"Am I Your Coequal?!": Memes and Changing Meanings in the Digital Subversion of Ghanaian Hierarchies

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ABSTRACT

Capturing the zeitgeist of youthful challenges to the status quo in Ghana, a video of an anonymous young person challenging an older politician with a derisive call of "Tweaa!" went viral in 2014. Reentextualizations of the encounter were soon circulating online in the form of memes, songs, and hashtags and offline in joking exchanges everywhere from vegetable markets to parliament. This article traces the many ironic reembeddings of the *tweaa* clip across these contexts, as young people used *tweaa* to subvert and interrogate Ghana's rigid social hierarchies—ultimately producing an enduring shift in the vocabulary of protest in Ghana. *Tweaa*, once a casual interjection of disapproval, is now explicitly seen as iconic of the disenfranchised challenging those in power: a verb meaning "to protest inept authority." This case study of memetic circulation suggests that memes not only discursively produce publics but can effect seismic semiotic shifts in everyday language.

In the mid-aughts, countries across sub-Saharan Africa were experiencing the rapid spread of mobile-broadband internet access and a related wave of techno-idealism, fueling the rise of what some declared the Silicon Savannah. In Ghana, mirroring moves by disenfranchised youth across the continent, young people latched onto the horizontal affordances of digitally mediated spaces to contest

the age-graded hierarchies that organize social and political life, imagining what came to be loosely known as the "New Ghana" into digital existence. In the midst of this foment, a video of an anonymous young audience member heckling a much older politician with a cry of "Tweaa!" (a Twi term of derision) and the outraged politician's reply "Am I your coequal?!" went viral. This distillation of youthful challenge to Ghanaian authority was reentextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Briggs and Bauman 1992) in innumerable memes, songs, parodies, and hashtags, which rapidly spilled over and across face-to-face, digitally mediated, public and private modalities—leading to a ban on phrases from the video in parliament, an extemporaneous reenactment of the original encounter during the president's annual state of the nation address, and even several mentions in international press outlets. In this efflorescence of both online and offline reactions over the next several months, *tweaa* underwent rapid and dramatic indexical shift: what was once a casual interjection of distaste is now explicitly seen as iconic of the disenfranchised challenging those in power and is used as a verb meaning "to protest inept authority." In what follows, I trace the many ironic reembeddings of the *tweaa* clip across mediated modes, illustrating language change in progress as young people leverage digitally mediated reentextualizations of *tweaa* in subverting and interrogating Ghana's social hierarchies—ultimately making possible what appears, several years later, to be an enduring shift in the vocabulary of protest in Ghana. I examine *tweaa*'s dramatic transformation as a case study of the potential for memes not merely to produce like-minded affiliation and community but to effect enduring shifts in linguistic meanings.

The Cultural Dynamics of the "New Ghana"

I respect a young entrepreneur more than a politician stealing his country's wealth. I am the NEW GHANA.

This adamant assertion, in white font emblazoned on stark black background with a tiny Ghanaian flag at bottom right, was one of innumerable such declarations circulating on Facebook and elsewhere online as I began preliminary fieldwork exploring digital literacies in Ghana in the summer of 2013. These sentiments, which problematized long-standing arrangements of political power while locating the moral center of patriotism in youthful contributions to the economy outside of these arrangements, were also the undercurrent to nearly every conversation I had or overheard with anyone under forty for months to come. Less a movement than a diffuse zeitgeist, the "New Ghana" represents the loose consensus among many youth in Ghana around the urgent

need for a change in the status quo of rigid age-graded status hierarchies that organize all realms of social and political life (Flamenbaum 2017). Young people point to this deeply rooted preference for unquestioning deference to parents, chiefs, elders, and other authority figures as holding back not only their own material advancement but that of the country as a whole—especially when it comes to the public sector, which many see as rife with graft, nepotism, and other abuses of power.

New Ghana condemnation of those at the top of Ghana's hierarchies for engaging in practices that allow them to consolidate and maintain power, wealth, and authority at the expense of the collective good is hardly new. The plot of Ayi Kwei Armah's famous novel *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), for instance, centers on grinding inequality produced by everyday corruption following the young nation's emancipation from colonial control. What marks a departure is the way in which the particular affordances of new media allow the many self-styled social media entrepreneurs among today's youth not only to distance themselves from the forms of accumulation they see as problematically mired in local networks but also to attempt to actualize aspirational alternatives. At the core of the New Ghana ethos is a belief in the transformational power of digital technologies. Contemporary Ghanaian youth across class and geopolitical divides are drawn to digitally mediated communication precisely because they see it as affording possibilities for horizontal collaboration and direct participation in civil spheres otherwise closed to them.

It is in this context that social media platforms have become collaborative safe spaces in which young Ghanaians network to collectively imagine and enact alternatives for themselves and the nation. In the process, however, generational tensions over hierarchy and moral authority emerged that seemed at the time to be nothing short of a national identity crisis. Who is the authentic Ghanaian citizen: the person who upholds enduring cultural expectations around hierarchy, deference, and respect, or the person who critiques them in the national interest? Who is the moral subject of the nation-state: the conservative bearers of structure, order, and tradition, or those who would upend the structure in the name of long-stalled progress?

The Interactional Dynamics of the Original *Tweaa* Video

The event shown in the original *tweaa* video was later identified by news outlets as a year-end durbar, or formal festival event, at a hospital just outside of the regional capital Kumasi in December 2013. The video opens with an older politician, Gabriel Barima, framed by elaborate bunting as he addresses an assembly

of hospital employees and regional chiefs. Barima was at the time a district chief executive (DCE) for the Ahafo Ano South District outside of Kumasi, a relatively low-ranking political appointee roughly comparable to that of a county mayor in the North American context.

Since an analysis of the subtleties and ramifications of Barima's Twi-English code-switching is beyond the scope of this essay, his Twi utterances appear below translated in italics.[1] I have not, however, translated the word that is the focus of the article: *tweaa*, the term that the young male audience member flippantly calls out to Barima. In the transcript,[2] Barima is represented by GB, and his anonymous challenger by HW (hospital worker); another anonymous male audience member, AM, counsels patience in line 12:

01	GB:	*That is why,*
02	HW:	*Tweaa::[::*
03	GB:	[*It is not that—*
04	GB:	*Who said tweaa?*
05		*Eh, are you insulting me?*
06		*Are you insulting me?*
07	HW:	*No*
08	GB:	*Who is it who called tweaa?*
09	GB:	*Tweaa means what?*
10	GB:	What do you mean by *tweaa*?
11	GB:	What do you mean by *tweaa*?!
12	AM:	*Patience*
13	GB:	*Patience means what?*
14	GB:	You sit somewhere, behave like you are talking to your coequal.
15	GB:	Am I your coequal?

At the outset of the video (before the above transcript begins), Barima appears to be discursively performing authority in Twi, the primary language of the region, to the satisfaction of those in attendance. When he resumes speaking (line 01) after a brief applause pause, however, he is interrupted by a call of "Tweaa!" from a young male voice somewhere to Barima's left, off-screen. Given that the interjection expresses disapproval, the communicative norms of Ghanaian social life dictate that it be used between peers or by a speaker of relative seniority to a novice or younger person acting improperly, as it would be deeply

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1. English, Ghana's only official language, remains inaccessible to many. Dialects of Twi, by contrast, are spoken by 70 percent of the population as either a first or second language (Kropp-Dakubu 1997).

2. Transcript of the recorded encounter between DCE Barima and his anonymous challenger in late December 2013, uploaded to YouTube January 31, 2014. Transcript conventions used here, including "::::" to indicated elongated vowels and "]" to indicate overlapping speech, follow those developed by Gail Jefferson in the 1980s (2004).

inappropriate for a younger person to chastise an elder. Indeed it could even be said that its use presupposes that specific culturally organized indexical relationship (Ochs 1990), with the word itself calling into being and reinforcing a dynamic of gentle comeuppance between elder and subordinate. For a younger, unknown, and un-titled person to lob a declaration of disapproval at the actions and speech of an older person who has been unilaterally granted the floor is a brazen act indeed—especially in a highly ritualized public event where the appropriate language is either English or formal Twi. Recognizing this breach of etiquette as an insult and direct challenge, Barima, after blustering in both Twi and English, calls back to the anonymous young man, "Am I your coequal?"—in other words, "How dare you interrupt me in such a way when you are so clearly my subordinate?" (fig. 1). Barima is ultimately so enraged by the breach that he storms off, supporters and staff in tow. The video then cuts to the bewildered audience, some craning to see the DCE's retreat—including the local chief in attendance, whose own authority outranks Barima's, and who had every right to be *more* outraged at *him* for walking out without finishing his remarks.

If viewed from the perspective that the interaction captured on the video is that of an elder shutting down an illegitimate challenge to his authority, then it merely reflects the Ghanaian status quo. Children and subordinates who ask too many questions or offer unasked-for opinions are often rhetorically asked "Who are you?" or accused by their elders and betters of being "too known"—acting like an attention-seeking upstart who doesn't know their place. The captivating nature of the clip lies in its seeming reversal of that everyday dynamic and in its excess: the absolutely brazen act of the anonymous youth who dared to do what so many young people would love to do (and have probably done, on a smaller scale, to an older sibling, parent, or teacher), and the over-the-top hilarity of the politician's

Figure 1. Stills of Barima asking, "Who said tweaa? Are you insulting me?"

ranting response. In its rearticulation through memes, hashtags, and ultimately political speech, this breach of expectations came to be interpreted as having posed a direct challenge both to the legitimacy of Barima's authority and right to speak and to the deeply entrenched system of age- and status-graded respect hierarchies that undergird those rights.

What's in a Meme?

Much contemporary scholarship on memes begin their efforts to define the concept by referencing Richard Dawkins (1976), who neologized "meme" as a cultural analogue to a gene: an abstract component of cultural information, like a trend or a popular melody, that reproduces itself as it moves through social spaces. The joking reenactments of the *tweaa* encounter that seemed to be taking place everywhere, online and offline, after the video was posted would seem to fit this definition. And yet as Blommaert and Varis point out, internet memes *not* are characterized by faithful copying of prior iterations (Blommaert and Varis 2015, 36). In addition to conscious remixing by meme authors, the mere act of decentering any text from its original context and re-embedding in a new one inevitably produces new entailments for interpretation and therefore new meanings (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 146). As such, all sharing of memes is intertextual and polyvalent, producing unavoidable transformations in meaning.

Bauman and Briggs (1990) further attest that the intertextual mechanisms that underlying memetic meaning-making is afforded by the inherently reflexive quality of language: "Basic to the process of entextualization is the reflexive capacity of discourse, the capacity it shares with all systems of signification 'to turn or bend back upon itself, to become an object to itself, to refer to itself'" (73, citing Babcock 1980). This suggests that on some level, memes themselves are simply a highly stylized mode of language doing what language does best. Theories of intertextuality explain the way language itself acquires and transmutes meaning as an "intersection of textual surfaces rather than a fixed point of meaning" (Kristeva et al 1980, 65). Thus in participating in memetic circulation, where understanding a given meme's emergent meanings requires at least some knowledge of its prior iterations and trajectory—indeed, Shifman (2014) suggests memes must be seen as "always a *collection* of texts" (56)—social actors are doing semiotic heavy lifting by producing and reproducing meaning in the very same way that language itself undergoes transformation through time in the mouths of speakers. And if language is intertextual in and of itself—dialogism, Kristeva et al. (1980, 68) insisted, "is inherent in language"—then investigating memes as

intertextual phenomena ought to lead us to consider the way linguistic meanings themselves are leveraged, refashioned, and reinserted into new contexts via their digital circulation, carrying forward prior meanings while building new ones. As we will see below, the very fact of memes' operation—first via the reflexive quality of language to produce ironic distance, and then through the unspooling of intertextual connections and movement across media ecologies—makes possible the kind of language change and profound social shift exemplified by *tweaa*.

In what follows, I trace several major stages through which the core interaction of the viral video was taken up and reembedded into different online and offline contexts, acquiring new layers of meaning as it went: (1) initial memes still tied loosely to the original meaning of the term *tweaa*; (2) memes that leveraged the asymmetry of the video interaction in expressing New Ghana youth positionality by broadly challenging those in authority through the veil of irony; (3) high-profile offline uses of *tweaa* by politicians that implicitly referenced these veiled challenges; (4) memes and hashtags that leveraged *tweaa* to express direct challenges to specific political policies and personages online; and, finally, (5) the use of *tweaa* in protests out in the world. Following *tweaa*'s movement through each of these phases helps illustrate how crucial this oscillation between online and offline spaces was in coproducing and solidifying its shift in meaning.

Early Iterations

Though it is unclear exactly when the durbar in the video took place, the clip itself was initially posted on YouTube at the end of January 2014 and went viral almost immediately. This online phenomenon leaked irrepressibly into offline interactions. For weeks, it was impossible to go anywhere without hearing people laughingly calling out to each other, "Tweaa!" and "Hey, am I your coequal?!" Given the culture of shared and collective media across sub-Saharan Africa, with extended and fictive kin often making use of the same devices (see Spitulnik 1992, Larkin 2002), it's not a stretch to say the majority of the country had seen the video within days. When the video first exploded onto the national consciousness, it spawned hundreds of mediated responses that specifically "foregrounded and re-entextualized" (Briggs and Bauman 1992) the term *tweaa* and the hierarchically positioned question "Am I your coequal" in no fewer than four parody songs, numerous sketch comedy skits, innumerable humorous memes, and a series of hashtags. While this may appear straightforward, the process is multilayered.

The very act of posting an edited recording of the event that extracts and therefore highlights only this encounter was itself a process of entextualization—that

is, it rendered the initial performance at the durbar into a text, "lifted out of its interactional setting" (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73) and placed it into the digital space where the logics and structures of participation (Phillips 1972) are dramatically different, thereby opening up the encounter to different possible interpretations. While it is nigh impossible to determine the very first meme produced in reaction to the video, that apocryphal first meme represents a further de- and reentextualization of both the original durbar moment and the posted video itself. It is telling that in the vast majority of reentextualizations of the encounter, just the initial call *tweaa* and only one line of Barima's response, "Am I your coequal?!," were decentered from the original text of the video and reanimated as if they had been uttered immediately adjacent to one another. This move essentially distilled Barima's longer reaction to its central sense of disrespected outrage, rendering the encounter a straightforward call and response. This now far more "detachable" (Spitulnik 1997) text can be more easily reembedded into innumerable other emergent contexts to be modified, commented upon, and so forth. In this process, participants add layer after layer of meaning, with each new instance of authoring and/or sharing of a *tweaa* meme (or indeed, song, hashtag, or other "text") providing a venue for contesting, reshaping, and renegotiating the meaning of the encounter and ultimately the meaning of the word itself.

In her examination of the circulation of Zambian radio discourse in everyday contexts, Spitulnik (1997) highlights the phenomenon of "public words," or "condensations or extracts from much longer speech events" that "function metonymically to index the entire frame or meaning of the earlier speech situation" (Spitulnik 1997, 166). Here, the memetic circulation of the condensed exchange "Tweaa!"/"Am I your coequal?!" not only indexes the originating video itself as a cultural reference point but also metonymically gestures to ongoing contestations of Ghanaian social hierarchies more broadly, such that the call and response, and ultimately just the term *tweaa* itself, came to be iconic of challenging elders and others abusing their authority. In essence, the *tweaa* video went viral precisely because it tapped directly into the New Ghana zeitgeist already under way, and its viral circulation moved New Ghana perspectives further into the mainstream by shifting and codifying the meaning of the term as one of disenfranchised protest.

Most early *tweaa* memes were primarily referential: directly leveraging the interactional excesses of the original video as the foundation of additional humor, while maintaining the original meaning of *tweaa* as mere disapproval. These included cleverly Photoshopped advertisements for imaginary products such as alcoholic Tweaa Bitters (tagline: "Drink and discover your coequal") or hypothetical

movies in the style of locally produced films with titles like "Who Said Tweaa? 1 & 2," featuring Barima as the main character, facing off between an aggressive young man and a supplicant pastor (characters prototypical of the genre), with the core interaction in the clip reframed as the movie's tagline: "Know whom you say TWEAA to, you may not be a coequal." Others drew on more globally recognizable image macros, such as a meme featuring famed actor couple Will Smith and Jada Pinkett-Smith in a cozy pose with the words "This could be us but your dad said tweeeaa!" over the image in Impact font. The latter especially emphasizes that, in its original meaning, *tweaa* was more appropriately used to mark disapproval by figures of authority, including a father chastising a child's choice of partner (fig. 2).

Youthful Assertions of Meaning and Community

The memes being authored and shared moved very quickly past referential to generative and subversive. While the politician and the youthful audience member disagreed about who had the moral authority to speak, their actions

Figure 2. A collection of publicly available tweaa memes collected from across social media platforms in the first several days following the original video's posting.

Figure 3. A still of the defensive teacher from Gallaxy's "Tweaa" music video

in the exchange clearly demonstrate a shared alignment to the hospital worker's intended meaning behind the call of *tweaa* in the moment: a direct challenge from someone in a lower position in local hierarchies of power, respect, and status, calling the authority of the higher-ranked individual into question. In fact, many of the memes explicitly made a connection between the asymmetrical encounter between the young hospital worker and the DCE and other common experiences of Ghanaian hierarchies.

In an early reembedding of the exchange, the Ghanaian hiplife band Gallaxy released a music video on social media for their song "Tweaa," featuring the band as members of a secondary school class led by an over-the-top parody of the worst negative stereotypes of Ghanaian public school teachers.[3] Quick to anger, barely competent in English (the state-mandated language of instruction past grade 4), and clearly ill-informed, the teacher introduces the topic for the day by badly mangling the pronunciation. When a student raises his hand and suggests a correction, the teacher shouts at him to shut up, then proceeds to lecture the students in Twi on the points of his own status and superiority. As the teacher continues his bombastic defense of his position as head of the class, a student from the back of the room calls "Tweaa!" and the room erupts in laughter, cueing the start of the song (fig. 3).

This music video is a marvelous representation of the layering of shared assumptions about corrupt and incompetent power that predated the original *tweaa* clip and served as the basis for many young peoples' interpretation of

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3. Hiplife is a hybrid musical genre mixing highlife music—itself a blend of several Ghanaian musical traditions with Western jazz instrumentation—and hip-hop (Collins 1985).

it. Ghanaians—young and old alike—are quick to make comparisons between the kinds of exploitation of power and authority that are seen to take place throughout the government and public sector, and the ideological underpinnings of local methods of rote pedagogy pervasive in Ghanaian public schools. This is often referred to by the colorful shorthand "chew and pour": students are expected to take the knowledge teachers give them and then metaphorically masticate and regurgitate precisely what they have been taught, with no synthesis of outside sources or ideas, including their own. Many of my interviewees had stories of incorporating additional resources and literature into a paper, only to be given a failing grade for not replicating the teacher's lecture notes exactly. I should note that in the course of my research, I came across many committed teachers, all of whom were doing incredible work in conditions of endemic scarcity. Nevertheless, this stereotype of teachers as resistant to new ideas and vindictively wielding power over their charges is a powerful and persistent one. The explicit connection that the Gallaxy music video draws between the original interaction of a young person publicly challenging a politician and the far more commonplace instance of a student challenging a teacher is, therefore, utterly logical and recognizable in the Ghanaian experience (fig. 4). In valorizing the student challenger, the music video not only casts implicit aspersions back onto Barima and his relative competence and right to hold a position of authority but also critiques Ghana's lack of qualified teachers and their supposed tendency to ignore or actively deride the knowledge their students might already have—the knowledge base New Ghana adherents hold up as having the potential to move the nation forward.

Figure 4. Two *tweaa* memes that make the link between power asymmetries and Ghanaian classroom experiences.

It is no accident that a challenge to hierarchy and authority became so wildly popular in online contexts whose horizontal affordances support the very ideological foundations of the critique. Among my upwardly mobile, digitally savvy research participants, it was not uncommon for the bulk of their socializing to take place online or for key moments in their career trajectories—locating resources to further their projects, seeking out pivotal job opportunities or collaborative partners—to have taken place through interactions with faraway strangers over Twitter and Facebook (see also Burrell 2012), rather than among authority figures who these young people felt were too quick to shut down their dreams. Given the logic of remixed authorship that undergirds memetic production and distribution, participating in memetic activity itself can be seen as a way to thumb one's nose at the top-heavy consolidation of narrow and exclusive knowledge production and authority in Ghanaian society.

Early on, this asymmetrical positionality and the online potential for its inversion was foregrounded in memes that centered the meaning of the encounter as a *legitimate* moral challenge to a delegitimizing status quo, rather than a case of an elder putting a youthful upstart in his place. The trio of examples shown in figure 5, for instance, all play on the popular meme derived from the WWII-era British propaganda motto "Keep Calm and Carry On." While this morale-bolstering message was originally crafted by the official mouthpiece of the British government—a bastion of officialdom and authority if there ever was one—the global iterations of the meme typically operate by ironically rearticulating ways to maintain morale and feelings of solidarity in the face of far more quotidian onslaughts. For instance, "Keep Calm and Carry Yarn" is a popular message of solidarity among knitters.

In foregrounding the lexical *content* of the young audience member's interjection and reentextualizing it in a new context, the perceived *intent* of that

Figure 5. A trio of *tweaa* memes playing off of WWII-era propaganda

original interjection—a challenge to authority—is *also* put under focus and carried forward into the new context. With this narrower meaning of *tweaa* centrally reembedded in the context of a meme associated with bolstering nationalist morale, the Ghanaian versions of the "Keep Calm" meme below can be read as messages of solidarity from peers, exhorting youthful addressees to maintain national pride by challenging incompetents in positions of authority. That is, both the original authors and those who coanimate the message by sharing the memes are articulating alignment with those who might wish to contest age-graded hierarchies of authority, thus interpellating youth as moral citizens under siege who must respond to their circumstances appropriately—by keeping calm and calling out abuses of power.

Such examples, and the many others that leveraged ironic global signifiers to center youth positionality, also amply illustrate that reentextualization is also a semiotic "act of control" (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 76), in a larger "normative debate about how the world should look and the best way to get there" (Shifman 2014, 120). Each reembedding of these memes in a new context is an assertion, playful and ironic though it may be, that it is valid and legitimate for a young person to use *tweaa* to express disapproval of someone in authority. Not unlike narratives in spoken interaction, memes provide a kind of moral laboratory (Mattingly 2014) for processing, problem solving, and otherwise rendering the confusing tumult of existence into an orderly, linear, and coherent form. As Papacharissi (2015) writes, "media do not make or break revolutions but they do lend emerging, storytelling publics their own means for feeling their way into events" (5). Milner (2016) similarly suggests memes provide a "means to transform established cultural texts into new ones, to negotiate the worth of diverse identities, and to engage in unconventional arguments about public policy and current events" (iii). As spaces of experimental stance-taking, thinking about memetic participation as "like narrative" usefully foregrounds how they can serve a subjunctive means of imagining the world as already otherwise (Bruner 2003), allowing participants to navigate, reconcile, and anticipate the shifting social expectations of the communities in which they hold membership (Ochs and Capps 2001). Taken together, *tweaa* memes in circulation represent a collaborative valorization of the inversion of social norms indexed by a youthful leveraging of *tweaa*, opening up a collectively held New Ghana space to rethink the way power and authority are granted in Ghanaian public life.

This discussion of memes as entextualized, narrative acts of control highlights that meaning-making takes place in concert with others, in shared acts of asserting belonging. This is hardly limited to memes or even to media. Spitulnik's

work on radio in Zambia clearly illustrates that circulating texts need not be the big media of newspapers, books, and conventional broadcasts to be effective in producing "imagined community" (Anderson 1991) via shared orientations to everyday life; indeed, she argues that the seemingly inconsequential small media of the type of condensed "public words" referenced earlier are in fact "a key constitutive and integrating feature of what can be called a community" (Spitulnik 1997, 166). Scholars have illustrated that "memetic activities play an important role in constructing shared values in contemporary digital cultures" (Shifman 2014, 60), and ultimately in producing online publics (Blommaert and Varis 2015). Lainesete and Voolaid (2017), for instance, illustrate the way the intertextual circulation of humorous memes about Soviet experiences across national boundaries allowed a collective reexamination of cultural memory in Estonia. Sharing memes playfully leveraging the *tweaa* encounter from the perspective of the youthful challenger serves as a means of "laughing with" (Rea 2013, 171) the anonymous hospital worker and other young Ghanaians who share his frustrations with the status quo, thus asserting membership in a possible New Ghana by laughing *at* the powers that be. If taking part in the participatory culture of sharing in internet spaces by "liking" content is to assert that you are the intended audience (Lange 2009), then reembedding that content elsewhere is a further assertion that you belong in community, or "affinity" (Gee 2004), with others who share your perspective (Blommaert and Varis 2015, 35). As such, memes serve as "publicly visible signs of participation" (Wong et al 2021, 3)—proof of one's competence in both understanding and appropriately deploying hybrid cultural texts interwoven with the requisite affective tenor and, therefore, of one's right to membership in a given mediated space (Flamenbaum and George, forthcoming). George's (2020) discussion memes in Serbian online spaces is a particularly apt illustration: faced with the reductive political choice of either aligning with the narrow provincialism of extreme nationalists or with the globalizing abdication of economic sovereignty expected by the European Union, youth in Belgrade express their fundamental ambivalence toward these options by creating and circulating "bivalent" jokes and memes online. Decoding these memes requires knowledge of multiple Serbian scripts (along with their cultural entailments) and English, as well as both Serbian and broadly Western cultural references, such that participating in their circulation speaks to a cosmopolitan "self-interpellation" (following Lange 2009, 229) of being deeply invested in Serbian national interests but not limited to them.

While much of the work on memes illustrates how broader ideological concerns get taken up in the production of online publics, there is increasing attention to how alternatives imagined in digital spaces come to have profound effects out in the world. Kraidy (2017) and Mina (2019), for instance, both speak to the subversive potential of memes in catalyzing revolutionary action across the Arab world and in China, respectively, while Bonilla and Rosa (2015) examine how protests over the police murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and online activism tagged with #ferguson ultimately overlapped in a coproduced political temporality. This work suggests that it is more productive to think of meaning-making in the "virtual" and "actual" as mutually embedded rather than distinct spheres. There is a productive parallel between studies of circulating memes to other work from linguistic anthropologists demonstrating that the circulation of talk and text across mediated and copresent contexts is crucial to the production of new, emergent meanings in the formation of publics. The interpretation of the *tweaa* encounter as that of a legitimate challenge to a figure of authority did not remain sequestered in online spaces; in its movement across contexts, *tweaa*'s shift in meaning not only mirrors the community-enacting movement of "public words" from radio broadcast settings into everyday life in Zambia (Spitulnik 1997), but also the "inter-animating" of the registers of political cartoons and political oratory in Madagascar in the run-up to presidential elections (Jackson 2008). Jackson argues that cartoonists' and politicians' borrowing, referencing, and circulation of speech forms—bringing stylistic elements and meanings connected with political cartoons into traditional Malagasy political oratory, and vice versa, as well as rhetoric from Christian sermons and international development discourse—was critical both in shaping public opinion and in producing new meanings associated with these forms. In the next section, I turn to how the uptake of *tweaa* memes and the ironic inversion of *tweaa*'s original meaning in political speech was crucial in sedimenting the shift in the term's emergent meaning as a verb of protest.

Reinforcing New Meanings: *Tweaa* Moves Off-Screen and Back Again

As *tweaa* memes were flying furiously across social media platforms, politicians in Ghana's parliament quickly realized the possibilities of a term in flux that lodges a legitimate complaint and immediately veils that complaint in the ironic veneer of plausible deniability. The use of *tweaa* to call out opposition in debates on the floor of parliament became so frequent and distracting, in fact, that it was officially banned in the House of Parliament on February 18, mere

weeks after the video first appeared. Yet even the MP who petitioned the speaker of the house for the phrase to be banned did so in a spirit of ironic play, declaiming, "If you do not declare *tweaa* unparliamentary, we'll be heading towards a situation where . . . Because last week, people tweaaed! Today, they are tweaaing! Tomorrow they will tweaa!" (fig. 6). This speech riffed on an image that had circulated online of a teacher instructing students in conjugating *tweaa* on the blackboard as if it were a verb, with "to tweaa someone" meaning "to challenge someone" (fig. 7). In taking this thread of online response to Barima's behavior onto the literal floor of legitimate political speech, the MP inadvertently furthered the ratification of the word's ongoing shift away from its original meaning as a generic interjection of disapproval and toward its expansion as both an interjection and a verb that quite clearly indexes power asymmetry and moral challenge. In semi-jokingly conjugating *tweaa* in his complaint about the use of the term itself, the MP further reinforced the linkage of the use of *tweaa* in the original interaction as a means of protesting Barima's speech specifically, and future iterations of the term as an index of the *act* of challenging a powerful person's speech and actions more generally. Indeed, by declining *tweaa* as if it were an English or a French rather than a Twi verb, the MP's and these memes' morphological jests suggest that word's emergent connotation of

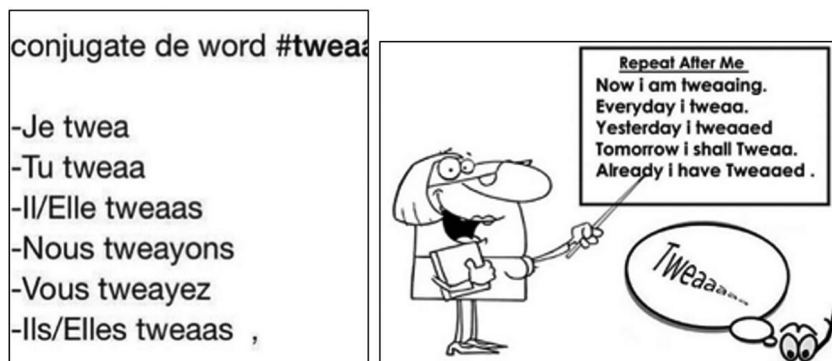**Figure 6.** Screenshot of the parliamentary proceedings during which *tweaa* was banned

Figure 7. *Tweaa* memes playing with the idea of *tweaa* as a verb

"challenge from below" is so powerfully obvious that its meaning is transparent even across language boundaries.

On February 28, only a week after the parliamentary ban went into effect, opposition members repeatedly called out "Tweaa!" during then-president Mahama's annual state of the nation address, in an effort to interrupt his speech and voice criticism of the administration. The president himself, in a recapitulation of Barima's original attempt to reassert his authority against the younger man's interruption, jokingly called back, "Hey, who said 'tweaa?' Am I your coequal?" on live TV. While received with laughter and applause from the floor, this referencing of the more powerful position of the politician in the video vis-à-vis the relatively powerless audience member was also clearly meant to put the opposition members in their place and reassert the authority of the office of president—but in doing so, Mahama once more very visibly sedimented the emerging meaning of the term as a challenge to authority (fig. 8).

At this point, the fervor of local reporting had already reached the attention of international media, including Al Jazeera (2014) and the BBC (2014). Ebo Quansah, veteran journalist and longtime editor of the Ghanaian weekly *The Chronicle*, ran an op-ed under the title "Ghana: The State of the Nation? Tweaa" (2014)—in which he positioned himself as "tweaa-ing" Ghana itself for its embarrassing national conduct around the term. After centuries of tumult on the path toward democratic self-governance, *local* (often ironic and veiled) critical attention to how politicians comport themselves is hardly a new phenomenon in Ghana. But for a country with such a keen collective national longing to be a serious player in global politics, *international* attention to a politician's outburst gone viral was a profound embarrassment. This increased attention, combined

Figure 8. Screencaps of President Mahama laughingly calling back to opposition members who said "*tweaa*" during his state of the nation address, left, and MPs crying with laughter, right.

with ongoing remixing of *tweaa* in mediated settings, led the president to remove Barima from his post immediately before the March 6 Independence Day celebrations that would have given Barima a high-profile public platform.

As the spring turned to summer, a cascade of state economic policy decisions kept *tweaa* on the lips and keyboards of millions of frustrated and struggling Ghanaians. Ghana's currency, the cedi, had been inching lower in value since the previous January, leading to a series of largely ineffectual efforts to shore up the economy, many of which went into effect in February 2014 just as the *tweaa* clip on YouTube was taking off. In spite of these efforts, the cedi went into a precipitous freefall that April, nearly tripling the price of basic goods and services. In response to public outcry, the government introduced fuel subsidies but was ultimately unable to sustain payments to bulk oil distributors. This led to country-wide fuel shortages throughout the summer. Meanwhile, ongoing problems caused by the country's aging electricity grid were brought to a head by additional state debts to the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG); unable to meet demand, ECG announced a rolling blackout schedule in early June. Facing even greater budget shortfalls, the government was then forced to revoke the fuel subsidy in mid-July, and prices soared even higher. Shared taxi conversations—always a reliable ethnographic gauge of the political atmosphere—were the most vociferous I'd ever experienced. It felt as if the collective capacity for sustained outrage was reaching a tremulous peak.

In the midst of these ongoing events, *tweaa* was repeatedly leveraged in everyday conversation and online as shorthand for this collective outrage. It was in this period that the new meaning of *tweaa* as a legitimate challenge from below was consolidated further by the increasingly widespread use of *tweaa*

as a hashtag on various social media platforms. Appended to images and utterances alike, #tweaa effectively rendered the content of a given post critical commentary on the contemporary state of affairs.

When the rolling blackouts began in June, for instance, hundreds of thousands of Ghanaians without power took to their dying phones to tweet their displeasure at ECG. The media spokesperson responded via the ECG twitter handle, "Even the sun doesn't light the whole earth at the same time so who are you to curse and insult us? If your time is up, *y3b3 fa wo* light."[4] The Twi code-switched phrase roughly translates to "we will 'off' your light," or turn off your electricity. It is notable that the tweet echoes Barima's original rhetorical question "Who are you?!," thereby positioning ECG as the powerful party at the top of the hierarchy, and almost begging to be responded to with a hearty *tweea*. This tweet was not only widely retweeted but also captured as screenshot and circulated on other platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram. Without fail, posters laminated additional meaning onto the incendiary message with their own commentary by tagging the posts with the hashtag #tweaa— effectively calling out ECG, a powerful state monopoly, from the position of the aggrieved populace.

The hashtag was readily applied elsewhere as well, such as a particularly effective tweet from June 27 that reads, "See the cedi against the dollar, ah too bad. Meanwhile he sits in that flagstaff house while pple [*sic*] struggle for petrol. #tweaa"—directly calling out the president (the "he" who resides at Flagstaff House) for resting on his power and privilege while his policies deepened inequalities (fig. 9).

Running through all of this hashtag commentary was an implicit—and sometimes quite explicit—moral condemnation of state policies and actions. With each iteration, *tweaa*'s meaning was further cemented as the expression of a disenfranchised populace actively challenging what they saw as the arrogance and incompetence of power consolidated at the top.

The use of *tweea* to highlight outrage was especially visible in June and July 2014, when an anonymous online consortium calling itself Concerned Ghanaians for Responsible Governance called for a series of protests. In an effort to bring attention to the would-be movement, the consortium encouraged people to wear red, a traditional color of both mourning and protest, on Fridays, with

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4. Here the /ɛ/ vowel in "yɛbɛ" (1st-pl FUT) is rendered with the numeral 3, and the /ɔ/ in 'wɔ' (2nd-POSS) merely as an /o/—both common workarounds for keyboards unable to represent Twi vowels; in English phonology, the phrase would be roughly *yeh-beh fah woah*.

Figure 9. ECG's tweet at its angry customers

the hashtag #redfriday. As the government had launched a high-profile and pop-
ular campaign encouraging Ghanaians to support the nation's economy by wear-
ing locally produced textiles on Fridays the year before, this was seen as be-
ing in direct contravention of these efforts and therefore a protest of the state
more broadly. After a number of official events, the #redfriday movement cul-
minated in an attempt to occupy the seat of government (#occupyflagstaffhouse)
in the capital of Accra on the national holiday of Republic Day, July 1. *Tweaa*
was emblazoned on signs and tagged profusely onto online commentary during
and after the protest. In figure 10, for example, the image of a young girl dressed
in red and holding a sign reading "Mahama adɛn???" (Mahama why???) is in-
dexed with a series of hashtags set against one another in a constellation of linked
meanings, including #fiscaldeficit, #occupyflagstaffhouse, #lightoff, and of course
#tweaa.

For a social and political landscape that for decades has been mired in frus-
trated resignation to the status quo of slow development, failed structural ad-
justment, and the seemingly lost promise of independence, this public call for
direct action was nothing short of extraordinary. It was also a "bivalent" mo-
ment par excellence, a complicated combination of the signifiers and modalities
of the digitally mediated, global "occupy" protest movement with the particu-
larities of local grievances and myriad local understandings of the politics and
historical ramifications of the protest—and, of course, the deeply local leverag-
ing of *tweaa*, now fully shifted in meaning from generic disapproval to this rare
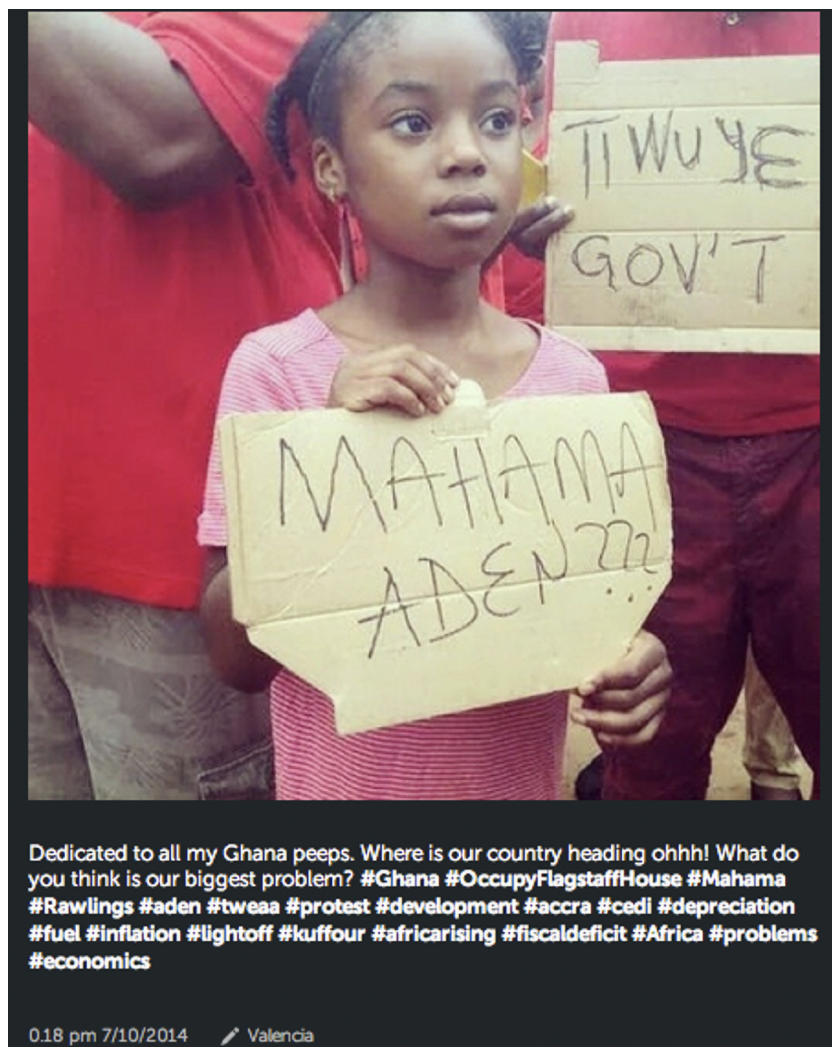instantiation of active, physically copresent protest from below.

Figure 10. An Instagram post about the #occupyflagstaffhouse protest bearing the hashtag #tweaa.

Yet for all their historical significance, these and other protests in other Ghanaian cities around the same period were in many ways quite limited, both in their scope and impact. The president did not respond to the protests directly or in policy shifts, and momentum died out. Those protesters who did come out were repeatedly criticized by politicians and local media for being supposedly too comfortably middle-class to authentically voice the struggles of ordinary Ghanaian citizens. In the ensuing fight over the characterization of these

events, defenders of the status quo framed the signifiers of youthful contestation as disrespectful and deeply negative failures to conform to local norms and expectations, mocking and delegitimizing their power to index future possibility and change. Further reentrenching the status quo, Barima was nominated for reinstatement by the president in November 2014 and officially returned to his post just before the new year. He lost out on other political posts in 2015, briefly considered a posting to the much-maligned position of ministry of power in 2016, and then quietly disappeared from politics—though he has been known, ever since his infamous outburst, as "the Tweaa DCE."

Conclusion

Several years after the *tweaa* debacle, a new viral video surfaced of a "man on the street"–style interview. The interviewee neologized the onomatopoeic phrase "kpa kpa kpa" to describe the hustling required to survive in the Ghanaian economy. The Ghanaian twittersphere lit up with the joking declaration, "#kpakpakpa is the new #tweaa"—suggesting that tweaa has not only undergone powerful indexical shift to be available as a communicative resource in new ways but has in a very real sense become the template for future iterations of powerfully resignified language in the growing lexicon of youthful, digitally savvy Ghanaian protest.

That this shift in meaning was made possible via the iterative, reentextualized circulation of memes across a complex media ecology should signal to all who study the digital that memes represent powerful communicative resources worthy of investigating as *linguistic*, and not merely textual, phenomena.

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