sociopragmatic Study of Address Terms among Educated Ghanaian Couples

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Abstract

The intricacies of communication within intimate relationships, including the choice of address terms, are influenced by various factors. Although address terms are commonplace in various interactive encounters, they remain under-researched in spousal interactions. This study, therefore, investigated address terms used among educated Ghanaian couples across different social contexts in the Cape Coast Metropolis (Ghana), utilising Brown and Gilman's (1960) Theory of Power and Solidarity Postulates. The data for this study were collected through a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) administered to some willing and available married close friends. Three key findings emerged from the analysis. First, educated Ghanaian couples in Cape Coast Metropolis commonly employed six major address terms in their face-to-face interactions, which include endearment terms, first names, clipped first names, descriptive phrases, titles/honorifics, and zero address terms. Second, the choice of address terms by educated couples is highly context-dependent, as they primarily consider the interaction setting before choosing a particular address form. Lastly, couples exhibit creativity and innovation in their choice of address terms to reinforce mutual communication and maintain intimacy and affection. These findings contribute to the sociolinguistic scholarship on familial address practices in multilingual Ghanaian contexts and offer implications for cultural maintenance, marriage communication, and future research on non-educated couples in Ghana.

Keywords: Address Terms, Cape Coast, Educated Ghanaian Couples, Familial Domain.

Introduction

Studies on address terms continue to attract considerable scholarly interest across sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and pragmatics. This sustained attention is crucial, as address terms represent a key aspect of verbal behaviour through which a society's norms, practices, and social conduct can be understood. Parkinson (1985) describes address terms as the words and expressions used in speech events to refer to the addressee, noting their significance as indicators of social meaning. Address terms constitute a crucial interface between language and society, as they provide valuable sociolinguistic insights among interlocutors, their relationships, and the contexts in which communication occurs. Social bonds among speakers are a central dimension of any communicative encounter, and an important aspect of understanding human interaction in any socio-cultural setting is examining how individuals initiate conversations or address one another using any address form. Holmes (1992) observes that examining how people use language across different social contexts reveals rich discernments into both the functions of language and the

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nature of social relationships within a community. Given that “different speech communities are likely to be different since different languages have different linguistic resources to express what is culturally permissible and meaningful” (Afful, 2007:276), it becomes essential to investigate address practices in diverse contexts.

Terms of address differ across communities because the socio-pragmatic variables that influence interaction in one group may not apply in another. Previous studies demonstrate that the expressions used for men and women often reveal broader societal attitudes toward gender relations (Akindele, 2008; Salami, 2004). Wardhaugh (2008) further observes that several social factors, such as event type, social status, kinship ties, age, gender, occupation, transactional role, race, and degree of intimacy, influence a speaker’s choice of address terms. The situational context also matters, as the use of particular address forms reflects the type of social relationship speakers wish to construct, whether one of distance or solidarity.

The relationship between language and context in the use of address terms has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Studies have examined address practices in academic settings (Afful, 2007, 2010; Dickey, 1997) and in non-academic domains (Mansor, 2019; Oyetade, 1995). Within non-academic contexts, a significant body of work has explored address terms within familial relationships, particularly among spouses (Afzali, 2011; Esmā’li, 2011; Evans-Pritchard, 1948; Yang, 2007). These studies show that spouses’ choices of address terms are shaped by factors such as intimacy, cultural norms, age, educational background, and situational appropriateness (Esmā’li, 2011; Keshavarz, 2001; Salami, 2004; Yang, 2007).

Despite these contributions, research on address terms in Ghana, especially within intimate relationships, remains limited, despite the country’s considerable cultural and linguistic diversity. Against the background of previous studies on address forms, as indicated above, we investigate the address terms used by educated Ghanaian couples in various social contexts within the Cape Coast Metropolis, given their potential to yield interesting findings. Educated couples, defined here as spouses who have completed tertiary education, form a distinct sociocultural group whose linguistic choices may reflect a blend of traditional Ghanaian norms and contemporary communicative practices. Investigations into how educated Ghanaian couples address one another are likely to yield interesting patterns regarding how social and contextual factors shape language use in modern Ghanaian society. Specifically, the study has two main objectives: first, to identify the different address terms used by educated couples in their daily conversations. Second, it aims to explore how contexts affect the choice of these address terms. The study, hence, is guided by the following questions:

1. What address terms do educated Ghanaian couples in Cape Coast Metropolis use for their partners in face-to-face interactions?
2. How do contexts affect educated Ghanaian couples in Cape Coast Metropolis in their choice of different address terms for their partners in face-to-face interactions?

Literature Review

Theoretical Lens

This study is grounded in Brown and Gilman’s (1960) power and solidarity framework, a foundational model for analysing address practices in social interaction. The framework has been widely applied in studies of address terms across diverse speech communities (Alrabaa, 1985; Braun, 1988; Dickey, 1996; Geertz, 1973; Parkinson, 1985) due to its enduring explanatory relevance.

Brown and Gilman (1960) argue that address choices are governed by two key social principles: power and solidarity. Power semantics is characterised by asymmetrical, non-reciprocal address patterns, historically illustrated by the European T/V distinction, in which speakers used deferential forms to address superiors and familiar forms to address inferiors. Such patterns reflected hierarchical social relations shaped by factors including age, gender, wealth, social status, and institutionalised roles.

In contrast, solidarity semantics reflects reciprocal address choices grounded in interpersonal closeness, shared identity, and mutual affiliation. As societies became more egalitarian, address practices increasingly shifted from power-based distinctions to solidarity-based reciprocity. Under this principle, familiar forms are mutually used to index intimacy, while formal forms signal social distance irrespective of relative status. Solidarity thus emerges from perceived like-mindedness, such as shared family ties, profession, or social background (Brown & Gilman, 1960).

This study draws on Brown and Gilman's (1960) Power and Solidarity semantics to examine address terms used among educated couples, whose interactions are shaped by both intimacy and social norms. Educated couples constitute a distinctive social group in which address practices may simultaneously reflect affection, equality, respect, and, in some contexts, residual power relations. This study conceptualises spousal address practices as shaped by the interaction of social context, relationship dynamics, and sociocultural norms, and interprets them through Brown and Gilman's (1960) power and solidarity semantics. Contexts (private vs public settings) influence whether couples prioritise solidarity (intimacy, affection, equality) or power (respect, hierarchy, social decorum). Linguistic choices (e.g., endearments, first names, honorifics) serve as observable manifestations of these underlying relational orientations. Thus, address terms function as sociopragmatic resources through which couples negotiate identity, intimacy, cultural expectations, and situational appropriateness. This framework positions address forms as dependent variables shaped by contextual and relational factors.

In applying this framework to marital discourse, the study assumes that address terms indexing intimacy and affection, such as endearment terms, first names, and clipped-name forms, primarily realise solidarity semantics. Equally, address terms that signal deference, respect, or hierarchy, such as titles, honorifics, or formal name forms, are interpreted as manifestations of power semantics. Spousal address practices, therefore, offer a productive lens for analysing how educated Ghanaian couples negotiate intimacy, equality, and respect across varying social contexts.

Past studies on Address Terms

Several studies have investigated address and endearment terms among spouses in different speech communities. Studies across different sociocultural contexts demonstrate that spousal address practices are shaped by social distance, formality, demographic variables, and broader sociocultural structures. Keshavarz (2001) shows that increases in social distance and formality reduce the use of familiar address forms in Persian, with age being central in informal settings and gender more decisive in formal domains. Subsequent studies in Iran reinforce this sociolinguistic sensitivity as Esmae'li (2011) found that spouses switch between respectful names, first names, and pet names depending on whether parents are present, while Afzali (2011) highlights how Iran's patriarchal norms and shifting gender roles influence power and solidarity dynamics in address choices. Shafiee et al. (2015) add that education strongly predicts the formality of address practices, whereas economic status does not significantly affect their use.

Other studies reveal patterns similar to those in the previous findings. Salami (2004) shows that Yoruba women's address practices toward their husbands are shaped by age, education, origin,

and speech context, as gender expectations played a key role. In Jordan, Etaywe (2018) demonstrates how situations, duration of marriage, and socio-educational backgrounds influence spouses' use of epithets, teknonyms, and endearment terms. Al-Majali and Al-haq (2021) further find age-graded patterns: younger spouses prefer endearment terms, while older couples use teknonyms, and men employ more endearment terms in public due to social power.

A few studies show a trend in sociocultural conditions of address practices. Yang (2007) argues that Chinese women's address terms toward husbands reflect traditional familial hierarchies, though education mediates this by empowering women to resist child-like forms of address. Peipei (2007) examines the widespread and socially flexible use of "meinü," showing how gender, location, and intimacy shape its usage. Mansor (2019) finds class-based differences among Malay wives, with upper-middle-class speakers choosing English forms such as "you" due to the prestige of English, and lower-class speakers relying more on kinship-based affection terms. Taken together, these studies converge on the idea that spousal address is a rich index of power, solidarity, gender relations, and social change. While modernisation and education promote more open and affectionate practices in private, traditional norms and social expectations continue to regulate public address behaviour across cultures.

Across these communities where address terms were explored in the familial domain, a common pattern emerges: spouses negotiate affection, respect, and cultural expectations through address terms. However, most African studies focus on women's address practices or on kinship terms rather than mutual spousal address forms. Again, while scholarship in Ghana on address terms is rich in naming and academic address terms, it has not explored intimate address practices within marriage. This study, therefore, fills an important gap by examining address choices among educated couples in an urban Ghanaian context.

Methodology

This section of the paper primarily describes how the study's data were collected. To achieve this, we described the research site, the methods and instruments used to conduct the study, and the analysis procedure.

Research Site

The research site for this study is Cape Coast Metropolis (Ghana). The city is located on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea and holds a significant place in both African and colonial history. Cape Coast is characterised by a diverse linguistic landscape reflective of Ghana's rich cultural tapestry. The primary language spoken in Cape Coast is Mfantse, a dialect of Akan (a language spoken by about 40 per cent of Ghana's population). Mfantse, in particular, is prevalent in the Central Region, including Cape Coast, where it is a primary means of communication for many residents. Again, English, Ghana's official language, is widely spoken and understood in Cape Coast, especially in formal and educational settings. It is the language of instruction in schools and universities and the medium for official communication, business transactions, workplaces and government affairs. Other languages such as Ewe, Ga, Dangme, Hausa, and Dagbani are spoken by smaller ethnic groups within Cape Coast, albeit to a lesser extent, contributing to the region's linguistic diversity.

Participants

The study relied on 160 participants. The participants were purposively sampled: eighty (80) males and eighty (80) females from Cape Coast. All couples in the study were aged 25 to 60 and had been married for more than 2 years. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants met

the criteria of (a) being legally married, (b) residing in Cape Coast, and (c) having completed tertiary education. Participants were recruited through social networks, churches, mosques, workplaces, and community contacts, and each confirmed their marital status before taking part. These criteria ensured that participants were both socially mature and linguistically competent.

Instrument

The data for this present study were gathered using the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT consists of two parts: part one entails personal information about the couples, such as age, sex, level of education, and occupation, while the second part comprises ten (10) situations where participants were asked to produce the actual address terms they often used in face-to-face interactions with their spouses in the various situations described. These situations include being alone, with family members and other relatives, at parties, workplaces, banks, or in a church/mosque. The questions asked covered two situations: formal and informal settings. Formal settings include workplaces, banks, churches/mosques, and public ceremonies, whereas informal settings include the home, private moments, and gatherings among close friends or family members. After each situation, a space is provided for participants to fill in with the appropriate address terms. The items on the DCT were intended to elicit responses about diverse situations in which couples usually find themselves.

Data Collection and Analysis

The designed DCTs were administered to couples and to some willing and available married close friends. According to Mackey and Gass (2005), DCTs are highly effective at quickly gathering large amounts of data and can be used to create an initial classification of semantic formulae and strategies in natural speech. The choice of this design for data collection enabled the collection of adequate data for the study. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, who were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and that no information provided would be revealed. Data analysis followed three stages: (1) open coding to identify frequently occurring address terms, (2) axial coding to group terms into six analytical categories, and (3) selective coding guided by Brown & Gilman's power and solidarity model. A second coder reviewed the dataset to enhance reliability, and coding disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Results and Discussion

From the data, the study identified six categories of address terms used by educated couples in various interactive encounters: endearment terms, first names, titles/honourifics, clipped first names, descriptive phrases, and zero address terms. Next, using examples from the data, each address category is separately discussed in terms of its sociopragmatic meanings.

Endearment Terms

Endearment terms are among the most commonly used address terms in the interactions of educated Ghanaian couples. Endearment terms are often used by couples to express affection and intimacy in their intimate relationships, which corroborates Leech's (2014) claim that endearment terms are linked to the expression of strong feelings of warmth and affection towards the addressee. Within Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, such endearments are classified as positive politeness strategies, as they function to signal in-group membership and reinforce social solidarity. Endearment terms used in this study are words or expressions used in an interactive situation among couples to show love or affection (Afful & Nartey, 2013). In Ghanaian culture,

endearment terms express love and reflect values, traditions, and societal expectations in marital relationships. These findings align with Brown and Gilman's (1960) solidarity semantics, in which reciprocal, familiar forms index intimacy and shared identity. The dominance of endearments in private and public settings shows that marital discourse among educated couples is primarily structured around solidarity rather than hierarchy. Table 1 below presents endearment terms used by educated couples:

Table 1: Endearment terms used by Educated Couples

Endearment terms used by males	Endearment terms used by females
Honey/Hun	Baby
My Love/ Medo	Darling
Dear	Honey
Sweet/Sweetie	Sweetie/Sweet
Sweetheart	Dee/ Dear
Odo/love	Daddy
Odeyewu	Akonoba
Sweet Dear	Ever Darling
Pure	Me Wura (My Lord/Husband)
Babe/Bae	My Lover
Daavi (young woman)	
My Wife	
Baby	
Sugar	
Ahuofe (Beauty)	
Srɔnye (my wife)	

From Table 1, the common use of endearment terms suggests that solidarity is the dominant orientation between educated couples. These terms obscure power differences and foreground emotional intimacy among couples. This confirms Leech's (2014) observation that endearment terms serve a pragmatic role in creating and sustaining social relationships between addresser and addressee. Endearment terms such as "Love, Baby, and Honey" convey affection and indicate a certain level of intimacy or closeness between couples as indicated by Holmes (1992) that endearment terms are used between people who know each other well. In an earlier study conducted among the Akans of Ghana by Afful (2006) revealed that endearment terms are used in situations where couples need to address each other in interactions with intimate and more affable tones, and this finding supports his claims. Couples see endearment terms as a conventional medium to express flattery and love towards each other.

Couples used some common endearment terms in addressing each other, such as "baby", a common term couples use to address their romantic partners (male or female), and it is sometimes shorten as "babe." However, "babe" is also slang for an attractive woman but sometimes used by both and female couples. An interesting observation about the structure of some endearment terms is the addition of the possessive pronoun "my" to the terms to compliment more prominence on the degree of affection and intimacy carried by the endearment term itself. For instance, some couples used "my love" or "my lover" to emphasise their love towards their partners.

The blending of English and Akan endearment terms reflect linguistic hybridity typical of Ghana's educated middle class. This linguistic diversity within Ghana contributes to the array of

endearment terms couples use. English, the official language of Ghana, is widely spoken, resulting in endearment terms borrowed from western cultures. However, endearment terms (Medɔ, Srɔnye) in local languages, such as Twi, and Ewe, also play a significant role in expressing affection with the use of these endearment terms. This linguistic variations highlight a unique blend of traditional values and modern influences, which reflect individuals' cultural identity.

First Names

The data showed that many couples used first names (FNs) to address each other. Couples adopt FNs to suggest a desire for a greater sense of equality and intimacy between them. It signifies a departure from the hierarchical structure and a move towards a more modern and egalitarian relationship dynamic between couples. Table 2 below illustrates examples of FNs recorded.

Table 2: First Names used by Educated Couples

First Names used by Males	First Names used by Females
Yaa	Joe
Fosua	Jamil
Efyia	Steven
Adwoa	Kwame
Araba	Kofi
Esi	
Sekyiwaa	
Hassana	
Memuna	
Joan	
Anita	
Ivy	
P hyllis	
Sekyiwaa	
Asantewaa	
Ama	

Men prefer to address their wives with their FNs more than their wives do. The selective use of FNs, especially women's reluctance to use husbands' first names publicly reflects enduring respectful norms within Ghanaian culture, even among highly educated couples. Thus, FNs use oscillates between solidarity (private use) and power-respect (public restriction). Men use FNs for their spouses at home more than in public places, and this practice could mean that men typically do not desire to disclose their wives' names in public, especially in the presence of their colleagues. Though FNs indicate intimacy, familiarity, and affection, educated men tend to show much love towards their wives by employing more endearment terms for their wives in social domains. This result corroborates Etaywe (2018), who indicates that male spouses address their wives by their FNs to show intimacy and closeness because women are usually addressed by other terms in public. Interestingly, men resort to using FNs for wives more in the presence of their wife's family members. This act is a strategy to inform the family members of their wives that they love and have affection for their daughters and have also not changed the name they have given to them. There are few uses of FNs in social settings such churches, parties to show intimacy and solidarity between couples in the presence of members. With Brown and Gilman's (1960) model of solidarity

or intimacy and power or distance, FNs alone are most common in instances where a speaker is speaking across and in which he or she is intimately acquainted with the addressee, or when he or she is speaking down and at least somewhat acquainted with the addressee. The use of FNs in this study among educated couples of equal status reflects great intimacy, and this is supported by Wardhaugh (1992: 267) who indicated that “knowing and using another’s first name is, of course, a sign of considerable intimacy or at least of a desire for such intimacy.

Many couples are now using FNs, signifying a more equal partnership and a departure from traditional gender roles. As partners address each other by their FNs, it suggests a shift towards equality and empowerment among educated Ghanaian couples. The act of addressing a partner by their FNs fosters a sense of intimacy and emotional connection among educated Ghanaian couples. This informal address encourages partners to engage in open conversations, forgoing the formalities that might hinder emotional connection. Couples who engage in this verbal practice maintain a balance between modern expressions of affection and the preservation of respect for traditional cultural practices.

Clipped First Name

Clipped first name (CFN) is another address term used among educated couples in the Cape Coast metropolis. First names of couples are truncated or shortened from the existing names while retaining its basic orthography. There are no distinct rules for formulating these clips, but there is a close relationship between the morphology and phonology of clipped first names and the original names from which they are derived by the couples. Clipped first names are used as higher solidarity markers by couples. Examples of clipped first names are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Clipped First Names used by Educated Couples

Clipped First Names used by Males	Clipped First Names used by Males
Kay (Kwame)	Fati (Fatima)
Steve (Stephen)	Naji
Kwabs (Kwabena)	Nuz (Nusrat)
Wizzy (Wisdom)	Conny (Comfort)
Paps (Papsy)	Chris (Christiana)
Jam (Jamil)	May (Mavis)
Joe (Joseph)	

The data indicates that the FNs of couples have undergone some processes. These names have undergone morphological and phonological changes like vowel deletion and clipping to become hypocoristic names. Afful and Nartey (2013) refer to this form of address terms as endearment terms derived from coinage from personal names. Clipped forms function similarly to hypocoristics and serve as high-solidarity markers. Their creative morphological reduction demonstrates linguistic playfulness characteristic of intimate relationships. Both men and women used a variety of this diminutive forms of first names (FNs) in addressing their partners.

Educated couples are creative in coining these names from the first names of their partners. A further interesting aspect of the use of day-names by couples, as found in the study, is what Obeng (1997: 39) calls “Akan hypocoristic day-names”. Among the Akans of Ghana, people are named according to the days they are born, which are featured in this study. Some examples include Kwame, Kofi etc. Again, even though Afful (2006) considered this coinage from personal names as nicknames, in this study, we consider them loosely as clipped first names, which play the same

role as endearment terms. These names are usually symbols of intimacy between partners in their conversations. In expressing these clipped FNs, couples sometimes add courtesy expressions like “Please” and attention getter such as “Hi” or “Hello” to these names to primarily show genuine affection and solicit favour from their partners. Using clipped first names by couples indicates creativity, innovativeness, fondness, and more affection towards a partner. More interestingly, some couples used only the initials of the FNs of their partners. For instance, in the data, a man called his wife ‘D’ from the name Dorcas, and on the other hand, a woman addressed her husband ‘K’ Kwabena.

Descriptive Phrases

An exciting aspect observed among educated Ghanaian partners is the use of descriptive phrases (DPs) as address terms. Descriptive phrases describe a person so they know they are being addressed; they serve primarily as an attention-getter and identifier (Afful, 2007). Usually, DPs are employed when addressees are not known by their names but must be distinguished from others around them (Afful, 2007); however, they are being used in this study to refer to people who are well-known by the addresser. The DPs identified in this study are related to the couples’ physical characteristics, such as looks, age, and roles played by the addressee. Educated couples often use these terms in the presence of their friends to show an explicit communicative function, informing friends of how cordially they (couple) coexist. Table 4 highlights examples of DPs recorded in the study.

Table 4: Descriptive Phrases used by couples

Descriptive Phrases used for Males	Descriptive Phrases used for Females
My Bodyguard	Fresh Girl
My Caretaker	Fine Girl
Young Man	Beautiful Lady
My Big man	Cute Lady
My Boss	
My Energy	
My Hero	

From the data, these descriptive phrases are used strategically in public to express affection and present the marriage in a positive light. DPs simultaneously express admiration and reinforce gender expectations, such as beauty for women, authority or strength for men. The use of DPs as address terms often reflects the dynamics of gender roles in Ghanaian society. Men typically use terms that emphasise respect and admiration towards their women, highlighting their beauty and appearance. Equally, women tend to use phrases that emphasise affection and appreciation, highlighting their nurturing and supportive roles within the relationship. As shown in Table 4, Ghanaian couples often use DPs that highlight their partner’s positive attributes. These phrases are carefully chosen to highlight the best qualities of their loved ones. Couples mostly use DPs at public gatherings with friends, especially when they want to solicit a favour from their partners, as this enhances social interaction between couples. Couples will always try to impress their partners in front of their friends, in a way that conceals any misunderstanding between them. The use of DPs by educated partners also adds an element of playfulness and humour to Ghanaian couples’ communication. Couples often choose phrases that evoke admiration or create a light-hearted atmosphere, further strengthening their bond and fostering a positive relationship dynamic.

Honorifics/Titles

Honorifics/titles are identified as terms used among educated couples in Cape Coast. The study identified honorifics husbands used for wives such as “naana” (female given title in Akan), “mama, maame” (mother), and “ohemaa” (queen), and on the other hand, women addressed their husbands using terms such as “opanyin” (elder), or “nana” (chief/leader), “papa” and “egya” (father), emphasising respect and hierarchical structures within their relationships. These terms not only convey affection but also reinforce traditional values. Though some of these titles appear to be kinship terms, primarily used among blood relations, in this study, couples generally employed these deferential honorifics to express respect and honour to their partners.

The choice of these honorifics among couples also reflects traditional gender roles. For instance, men use terms like “maame” (mother), highlighting the nurturing and caring nature typically associated with women, while women use terms like “papa” (father), emphasising masculinity and strength. These terms reinforce societal expectations for gender roles in relationships. Ghanaian culture places great importance on preserving cultural traditions and values, and couples use honorifics as address terms to acknowledge and embrace their cultural heritage. As couples use these terms, they retain cultural practices by actively participating in the continuity of their customs, ensuring that future generations remain connected to their roots. This practice helps preserve cultural identity and reinforces the importance of maintaining traditions within Ghanaian society.

There is limited use of titles and honorifics, as recorded in the data. This outcome could result from the evolving gender dynamics in Ghanaian society. As women gain more independence and assume leadership roles outside the home, the rigid hierarchy inherent in traditional language is being challenged. It is common now for couples to use terms of endearment, such as “sweetheart” or “Babe,” to address each other, highlighting the equal partnership in their relationship. The use of honorifics/titles also suggests that, while educated couples embrace modern forms of intimacy, they still draw on traditional titles when contextually appropriate. The situational use of honorifics reflects residual power semantics. Although contemporary influences have changed address practices, educated couples still cherish and uphold these traditional norms. The interplay between tradition and modernity shapes how educated couples address each other, ultimately conveying their love, respect, and commitment within their unique partnership.

Zero Address Terms

Couples use zero-address terms to indicate deep familiarity, where explicit naming is unnecessary in their conversation. This differs from avoidance strategies observed in other cultures and reveals that non-term use can also index solidarity among Ghanaian spouses. Even though Al-Qudah (2017) reports that Jordanians use “zero address terms” mainly to refer to strangers and rarely with acquaintances, this study takes a contrary view: some couples employed “zero address terms” when communicating with their partners in specific social contexts. Some couples do not use any overt address term for their partners. Afful (2007) indicates that this strategy can be achieved through two distinct means: the use of attention-getters and/or greetings. The appropriateness of using “zero address terms” among educated Ghanaian couples is highly influenced by intimacy, familiarity, and, more importantly, social contexts. The practice of couples employing “zero address term” shows intimacy beyond lexical marking. Some couples rely on attention-getters (Afful, 2007) and courtesy markers to initiate a conversation. Addressing someone with a zero address term may be inappropriate and could indicate anger or a way to express disapproval of a person’s behaviour. However, using zero address terms by educated Ghanaian couples shows

intimacy and respect towards the addressee, as they combine this strategy with courtesy markers like “please” and attention-getters such as “hello” or “hi,” as well as non-verbal means like gaze and touch.

Conclusion

This study investigated the address terms used by educated Ghanaian couples in the Cape Coast Metropolis and examined how social contexts shape spouses’ address choices. Guided by Brown and Gilman’s (1960) Power and Solidarity concept, the study set out to identify the major address terms in marital interactions and to explain the sociopragmatic motivations underlying their use. The findings demonstrate that spousal address practices among educated Ghanaian couples are systematically patterned, context-sensitive, and reflective of broader sociocultural norms governing intimacy, respect, and equality. The analysis revealed six major categories of address terms employed by couples: endearment terms, first names, clipped first names, descriptive phrases, titles/honorifics, and zero address terms. Among these, the data showed that endearment terms and first names emerged as the most frequently used, particularly in private and informal settings. This pattern highlights the prominence of solidarity and affective closeness in spousal communication, supporting earlier observations that address terms function as key resources for expressing intimacy and reinforcing interpersonal bonds. These forms align closely with the solidarity semantics of Brown and Gilman’s (1960) concept, where reciprocal and familiar address choices index emotional closeness, familiarity, and shared identity.

However, the selective use of titles and honorifics, especially in public or formal contexts, suggests that power relations and culturally embedded norms of respect remain relevant in marital discourse. Such address forms reflect residual power semantics, indicating that educated couples strategically invoke deference and hierarchy when situationally appropriate (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Wardhaugh, 2008). This finding echoes previous studies, which show that spouses often adjust their address practices in response to audience, setting, and cultural expectations (Esmae’li, 2011; Etaywe, 2018). The study further demonstrates that educated Ghanaian couples exhibit creativity and linguistic flexibility in their address choices. The use of clipped names and descriptive phrases illustrates playful linguistic innovation, a feature commonly associated with high levels of intimacy (Afful & Nartey, 2013). Additionally, the alternation between English and local languages, such as Akan and Ewe, in address forms reflects linguistic hybridity characteristic of multilingual Ghanaian contexts, where speakers draw on multiple linguistic repertoires to negotiate identity and express affection (Afful, 2006; Mansor, 2019).

Furthermore, the findings contribute to sociolinguistic scholarship on address practices by extending empirical attention to spousal interaction in a Ghanaian context, an area that has received limited scholarly focus. The study also reinforces the continued relevance of Brown and Gilman’s (1960) Power and Solidarity concept in analysing intimate discourse, demonstrating that even within highly personal relationships, address choices are shaped by social norms, cultural expectations, and contextual constraints. Beyond theory, the study has implications for understanding marital communication and cultural maintenance in Ghana, as address terms serve as linguistic tools through which couples negotiate affection, respect, and relational harmony. Future studies may build on this work by examining address practices among non-educated couples, comparing rural and urban settings, or analysing naturally occurring conversational data to complement elicited responses (Afzali, 2011; Al-Majali & Al-Haq, 2021).

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