Personal View

Tafracher, pronounced Tah-frah-cher (low-highlow-high pitches for the three syllables), is an extraordinary Ghanaian word. It is used in virtually every tribe—a good indication of how indispensible a word it is. But before I say what exactly *tafracher* is (it is a word I would dearly like to introduce into ordinary medical parlance) I want to digress a little and comment on language generally.

Those of us who have learnt to speak more than one language very well are quick to discern not only the peculiar advantages of the dialects and languages of others but also their peculiar shortcomings. English excels in roundaboutism. An Englishman would say "I wish you were wiser" when he probably meant you were a fool. Where a Ghanaian would condemn something outright the Anglo-Saxon said "It leaves a lot to be desired." Thus the African continued to admire these attractive flourishes in someone else's language and wished he could say the same things the same way in his own language until suddenly it dawned on him that some expressions in his mother tongue were quite without aesthetic parallel in any other language of mortals.

One had been tempted to think (like some theoretical anthropologists) that English had "evolved" farther than African languages until one began to compare notes very closely. Take exclamations for instance—oh, ah, hey, ugh—and one has to scratch the barrel for more British noises. But include the implosives, explosives, glossal tuts, labial poops and guttural clicks, each with a specific (if you like pathognomonic) meaning, and the African exclamations are numbered in their tens. Or take the way and manner nouns, adjectives, and adverbs in African languages can just be built up as one talks, making clever use of onomatopoeia. The most characteristic feature of the commonest hereditary disease in Africa is the repetitive, relentless nature of the aches and pains in the bones and joints of sufferers during the rainy season.

So the names of the disease, known in African tribes centuries before Herrick observed the "peculiar sickle shaped red cells" in the blood of a West Indian in 1910, were, and still are, *Chwechweechwe* pronounced chway-chway-chway (Ga language), *Nuidudui* (Ewe), *Nwiiwii* pronounced nweewee (Fante), *Ahotutuo* (Twi) etc. Onomatopoeia plays a handsome part in our languages. In English one can hardly judge the length of an object described by the words "short" or "long" whereas in Ga the word for "short" is *kuku* and that for "long" is *kakadangng*.

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But back to the word *tafracher*. This is an extraordinary interjection, the like of which is totally missing in English. It effectively removes the sting from a crude or obscene word when placed just before it. A vulgar word or phrase is devulgarized when the word *tafracher* is made just to precede it. This use of the word is so specific that one automatically prepares oneself for a crude shock when it is mentioned. Thus it is not only used to prepare the listener for the unpleasant, but also to preserve the reputation of the speaker. The more respectable the speaker the less vulgar in speech he is expected to be, and the more likely he is to use *tafracher* when he has to mention something he thinks is not pleasant to the ear. The fastidious will often use the word when most people think it unnecessary, while uncouth persons accustomed to much swearing completely forget that such a word exists.

To say "*tafracher*" is to show respect to the person or persons one is addressing. The fact that the word is now never heard from the mouths of youths is a sign of the times that the young in Africa have lost the traditional respect for the elderly. I can safely say that with very few exceptions all the people I have heard use the word in the past 25 years have been elderly men and women. I remember hearing it twice in one afternoon at the diabetic clinic at Korle Bu Hospital—and how very refreshing it was for me: I asked a 70-year-old retired Ga fisherman if he had any complaints. He eyed the attending staff nurse and asked her to move out of earshot, then leaning forward towards me he said in hushed tones "*tafracher*, I am losing my manhood." The very next patient was a new, obese diabetic woman of 48 referred from a general practitioner with severe pruritus vulvae. She could never have heard what the dear old gentleman had just whispered to me but topping a long list of complaints was her statement in Ga: "Please doctor I itch all over my, *tafracher*, private parts." I am also reminded of a favourite expression of my mother when one of her maids had done something really stupid: "Adjoa" she would call her name, "are you, *tafracher*, such an idiot?"

The word is also sometimes used to prefix the mention of sad events or the description of outrageous and despicable acts: "While we were all assembled in the chamber, the lunatic suddenly burst in and before he could be restrained, *tafracher*, slapped the paramount chief's ear." Or, three armed men raided a girls' school in Washington D.C. "and, *tafracher*, raped the teachers." When earlier this year I went to report details of my visit to the U.S.A. to my father, I had to choose my words carefully: "I saw on television while I was there nearly 1,000, *tafracher*, streaking undergraduates blocking a major road in Baltimore." I would never dare say such things to my father without the vital devulgarizing word. In fact, more than one tafracher is sometimes used to neutralize the shock of the succeeding descriptive lewdness. I could well have said to my father: "Parading the streets of Baltimore in Maryland were, *tafracher*, *tafracher*, 1,000 stark naked American undergraduates."

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A lady was recently interviewed on British television about her part-time modelling in the nude. Suddenly she broke loose and began to utter words which I blushed to use even during anatomy vivas on the perineum in my second M.B. days. To this woman the words came easily and naturally in a way which would have been unthinkable 25 years ago. Britain has changed very fast. I used to be terribly awed and impressed when I first went to London in the early 'fifties, seeing men (usually elderly men) stopping suddenly by the street when they saw a hearse with a coffin passing by. They would quickly take off their hat, stand at attention, and bow gently to the bier. I had always thought this a colossal sign of English respect for those who had defeated their last enemy—death. One hardly sees this spectacle any more. Indeed, the converse is true. For isn't there a mad rush these days to get at the body of the late Mr. X to whip out a kidney, or liver, or heart?

I would like to make a suggestion. While I am not asking for a return to the early 'fifties of the salute and the bowing down to the dead, I would nevertheless make a plea that before the body of the late gentleman was rudely violated the surgeon should (I know it's a race against time) spare a few moments to say, *tafracher*.

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