



Article

Unpacking the commonalities between humans and the more-than-human world: Insights from selected Akan proverbs

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Abstract

Escalating environmental crises have become a critical global concern, prompting interdisciplinary research efforts to propose sustainable developmental solutions. However, much of the existing literature seeking to draw attention to, and subsequently address, the crisis from an ecolinguistic perspective often focuses on eco-destructive stories. Ecolinguists believe that studies from indigenous African perspectives have the propensity to offer alternative discourses that depict a more harmonious relationship between humans and nonhuman beings than those from the Western world. The present study explores language forms (lexical items) in Akan proverbs to propose alternative discourses to the current human-centric narratives that have been detrimental to ecosystems. To achieve this, thirty-four Akan proverbs with eco-characters were purposively selected, drawing on Stibbe's ecolinguistics framework to guide the analysis. The study observes that Akan proverbs employ language forms that use the same terminology for equivalent processes, anatomical parts, spiritual prowess, places of abode, and kinship terms for both humans and the more-than-human world. Beyond the lexical level, the more-than-human world is culturally modelled as being morally responsible, actively engaging in the activities of the ecosystem, and as comprising sentient beings who are organised and intentional about what goes on around them. This worldview bridges the gap between humans and nonhuman beings, thereby contributing to ongoing interdisciplinary debates on folk biology, anthropomorphism, and comparative cognition, and positions the selected Akan ecoproverbs as eco-affable texts.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; more-than-human world; Akan proverbs; Ghana; folk biology; ecocentric

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1. Introduction

In the Anthropocene era, where human beings are considered the centre of everything, with all other species and ecosystems existing solely for their exploitation, a fundamental re-evaluation of this relationship is imperative. The relationship between humans and the more-than-human world is of great importance. Paşcalău et al. (2021) assert that the human–nature relationship, as intrinsically reflected through language, varies across and within cultures, leading to the different perceptions people have about nature and informing how they engage in different activities. In this regard, language can be employed “to establish similarities and differences” (Mühlhäusler, 2003, p. 54). Similarities paint harmonious relationships, whereas differences do otherwise. Differences may divide a complex society into groups, focus attention on a specific group, assign people to the group, and depict one group as being superior to others (van Dijk, 2008). This is a well-known process in the context of the typical social distinctions of race, gender, class, and sexuality, but it also plays an important role in issues related to the environment. Stibbe (2019) argues that if the world is separated into two groups, people and nonhuman life, there is a risk that humans will be viewed as superior and the natural world as exploitable and unsustainable. Penz and Fill (2022) claimed that European languages, particularly English and German, have distinct lexicons for referring to analogous or equivalent human and nonhuman concepts. Hence, divergent terminologies are employed to describe similar qualities and processes. To understand how various languages in different parts of the world construct human–nature relationships, which invariably influence worldviews and perceptions about the natural world, the authors advocated extending studies to languages found in Africa, as they could provide patterns that may be positive. It has been argued that when humans uniquely and subtly defend our exploitative behaviour by linguistically highlighting the differences between humans and nonhuman species, it creates an emotional separation between us (Heuberger, 2025). Stibbe (2021) asserts that instead of concentrating on what divides us from other species, we should be concerned with what we have in common with them.

In a bid to search for commonalities, there is advocacy for alternative stories. In this regard, Abram (1996) draws attention to the richness of indigenous languages. Steffensen and Fill (2014) also opine that ecolinguistics offers a platform for mending the broken relationships between humanity and the more-than-human world. In this case, humanity can take on many identities and construct different relations centred on these identities. Such relationships can promote equality, well-being, and fairness, or discrimination that results in injustice and anthropocentrism. Stibbe (2012, p. 47) defines a healthy ecosystem as “teeming with life, with humans, animals and plants living their lives and interacting with each other and the physical environment in ways that sustain all life”. In a bid to adhere to Penz and Fill’s (2022) advocacy to subject indigenous African languages to critical evaluation, some attempts have been made. Studies by Simotwo (2019), Ambe (2022), and Khasandi-Telewa (2023a, 2023b) have focused on oral narratives from Kenya and

Cameroon. Angwah (2020), in turn, analyses Cameroonian proverbs with an emphasis on proverbs that directly talk about conservation. Nonetheless, studies dedicated to how lexical items construct commonalities between humans and the natural world within Akan proverbs have yet to receive scholarly attention, hence the need for the present work, which seeks to add to the existing scholarship on oral literature and to reinforce the relevance of indigenous knowledge in addressing global sustainability challenges. The study is guided by the following questions: (i) In what areas do Akan proverbs employ similar lexical items to establish relationships between humans and nonhuman beings? (ii) How do Akan cultural models of the more-than-human world reflect perceived commonalities between humans and nonhuman beings? The study, therefore, explores representations of identities that encourage respectful relationships between humans and the natural world.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Theoretical underpinning*

Ecolinguistics focuses on how humans use language to impact the more-than-human world. For the present study, it would be interesting to evaluate the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world as portrayed in Akan proverbs. Stibbe (2005) posits that human–nature relationships are largely influenced by language use. For instance, the existence and use of derogatory and offensive terms do not only represent hateful relationships; rather, the words themselves serve as the foundation for these relationships. Stibbe (2005), drawing on Halliday (2001), contends that the role of language in this regard is significant since “our ‘reality’ is not something readymade and waiting to be meant — it has to be actively construed; and ... language evolved in the process of, and as the agency of, its construal” (Halliday, 2001, p. 179). This means that our relationship with the natural world is partly shaped by how we use language to discuss it. Okri (1996) claims that, to change our way of thinking and attitudes, there is a need to change the stories we live by as well. Subsequently, Stibbe (2021) proposed nine main types of stories: ideology, framing, metaphor, evaluation, identity, conviction, erasure, salience, and narrative. In this study, we employed Stibbe’s (2021) ecolinguistic framework to guide the analysis. The main story we discuss is ideology because it somehow sums up all the other stories. It must be noted that these stories are inextricably interlinked, as they all work together to convey an ideology. Stibbe (2021) defines ideologies as “belief systems about how the world was, is, will be, or should be, which are shared by members of particular groups in society” (p. 19). In this model, the analysis goes beyond lexical items and examines how individual vocabularies are used to tell stories about the world. The ideologies of the stories may be ecocentric, anthropocentric, or both, and may be the premise for classifying the findings as beneficial, negative, or ambivalent. Akan proverbs are based on culture, beliefs, and worldviews. Therefore, subjecting them to ecological analysis to reveal their underlying stories in terms of ideology is the right direction. In line with this, we argue that the Akan language and its

oral culture can offer an alternative discourse, as it explores distinctive linguistic patterns that assign personhood to plants and animals (see Agyekum, 2024). Such inspiring stories are important because ecolinguistics gives prominence to the role of language in human–nature interactions.

2.2. Oral traditions in Ghana

The term “oral tradition” is used by African scholars to refer broadly to non-literary or non-written intellectual resources (Quayson, 2009). Oral tradition, or orality, can be explained as the system in which messages and information are passed on verbally from one generation to another (Finnegan, 1978; Sampene et al., 2024). Oral literature falls under oral traditions. In Ghanaian society, oral traditions are crucial to the preservation of historical accounts. These oralities are an essential component of Ghana’s identity and cultural legacy (Kondwe et al., 2004). Oral literary forms, including folk songs, riddles, puzzles, folk tales, proverbs, drum language, speech play, poetry, myths, panegyric poetry, and proverbs, are metaphors that promote self-introspection and moral choices. Oral traditions serve as the best form of informal education for transmitting knowledge prior to Western or formal education (Taluah, 2015). Unlike the current literate era, where codes of conduct are written and sold to be read to regulate behaviour in society, everyone growing up in any society consciously or unconsciously comes to understand these linguistic expressions. Understanding a language involves more than simply its vocabulary and grammar, but also the cultural assumptions that underpin its use. This claim is reaffirmed by Nketia (1955, p. 1), who states that “[t]he study of verbal expressions ... is important not only for a clearer understanding of problems of meaning in a language, but also for a deeper understanding of a people’s life from which their meaning is ultimately derived”.

As pertains in many African countries, even the written literature studied in Ghanaian schools is heavily influenced or rooted in oral literary traditions such as folk tales, riddles, myths, legends, songs, proverbs, and riddles (see Yitah & Komasi, 2010). These genres, among other things, teach lessons including desirable and undesirable characters, social roles, the importance of harmonious living, and appreciation for nature (Yitah & Komasi, 2009). Yitah and Komasi (2009) assert that a closer look at children’s literature reveals that children’s literature in Ghana evolves around fantasy from legends and folk tales to the sophisticated realm of the artistic, while at the same time keeping a closer link with oral literature, but this time taking on modern characters. This has also informed the writings of African authors who consider writing for children as a means of shaping future adults to fit well into their respective societies. Besides the stories in children’s literature, the oral genres are consciously included in the syllabus from primary to tertiary level and are taught in formal settings.

Oral traditions provide a special window into Ghanaian society’s past, offering information crucial to the development of community identity and cultural preservation.

That is why, even amidst Westernisation and globalisation, this recurrent pattern emphasises how human societies and the environment are intertwined. Although oral traditions serve as the bedrock of literary expression, scholars fear they are becoming fossilised, and conscious effort is needed to educate this and upcoming generations on the importance of these verbal acts in our linguistic culture. Agyekum (2023), for instance, calls for encouraging the youth to read available books on them and engage with “oral literature genres like folk songs, riddles, puzzles, folk tales, proverbs, drum language, speech play, poetry and others” (p. 118). In Africa, oral traditions like proverbs and wise sayings are considered divine and flawless truths. The language resources of traditional Ghanaian communities reflect unique religious knowledge (Addo-Fening, 2001), which demands complete compliance rather than questioning. According to Setuba (2002), proverbs are a valuable oral tradition in Africa that preserve a people’s wisdom and philosophy of life.

2.3. Akans and the proverbial stories they live by

In modern usage, Akan refers to both the people and the language. The 2021 Population and Housing Census put the population of Akans at 45.7% of the overall population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). The Akan language is the most popular language spoken in Ghana (Agyekum, 2024). The majority of Akans live in Ghana’s Central and Southern regions. Native speakers of Akan are found in nine out of the sixteen regions in Ghana. These are Oti, Ashanti, Bono, Ahafo, Bono East, Central, Eastern, Western, and Western North regions. In the Oti region, the Akan-speaking people share boundaries with the Gbe language people of Gur, Guan, and Ewe. Akan comprises thirteen dialects, namely Asante, Agona, Bono, Buem, Fante, Akuapem, Akwamu, Akyem, Assin, Denkyira, Wassa, Kwawu, and Twifo. According to Dolphyne (2006), Akan may be spoken as a first, second, or third language in addition to one’s mother tongue. According to Akuamah (2022), Akan is a *lingua franca* and, *de facto*, the national language of Ghana.

Proverbs are defined by Durkheim (1933) as condensed statements of a collective idea or sentiment relative to a determined category of objects. Agyekum (2024, p. 143) also asserts that proverbs are “terse sayings that embody general truths or principles and ways of life”. At this point, it can be said that Akan proverbs are communally owned, as no individual can claim ownership of a particular proverb; they represent the collective view of the people. As noted by Asante (2002), Akan proverbs are generally based on observations of real-life situations made by society. They are, therefore, opinions formed by a group of people in their environment. Agyekum further stressed that Akan proverbs are not just used as speech ornament, relating them to the “salt” of language, without which the language dish lacks flavour (Agyekum, 2024). By extension, Akan proverbs have moved from being confined to the chief’s palace for settling disputes and merely being used in conversations as proof of eloquence, and from teaching moral lessons, to addressing a modern issue facing the world today: unsustainable practices. Nonetheless, it is important to note that they contain symbolism and metaphors handed down from past generations,

which make some of them difficult to understand for the present generation, especially those in urban communities. Because they are ingrained in Akan culture, children start using them without even knowing the words they are made up of. Angwah (2020) believes that eco-friendly proverbs could encourage positive ecological literacy among people. Gyekye (1996) and Asante et al. (2017) argue that Akan proverbs are used to conserve the environment. Given that Akan proverbs are described as being embedded with local ecological knowledge, coupled with the environmental problems facing Ghana, it is important to treat them as an alternative story within the context of ecolinguistics.

2.4. Studies on Akan proverbs

Studies on proverbs have recently moved from only compiling proverbs to using them in various fields. Ratray (1916) and Appiah et al. (2007) are two writers who have compiled many Akan proverbs. In his book *The Proverb in the Context of Akan Rhetoric*, Yankah (1989, 2012) points out that simply recording African proverbs in general and Akan proverbs in particular is insufficient. The author describes the use of proverbs in his book as a dynamic communication technique in which form, meaning, and logic are constantly interacting. According to him, proverbs have rhetorical significance based on indigenous aesthetics and are at the centre of actual discourse encounters (i.e., performative and rhetorical components). Yankah stresses the relevance of situational context, including power dynamics, the intended communication, and the relationship with the audience, to measure the effectiveness and meaning of a proverb. He introduced two principal concepts: proverb competence and the notion of the proverb as a medium of subtle criticism, persuasion, and social control. Hence, proverbs function as a “romantic balm” applied to woo the hard-hearted suitor to open the gate of favour. The second edition of Yankah (2012) updated the old work with new insights on orality and rhetoric, reaffirming his earlier position that Akan proverbs are a sophisticated system of communication. Yankah’s argument partly provides a theoretical basis for exploring how ecoproverbs in Akan operate rhetorically, as his focus on context-specific interpretation directly supports the application of an ecolinguistic lens in analysing Akan ecoproverbs as situated rhetorical acts and not just aesthetic expressions for spicing speeches.

Agyekum (2012) examined the idea of marriage and studied marriage-related proverbs and aphorisms. His goal was to investigate the Akans’ conception of marriage and all its ideals. The author examined proverbs related to marriage in general, pre-marriage, marriage contraction, and post-marriage. He pointed out that these proverbs have both benefits and drawbacks for marriage. Agyekum (2012) further noted that Akan proverbs are created from their environment and cosmology and may be centred on economic, spiritual, political, and sociocultural experiences. This implies that proverbs, their origins, how they are interpreted, and the medium of transmission are dependent on language and culture. They reflect accumulated generational experiences and wisdom. They are a medium for transmitting principles and traditional wisdom from one generation to the next. The

knowledge and concepts they transmit include environmental issues such as environmental degradation, conservation, and environmental awareness. Among the Akans, proverbs are employed to educate and advise people on the need to protect and preserve forests for a sustainable future (Gyekye, 1996). The present study also reviewed a number of publications on metaphors, cognitive semantics, and cultural linguistics from the same author. These include face concepts, anger, patience, distress, and well-being metaphors (see Agyekum, 2006, 2012, 2015a/b, 2016, 2018, 2020).

Recently, Moasun and Mfoafo-M'Carthy (2021) examined samples of Akan proverbs on mental and physical disabilities and their meanings through critical discourse analysis guided by labelling theory. They concluded that proverbs mostly tag people with disabilities and represent them negatively, which eventually results in exclusion, marginalisation, and stigmatisation. Danquah (2023) investigated and explored indigenous portrayals of women in selected Akan proverbs. This study used neo-feminism to critically analyse Akan proverbs about women. The findings demonstrate that the role of African women is recognised and appreciated as an important contributor to society. The conclusion drawn is that such representations of women belie the portrayal of the African woman as a beast of burden. This implies that Akan proverbs can be applied to several areas of life. Therefore, the present study expands the frontiers of these studies by exploring the representations of the more-than-human world in Akan proverbs and how they are applied to current global environmental issues.

2.5. Representation of animals in African discourse

Previous studies have explored the representation of nonhuman animals in African discourse, particularly proverbs. Kobia (2016) conducted a metaphorical analysis of 27 seven chicken-related proverbs in Swahili, selected purposively from a published secondary source. The study drew on conceptual metaphor theory (CMT) with the aim of analysing Swahili proverbs to understand their sociocultural meaning, because animals are used to symbolise humans metaphorically. The findings demonstrated that the cock represented men, the hen represented women, while the chick represented children. The study suggested that, in Swahili proverbs, chickens may be likened to humans to unveil good behaviours such as motherliness, caring, creativity, protectiveness, hard work, gentleness, and honesty. Conversely, it also depicts some negative human behaviours like foolishness, cowardice, deceitfulness, ignorance, and being easily deceived, which were also projected to be embedded in the sampled chicken metaphors in Swahili proverbs. The study further revealed that chicken metaphors are inherently culture- and environment-specific, employed to communicate societal behaviours in all forms. Kobia concluded that Swahili proverbs are a reservoir of the traditional knowledge of a people, employed to project and nurture their worldview.

In addition, Yakub (2020) offers a cognitive-conceptual metaphorical analysis of animal proverbs in the Nzema language of Ghana, with emphasis on how some animals

are used in Nzema proverbs to represent diverse human attitudes, characters, and behaviours based on the socio-traditional values, beliefs, and general worldview of the Nzema people. The researcher adopted conceptual metaphor theory to reveal how animals represent the source domain through which other human experiences are conceptualised. A total of eighteen animal-based proverbs comprising domestic and non-domestic animals such as reptiles, insects, birds, and flies were purposively selected for the study from both primary and secondary sources. The findings suggested that the sheep represents preparedness and focus; the dog symbolises cooperation and collaboration. The study concluded that these animals are employed in Nzema proverbs to guide humans to inculcate positive behaviours such as forgiveness, cooperation, tolerance, patience, hard work, kindness, obedience, and faithfulness.

Moreover, Agyekum (2023) discusses animal metaphor in Akan from the perspective of cultural linguistics, drawing on cultural metaphor and worldview metaphor as well as conceptual metaphor. The author argues that Akans employ the behaviours of animals, their movements, and their stature to portray human behaviour in metaphors. The data, collected in the form of proverbs, panegyric poetry, Akan state and clan totems and symbols, were sourced from documents, internet sources, and interviews with four renowned Akan scholars. The study concluded that although animal metaphor is universal, the attributes for specific animals are culture- and language-dependent. The study revealed that animals are affiliated with specific clans in Akan culture and are regarded as family members. Some common characters of animals, including eloquence, swiftness, beauty, bravery, resilience, and indefatigability, are projected onto humans.

Similarly, Arhine et al. (2024) explored how Akans employ the character of animals, their movements, and their stature to represent human behaviours metaphorically. Situating the discussion within the tenets of conceptual metaphor theory, their research employs Akan folk tales, proverbs, panegyric poetry, folk songs, and drum language from sociocultural and socio-cognitive perspectives through which human behaviours are represented. The authors argue that the Akan people's animal-based metaphors represent their religion, philosophy, indigenous knowledge, worldview, and environmental knowledge about animals. According to the data analysed, the following were found to be common attributions of domestic animals, which could be projected metaphorically to describe humans. For example, *ɔkraman* 'dog' represents both loyalty and shamelessness; *abirekyire* 'goat' represents gluttony or stubborn disrespect; *ɔkra* 'cat' connotes slyness and quietness; *odwan* 'sheep' represents meekness, foolishness, and being easily misled; *prako* 'pig' represents dirtiness and gluttony; and *akoko* 'fowl' depicts cowardice, gossip, and/or noisy behaviour. By using animal-based metaphors to depict human behaviours in Akan, this reflects the society's ecological knowledge and perceptions of these natural entities. The study concluded that although animal-based metaphors are universal in nature, the specific behaviour assigned to animals is language- and culture-specific. Although previous studies have explored animal-based proverbs by focusing on how animals are framed to depict human behaviours from a pragmatics point of view, the present study examines the

commonalities between these natural entities through an ecolinguistic lens to elucidate their environmental implications.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, as we believe that realities are relative, multiple, and socially co-constructed, and not objectively fixed (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In this framework, we sought to generate descriptive data in the form of spoken words and written texts. Qualitative research uses words to describe data, as opposed to quantitative research, which uses numerical data. Data were collected through documents, social media, audiovisuals, and semi-structured interviews, using a purposive sampling technique. We consulted one published work (a collection of Akan proverbs and their meanings), titled *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People*, translated from the original with grammatical and anthropological notes by Rattray (1916). In addition to the document, additional data were collected from three social media platforms, namely Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. On Facebook, we reviewed posts from the Asorebanie page (active since 2016, with over 147k followers). YouTube data were taken from Peace FM and Fitiam TV (active since 2011). On TikTok, the data were sourced from Comedyboy's page. On each platform, we employed keyword searches with predefined phrases, including "Akan proverbs", "Akan proverbs and their meanings", "Abɛbuo", and "proverbs on animals". These keywords were chosen to narrow the audiovisual content to proverbs with eco-characters. The search results for each were watched or listened to by two independent researchers who assessed the relevance of the searches. After screening, the relevant videos were downloaded using the savefrom.net downloader. We watched the videos and transcribed verbatim the proverbs that met the inclusion criteria. Efforts were made to ensure that the emotions inherent in each proverb were accurately translated.¹ After gathering these ecoproverbs from the aforementioned sources, we purposively consulted five native speakers who are renowned for their extensive understanding of the linguistic and sociocultural facets of the Akan language and culture (Leavy, 2023; Morse, 2010; Patton, 2015). Through semi-structured interviews, these experts were consulted to extract additional proverbs, provide helpful clarification, and cross-check the available raw data. We arrived at five participants when we reached data saturation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Office for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, a College of Education-based Akan lecturer, as well as a University-based English lecturer, both native Akan speakers, were consulted to verify the

¹ We adopted the binary gender forms "s/he" and "his/her" in the English translation to indicate that the nonhuman animal referred to may be either male or female, since the Akan pronoun *ɔno* does not distinguish gender and may be rendered as "he" or "she" in English. Similarly, the possessive form *ne* in Akan, which can be translated as "his", "her", or "him", is not gender-sensitive. Furthermore, these pronouns are used in Akan for both human and nonhuman referents without gender distinction.

accuracy of the data by comparing the Akan and English versions of the texts. All the data were stored on a Microsoft Excel sheet. In total, 34 Akan proverbs were selected for their subject relevance and stylistic coherence with ecological elements. All proverbs that did not explicitly contain or refer to eco-characters were omitted. Again, we only considered ecoproverbs in which similar terminologies were employed for both the more-than-human world and humans. Ecoproverbs that were incomplete, as well as those that were not rendered in the Akan language, were excluded. We used Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic coding process, where coding is not considered mechanical but an active and reflexive process. With this method, the codes were iteratively generated, and as a result, we did not use any fixed codebook. We read all 34 ecoproverbs repeatedly to familiarise ourselves with the data. Subsequently, we generated semantic codes (shared terminologies) and latent codes (underlying assumptions). We generated the codes through discussions. We did not use any pre-existing templates. In the process, disagreements were clarified by revisiting the original data to negotiate the interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). We then grouped our cluster of codes into themes, e.g., "Same terminology for an equivalent action", "Same terminology for equivalent body parts", etc. Similarly, codes such as "ethical responsibility", "disobedience", and "deliberately provoking" were categorised under the theme "morality"; a code like "speaking animals" was put under "animal speech"; codes such as "survival actions", "emotional actions", and "social actions" were classified under "agency". Following this, we wrote our report. We recorded our reflexive interactions in our reflective journal. Verbatim quotes were added to support the themes, where ProV stands for interview data, ProS stands for social media data, while ProDoc refers to document data sources.

4. Presentation of results

In this section, we present our findings under their respective themes, as given in Table 1. Samples of Akan proverbs are quoted to support the corresponding themes.

Table 1: Findings in themes

Research question	Theme	Example Akan proverb	Literal English translation
Research question i.	Same terminology for an equivalent action	<i>Anoma baako di ayuo a, ɔtiatia so.</i> (ProDoc: 1)	When one bird alone eats the grain, it treads it underfoot.
	Same terminology for equivalent body parts	<i>Nwansena nni hwee koraa no, ɔpepa ne nsa mu.</i> (ProV: 5)	Even if the housefly does not have anything at all, it rubs its palm .
	Same spiritual composition	<i>Akokɔ kra ne obirekuo deɛ nɛ.</i> (ProS: 5)	The soul of the fowl is different from that of the white-brown coucal.

	Same name for an analogous place of residence	<i>Yerekɔ nnomaa nnomaa kurom a yentete mprebuo nɔ kwan so.</i> (ProS: 7)	If we are going to the city of birds, you don't pick up nests on your way.
	Same kinship terms	<i>Se ɔkotere nsa sua koraa a, eno ara na ɔde hye ne yere nkyene.</i> (ProS: 10)	Even if the lizard's palm is small, that is what he uses to measure salt for his wife .
Research question ii.	Agency	<i>Ɔkɔtɔ rewea ne ba rewaɛ hwan na ɔbegye ne yonko taataa.</i> (ProV: 2)	The crab crawls, and his child crawls, and which will take the other and teach him how to walk upright?
	Morality	<i>Seantie ne ɔnwam atikɔpɔ.</i> (ProS: 2)	The lump on the hornbill's occiput is attributed to disobedience.
	Animal speech	<i>Akyekyedee se ne nsa ye tia koraa eno ara na ede to ne yere kɔn mu.</i> (ProV: 6)	The tortoise says even if his hands/arms are short, that is what he uses to neck-waist hug or put around the neck of his wife.
	Gendered and androcentric roles	<i>Woma yere se, se ne kunu kɔ abe so a, ɔnhwe se ɔrenoa aduane asi hɔ atwɛn no, ɛfiri se ɔrekɔ no, egya betumi ahye no ama no awu anaase ɔbetumi aka doroben mu awu.</i> (ProS: 12)	The bee's wife says she will not prepare food and wait for her husband when he goes to the site for tapping palm wine, because he could be burnt to death or stuck in a pipe.

*ProV = Interview data, *ProS = Social media data, *ProDoc = Document data

5. Findings

5.1. Same terminology for an equivalent action

In Akan proverbs, the same words are used to refer to activities performed by nonhuman animals and humans when engaging in equivalent activities. These words are similar to the literal and mundane words used in the ordinary day-to-day conversations of an Akan speaker. The excerpts below are some examples where terms typically used for human activities in English are equally used for nonhuman animals (see examples in Table 2).

Table 2: Proverbs which use same terminology for an equivalent action

Example	Akan proverb	Literal English translation	Shared lexical item
i.	<i>Mmoa nyinaa di abe nanso opuro na ne din atene.</i> (ProV: 1)	All animals eat palm fruits, but only the squirrel is known for that.	di 'eat' (used of nonhumans as of humans)

ii.	<i>Anoma koro di awi a, otiatia so.</i> (ProDoc: 1)	When one bird alone eats the grain, it treads it underfoot.	di ‘eat’ (used of birds as of humans)
iii.	<i>Ɔkotere nkɔdi ne mako mma aponkyirenne nte ho mfifire.</i> (ProDoc: 2)	The lizard does not eat pepper for the toad to sweat.	di ‘eat’ (used of lizards as of humans)
iv.	<i>Ɔkɔtɔ nwo anomaa.</i> (ProDoc: 3)	The crab does not give birth to a bird.	nwo ‘does not give birth’ (used of crab as of humans)
v.	<i>Ɔkɔtɔ rewɛa ne ba rewɛa hwan na ɔbɛgye ne ɔnko taataa.</i> (ProV: 2)	The crab crawls , and his child crawls , and which will take the other and teach him how to walk upright?	rewɛa ‘crawls’ (used of crab as of humans)
vi.	<i>Wote kukuro, na akyekyedee refa ne yere.</i> (ProV: 3)	If you hear the onomatopoeic sound ‘kukuro’, it means the tortoise is sleeping with his wife .	refa ne yere ‘sleeping with his wife’ (used of tortoise as of humans)
vii.	<i>Anomaa ne nua ne nea ɔne no da.</i> (ProDoc: 4)	It is one of its own family that a bird sleeps with.	da ‘to sleep’ (used of birds as of humans)
viii.	<i>Aboa nanka nim adekyee a, anka ɔda nwianna?</i> (ProDoc: 5)	If the boa knew when it was dawn, would he/she sleep in the daytime?	da ‘to sleep’ (used of birds as of humans)

Table 2 shows that the verb *di* ‘eat’ in proverbs (i) to (iii) denotes a process analogous to that of humans. In these instances, the verb *di* ‘eat’ is applied to nonhuman animals rather than using ‘feed’ or ‘graze’. In example (iv), the verb phrase *nwo* ‘does not give birth’ is used instead of ‘spawn’, as would be typical in English. The proverb also adopts linguistic choices that are the same for both humans and nonhuman creatures. Once more, in Table 2, example (v), the movement of the adult crab and the young one in Akan is described by the word *rewɛa* ‘crawling’ instead of ‘scuttling’ or ‘sidling’, as would be the case in typical English. The use of *rewɛa* ‘crawling’ rather than ‘scuttling’ or ‘sidling’, and ‘who’ rather than ‘which’, as would have occurred in English, blurs the linguistic gap between humans and crabs. We also observe in example (vi) that the male tortoise, presumably the husband, is presented as ‘sleeping with his wife’. By using the expression *refa ne yere* ‘sleeping with his wife’ instead of ‘mating’, the proverb anthropomorphises the tortoise. In examples (vii) and (viii), the verb *da* ‘sleep’ is employed to denote a process equivalent to that of humans. Hence, *anomaa* ‘bird’ *da* ‘sleeps’ instead of ‘roosts’, and *ɔnanka* ‘boa’ *da* ‘sleeps’ instead of ‘brumates’. The use of the Akan word *da* ‘sleep’ in place of ‘roost’ and ‘brumate’ for the bird and the boa, respectively, blurs the distinctions between human and nonhuman beings. From a linguistic perspective, lexical overlap indicates that the Akans do not differentiate between humans and the nonhuman world in the broader ecosystem.

5.2. Same terminology for equivalent body parts

In addition, the same terms are used for the body parts of both humans and nonhuman animals. Linguistically, Akan proverbs treat humans and nonhuman animals the same. Table 3, examples (i) to (xi), compare body part names between humans and nonhuman beings.

Table 3: Same terminology for equivalent body parts

Example	Akan proverb	Literal English translation
i.	<i>Aserewa ɔse n'akosuakumaa sua kora a n'ani ne kunu ani gye bo.</i> (ProV: 4)	The sunbird says that even if her vagina is small, her husband likes it.
ii.	<i>Nwansena nni hwɛɛ kora a no, ɔpɛpa ne nsa.</i> (ProV: 5)	Even if the housefly does not have anything s/he rubs his/her palm .
iii.	<i>Akyekyedee se ne nsa ye tia kora a eno ara na ede to ne yere kɔn mu.</i> (ProV: 6)	The tortoise says even if his hands/arms are short, that is what he uses to neck-waist hug or put around the neck of his wife.
iv.	<i>Kaka bu ɔsono se.</i> (ProDoc: 6)	Toothache breaks the elephant's teeth .
v.	<i>Akokɔ a ɔben oni na ɔdi abebe sɛ.</i> (ProV: 7)	The chick that is closer to the mother eats the thigh of the grasshopper.
vi.	<i>Akokɔ nan tia ba nanso ekum ba.</i> (ProV: 8)	The leg of the hen steps on the child but does not kill him/her.
vii.	<i>Anomaa ano ware se deen ara ɔnnidi asuogya.</i> (ProS: 1)	When the mouth of the bird is long, s/he uses it to eat at the far bank.
viii.	<i>Seantie ne ɔnwam atikɔpɔ.</i> (ProS: 2)	The lump on the hornbill's occiput is attributed to disobedience.
ix.	<i>Agyegyenesu nan duru nsuo ase anka ɔbebono nsuo.</i> (ProS: 3)	If the legs of the whirligig beetle were to reach beneath the stream, s/he would have muddied it.
x.	<i>Mmwɛrɛ a yede maa akorɔma a ɔde kyere akokɔ no, saa mmwɛrɛ no ara bi na yede maa kɔkɔsakyi a ɔde didi sumina so so.</i> (ProDoc: 7)	The nails which were given to the hawk, which s/he uses to hunt, are the same nails that were given to the vulture that s/he uses to feed on the dumping place.
xi.	<i>Abe mtoam woanya domɔ a wo nya abe mu.</i> (ProS: 4)	It is in the armpit of the palm nut tree that we harvest the straw mushroom.

In Akan proverbs, similar physical parts (*akosuakuma* 'vagina', *nsa* 'hand', *kɔn* 'neck', *se* 'tooth', and *sɛ* 'thigh') have the same names for humans and nonhuman beings (see examples in Table 3). Notably, the *aserewa* 'sunbird' has *akosuakuma* a 'vagina' instead of a 'cloaca' or 'vent'; the *nwansena* 'housefly' has *nsa* 'hand' instead of 'prothoracic legs'; the *akyekyedee* 'tortoise' has *nsa* a 'hand' instead of 'front limbs'; the *ɔsono* 'elephant' has *se* 'teeth'

instead of ‘tusks’; the *abebe* ‘grasshopper’ has *sɛ* ‘thighs’ instead of a ‘femur’; the *akokɔ* ‘fowl’ has *nan* a ‘leg’ instead of a ‘crus’; the *anomaa* ‘bird’ has *ano* a ‘mouth’ instead of a ‘bill’; the *ɔmwam* ‘great hornbill’ has *atikɔpɔ* an ‘occiput’ instead of a ‘casque’; and the *agyegyenesu* ‘whirligig beetle’ has a *nan* ‘leg’ instead of a ‘raptorial leg’. Furthermore, both the *ɔkɔdeɛ* ‘eagle’ and *kɔkɔsakyi* ‘vulture’ have *mmɔwere* ‘nails’, not ‘talons’, and *abe* ‘palm tree’ has *mɔtoam* an ‘armpit’ instead of a ‘tubular sheath’, as is customary in English. By employing identical terminology for corresponding body parts, we can construct relationships between humans and the natural world as physiocentric (cf. Penz & Fill, 2022; Heuberger, 2025). The emphasis on sameness between humans and other species (particularly animals and plants) creates an emotional bond that blurs the line between humans and nonhumans.

5.3. Same spiritual composition

There are also instances where the more-than-human world is presented as having the same spiritual makeup and extended predestined life traits that are typically attributed to humans in Akan cosmology. This is evident in the proverbs listed in Table 4.

Table 4: Same spiritual ontology

Example	Akan proverb	Literal English translation
i.	<i>Akokɔ kra ne obirekuo deɛ nɛ.</i> (ProS: 5)	The soul of the fowl is different from that of the white-brown coucal.
ii.	<i>ɔbosomaketere hyɛ ɔhye a, ɔhye.</i> (ProDoc: 8)	If the chameleon is predestined to be burned, s/he will be burned.
iii.	<i>ɔhene aso te sɛ Odum, ɛwɔ baabira.</i> (ProS: 6)	The ears of the chief are like the Odum; they are present everywhere.

Examples (i) and (ii) in Table 4 also show that nonhuman entities have individual souls and that their lives are predetermined. From examples (i) and (iii), we can also see that *akokɔ* ‘fowl’ and *obirekuo* ‘white-brown coucal’ have distinctive souls, which means that each has its own fate. In Akan cosmology, the *kra* ‘soul’, seen as the supernatural and divine essence of humans, is also applied to animals. This depiction establishes a common spiritual composition, tracing them to the same divine source as of human beings, *Onyankopɔn*, the Supreme Being. In example (ii), the fate of *ɔbosomaketere* ‘chameleon’ could be predetermined, as in the case of humans. This means that the soul descends from heaven with a predetermined destiny. Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 4, example (iii), the chief or king is associated with the Odum tree, possessing ears akin to those of the Odum. The ears are said to be everywhere, implying that they hear whatever is whispered in the community. One of the participants explained this as follows:

Akanman mu no, yɛgyi di sɛ ɔhene yɛ ntamgyinafoɔ ma ateasefoɔ ne awufɔɔ. Eno nti, yɛgyi di sɛ ɛɛ sɛ ɔhunuu nea erekɔ so wɔ ne kurom, na Odum so na enam ma ɔte saa nsem ahodoɔ no

mu dodoɔ no ara. Yɛgye di sɛ Odum tumi dane ne ho nipa anadwo kɔsra ɔhene na ɔka nsemɔne ahodoɔ a erekɔ so wɔ ne mpotam kyere no. Eno nti na wokɔ nkuraaseɛ no a, Odum taa si kurotia no. (Interviewee: Kwaku)

In Akan culture, the chief or king is believed to be the link between the living and the dead. Hence, he is expected to be well-informed about his community, and through the Odum tree, he is able to hear most of the information. We believe that the Odum tree can transform into a human being at night and pay the chief a visit to inform him about crimes in his community. Odum is typically located on the fringes of Akan villages. (Interviewee: Kwaku)

According to the extract above, both the *ɔhene* ‘chief’ and the Odum tree have spiritual qualities that allow them to be aware of evil in their communities. Both are classified as gatekeepers, with the Odum serving as a vital informant for the chief in Akan society. Linguistically, the proverbs illustrate the complex relationship between humans and the natural environment. Both are shown to have comparable spiritual essences and destinies, contradicting the anthropocentric paradigm that typically elevates humans above the natural world.

5.4. Same name for an analogous place of residence

Akan proverbs use recognisable lexis, such as ‘town’ or ‘home’, typically associated with human beings, when referring to nonhuman beings. Let us look at the examples (i) to (v) presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Human interactions with the more-than-human world

Example	Akan proverb	Literal English translation
i.	<i>Yerekɔ nnomaa nnomaa kurom a yetete mprebua wɔ kwan so.</i> (ProS: 7)	If we are going to the city of birds, you don’t pick up nests on your way.
ii.	<i>Wokɔ akyekyedee kurom na ɔredi dɔte a di bi.</i> (ProDoc: 9)	When you go to the town of the tortoise, and he is eating soil, eat some.
iii.	<i>Wokɔ okusie fie na ɔrewe adwe a, we bi.</i> (ProDoc: 10)	When you visit the rat’s home , and he is eating/chewing palm nuts, chew with him.
iv.	<i>Edan ho pae a, ɔkotere nya dabrɛ.</i> (ProS: 8)	When there is a crack in a building, the lizard gets a sleeping place .
v.	<i>Kotonkurodu resi ne dan a obiara nkw nsuo mma no.</i> (ProS: 9)	If the mud dauber is building his/her house , no one watches the water for him/her.

In Table 5, examples (i) to (v), nonhuman beings such as *nnomaa* ‘birds’, *akyekyedee* ‘tortoise’, *okusie* ‘rat’, and *ɔkotere* ‘lizard’ are depicted as having *kuro* ‘towns’ or ‘cities’. The rat is

depicted as having a *fiɛ* ‘home’; the lizard has a *dabrɛ* ‘sleeping place’, while *kotokrodu* the ‘mud dauber’ builds a ‘house’. Proverbs employ concrete nouns and concepts that are typically known to humans. Using familiar words such as *kurom* ‘town’ or ‘city’, *fiɛ* ‘home’, *dabrɛ* ‘sleeping place’, and *kotokrodu* ‘mud dauber’ instead of ‘habitat’, ‘jungle’, or ‘burrow’ can draw attention to the similarities between humans and nonhuman animals. In example (iv), as seen in Table 5, the sleeping place of the lizard (a crack in a building) is referred to as *dabrɛ*, a ‘sleeping place’. Here, too, the same term is used to refer to a place of abode in this Akan proverb. Referring to the crack in the building as *dabrɛ* instead of ‘habitat’ or ‘den’, the *kotere* ‘lizard’ projects an ecocentric worldview. The use of this form of language could encourage speakers, listeners, and readers to perceive the more-than-human world in a new light. In this form of representation, the more-than-human world could be considered as being composed of sentient beings, worthy of consideration, rather than of non-sentient objects.

5.5. Same kinship terms

Kinship terms are another language technique employed in the selected Akan proverbs to depict nature. Family members are typically the people we care about most and whom we are most inclined to protect from danger. Being part of a family (mother, father, uncle, sister, etc.) is frequently one of the most powerful identities that people possess. Nonhuman creatures are referred to using family terms, placing them in the same category and transforming the individual into a collective social entity regarded in its own right. Examples of such proverbs are listed in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Akan proverbs with human kinship terms

Example	Akan proverb	Literal English translation
i.	<i>Sɛ ɔkotere nsa sua koraa a, eno ara na ɔde hyɛ ne yere nkyene.</i> (ProS: 10)	Even if the lizard’s palm is small, that is what he uses to measure salt for his wife .
ii.	<i>Sɛ akyekyedee repe ne yere amanneɛ a, ɔsɛ, wɔ mmesa gu m’atiko, na menkɔhwɛ agoro.</i> (ProS: 11)	When the tortoise seeks a quarrel with his wife , he says, ‘Plait the tresses of hair falling down my back, and let me be off in search of some fun.’
iii.	<i>Ntontom repe n’ase fiɛ akɔ na mframa abo no.</i> (ProV: 9)	The mosquito wants to visit his in-laws’ home, but how much more when he is blown there by the wind.
iv.	<i>Wɔwa yere sɛ, sɛ ne kunu kɔ abɛ so a, ɔnhwɛ sɛ ɔrenoa aduane asi hɔ atwɛn no, ɛfiri sɛ ɔrekeɔ no, ɛgya betumi ahyɛ no ama no anwu anaasɛ ɔbetumi aka doroben mu anwu.</i> (ProS: 12)	The bee’s wife says she will not prepare food and wait for her husband when he goes to the site for tapping palm wine, because he could be burnt to death or stuck in a pipe.
v.	<i>Anomaa nua ne nea ɔne no da dua so.</i> (ProV: 10)	The bird’s sibling is the one he sleeps with on the tree.

vi.	<i>Nea odwan gyina no ebɔ na ne ba gyina.</i> (ProV: 11)	Where the sheep stands, that is where her baby/child also stands.
vii.	<i>Kɔkɔte ne kɔkɔbo sɛ din mu nanso wɔmmɔ abusua.</i> (ProV: 12)	The warthog and the mongoose are related in name, but they are not relatives .

There are examples of specification and anthropomorphism in which nonhuman animals are portrayed as equal to humans. Table 6, examples (i) to (vii), refer to nonhuman animals as *yere* ‘wife’, *ase* ‘mother-/father-in-law’, *kunu* ‘husband’, *nua* ‘sibling’ (brother or sister), *ba* ‘child’, and *abusua* ‘relatives’ or ‘family’. They are implied to play the same role as individual humans in Akan civilisation. For example, the male lizard is depicted as a ‘husband’ fulfilling his responsibilities to his wife, Mrs Lizard, by measuring salt with his hand. Likewise, example (ii) depicts the male tortoise as anthropomorphised with a sense of humour and romanticism, as well as being a loving husband who intentionally seeks to cause ‘trouble’ in the home by requesting his wife, Mrs Tortoise, to plait a lock of hair falling down his back, even though he lacks ‘hair’. This implies that tortoises are spouses and have experience plaiting their hair in the same way that people do. This also implies that their offspring would be children. In example (iii), *ntontom* the ‘mosquito’ is presented as having an *ase* ‘in-law’ (father- or mother-in-law), implying that it is either a ‘wife’ or ‘husband’, or married to the ‘daughter’ or ‘son’ of the in-law, a concept typically associated with humans. In example (iv), the noun phrases *woma yere* ‘bee’s wife’ and *ɔkunu* ‘her husband’ refer to bees as spouses. This expands the family frame to include nonhuman beings. The bird in example (v) sleeps with his *nua* ‘sibling’ (brother or sister), whereas the sheep in example (vi) has a *ba* ‘baby’ or ‘child’, making the sheep (ewe or ram) the parent. In example (vii), the *kɔkɔte* ‘warthog’ and the *kɔkɔbo* ‘mongoose’ appear to have similar names (in the manner in which they are pronounced), yet they do not belong to the same family. The expression *nanso wɔmmɔ abusua* ‘but they do not come from the same family’ implies that these nonhuman species (warthog and mongoose) belong to their own unique families. The use of these kinship terms to refer to nonhuman animals, such as *ase* ‘in-law’, *yere* ‘wife’, *kunu* ‘husband’, *nua* ‘sibling’, *ba* ‘baby’ or ‘child’, and *abusua* ‘family’ or ‘relatives’, as beings who can feel implies that nonhuman animals can form families, that is, they experience things that humans do, thereby attempting to bridge the gap between humans and nonhumans.

6. Cultural models reinforcing commonalities between humans and nonhumans

Besides the commonalities identified at the lexical level, a collective analysis of patterns in the ecoproverbs further revealed cultural models which equally highlight similarities between humans and nonhuman species.

6.1. Agency

A close observational examination of Akan ecoproverbs revealed that animals undertake

intentional actions. The ecoproverbs portray nonhuman animals as active participants in the ecosystem and not as passive entities existing in nature. For instance, *mmoa nyinaa di* ‘all animals eat’; *anomaa koro di* ‘a bird eats’; *ɔkoterɛ nkɔdi ne mako* ‘lizards do not eat pepper’; crabs do not give birth; crabs crawl; birds and boas sleep; mud daubers build houses, and houseflies rub their palms. By portraying nonhuman animals as undertaking deliberate activities such as eating, crawling, sleeping, and building, the proverbs signal agency, that is, the ability to act with intention. These portrayals assign intentional behaviour and conscious activity to animals. From an ecolinguistic perspective, portrayals such as these give prominence to the agency of the natural world. The actions designated to the animals are diverse. They extend beyond survival acts such as eating, building, and crawling to include emotional and social actions as well. Here, animals pay visits to in-laws, have intimacy, measure salt, and quarrel. This presupposes that they have affections, intentions, responsibilities, and even anger, thereby representing complex mental states. These presuppositions present a worldview which philosophers of mind refer to as “theory of mind”, since listeners’ attention is drawn to the idea that animals are thinkers and intentional beings. This representation may influence listeners and readers as well as speakers to consider animals as co-inhabitants of the ecosystem in their own right and not as inferior beings or mere resources for human consumption. This challenges the anthropocentric notion that intentionality and consciousness are reserved only for human beings. Rather, the Akan ecoproverbs linguistically construct nonhuman animals as beings who are able to interact, take decisions, and participate in ecological and social relationships.

Interestingly, not all natural entities are granted agency in the Akan ecoproverbs. Unlike the animals and plants that are given agency, *mmire* ‘mushroom’, a fungus that appears among the animal-based and plant-based proverbs is denied agency and subsequently framed as a harvested product. This is expressed in Table 3, example (xi): *Abe mtoam woanya domo a wo nya abe mu* ‘it is in the armpit of the palm nut tree that we harvest the straw mushroom’. In the proverb, a plant (the palm tree) uses a body part (*mtoam* ‘armpit’), while *mmire* ‘mushroom’ is portrayed as a resource. This anomaly presents a counter-ideology, utilitarianism, contradicting the ecocentric worldview being propagated by this study.

6.2. Morality

The Akan ecoproverbs represent animals as morally responsible because they are able to engage in good and bad deeds. In the data, animals are depicted as taking decisions that have moral implications and consequences rather than acting on instinct. Assigning morality to nonhuman animals presents an indigenous Akan cultural model where ethical responsibility is expanded to include nonhuman animals. For instance, in Table 2, example (iii), the lizard is depicted as morally responsible for its actions. The proverb *ɔkoterɛ nkɔdi ne mako mma aponkyerɛne nte ho mfifire* ‘the lizard does not eat pepper for the toad to sweat’

signifies that no one should suffer for the wrongdoing of others. In this case, the lizard is the real culprit whose deeds bring consequences, whereas the toad becomes the innocent victim. Hence, the lizard's action is framed within a moral framework of justice, guilt, and responsibility. Similarly, the hornbill is portrayed as experiencing the consequences of its failure to listen to counsel. This is captured in example (viii) in Table 3: *Seantie ne ɔnwam atikɔpɔ* 'The lump on the hornbill's occiput is attributed to disobedience'. Metaphorically, the physical appearance of the *ɔnwam* 'hornbill' is interpreted as punishment emanating from its moral failure. Hence, the bird is portrayed as being morally responsible for its condition rather than simply being biologically formed. A representation of this kind is evidence of how the Akan oral tradition maps ethical reasoning onto nonhuman animals to communicate messages about obedience and responsibility.

In Table 6, example (ii), the *akekyedee* 'tortoise' is depicted as deliberately provoking his wife, suggesting intentionally morally questionable behaviour. The employment of deliberateness in this portrayal bolsters the notion that nonhuman animals have social consciousness and ethical agency. Animals are humanised through these representations and placed within an ethical framework that is mostly reserved for humans. These representations construct an ideology where both humans and animals are seen as socially and ethically interrelated within the ecosystem. In these proverbs, ethical consciousness is mapped onto animals, as their actions are regarded as intentional and weighty. As a result, misfortunes experienced by the animal are not considered natural or instinctive but are rather interpreted as consequences associated with moral actions. This framing constructs animals as having ethical agency, which goes a long way towards closing the gap between humans and animals.

6.3. Animal speech

The analysis further demonstrates that animals are endowed with speech. For instance, *wowa yere se* 'bee's wife says', *aserewa se* 'sunbird says', and *akekyedee se* 'tortoise says', as found in the data, are evidence of animal speech, where nonhuman animals communicate through the use of language. Here, *wowa yere* 'bee's wife', *aserewa* 'sunbird', and *akekyedee* 'tortoise' are 'sayers' in the verbal process *se* 'says'. These grammatical patterns project animals as communicative beings capable of expressing intentions, opinions, and thoughts.

This representation increases the personhood of nonhuman animals as they portray communicative ability and intelligence. Mostly, speech is regarded as a distinctive feature of human identity and rationality that separates humans from animals. Therefore, linguistically, when animals (*wowa yere* 'bee's wife', *aserewa* 'sunbird', and *akekyedee* 'tortoise') are depicted as speakers, they are metaphorically elevated by the proverb from being silent objects to active social participants in the ecosystem. The verbal process grants readers and listeners access to the mental world of these animals (van Leeuwen, 2008). By representing these entities as speakers, they are positioned as worthy of being heard and as communicators, which advances an ecocentric ideology. When entities are 'sayers', they are

active participants in verbal processes because they are social actors (van Leeuwen, 2008). This gives salience to these animals as they invite readers and listeners to hear them. This bridges the gap between humans and the natural world.

6.4. Gendered and androcentric roles

Furthermore, analysis of the Akan ecoproverbs presents a strong animal society that is gendered and androcentric. From the data, animals are given explicitly defined social roles based on gender, encoding the patriarchal Akan society. It is observable from the kinship terms used across the data that male animals are repeatedly portrayed as husbands, while female animals are depicted as wives. These portrayals present animal society as socially organised along gender lines akin to Akan human society. Male animals are assigned roles associated with responsibility and provision. From the data, husbands are given the responsibilities of *hye nkyene* ‘measuring salt’ and *ke abe so* ‘tapping palm wine’, activities linked to sustenance and provision. This constructs male animals as providers within the family structure. On the other hand, female animals are exclusively portrayed as wives performing domestic and nurturing roles. They prepare food, worry about a husband’s safety, and provide food and care for their younger ones. Female animals are therefore constructed as carers, caretakers, and responders whose duties are centred on emotional labour and domestic chores. Interestingly, these gender roles are not reversed at any point in the data. The roles assigned to both genders, male and female, remain fixed and consistently ordered throughout the ecoproverbs. This kind of portrayal normalises the gendered division of labour, consequently extending it to the nonhuman world. In this instance, the animal society models a patriarchal order reflective of Akan society, where males are providers while females are responders and carers, thereby reinforcing gender-specific roles. In the ecoproverbs, family roles are explicitly spelt out and consistently applied. The animals play their diverse roles deliberately. The androcentric framing presents an ideological story in accordance with Stibbe’s (2021) ecolinguistic model. Here, the animal world mirrors Akan patriarchal society. The animals are represented as socially organised beings similar to humans in the Akan culture. This closes the psychological gap between humans and animals.

7. Discussion

The main goal of this study was to explore how language is employed to establish commonalities between humans and the more-than-human world. The findings suggest that the lexical items in the proverbs consistently use the same anatomical terms for both human and nonhuman body parts as well as actions and processes, thereby linguistically closing the gap between them. In comparison to Penz and Fill’s (2022) assertion that European languages like English and German tend to use different words for the same activities, such as linguistic patterns like ‘graze’ or ‘feed’ for animals in English, while

human beings ‘eat’ (German: *fressen* vs. *essen*), language use in Akan proverbs does not promote such separation. The study reveals that in the selected Akan proverbs, both humans and nonhuman beings *di* ‘eat’, *wo* ‘give birth’, *wea* ‘crawl’, *fa* ‘have sexual intercourse’, and *da* ‘sleep’, suggesting their closeness. The study supports Penz and Fill’s (2022) observation, as they call for research to be conducted in African languages, which may offer a distinct perspective on the distancing representation that characterises European languages. Furthermore, this study suggests that the same terms are used for analogous body parts in both humans and nonhumans. The words *akosuakuma* ‘vagina’, *nsa* ‘hand’, *se* ‘teeth’, *sere* ‘thigh’, *ano* ‘mouth’, *atiko* ‘occiput’, *nan* ‘legs’, and *mmowere* ‘nails’ were used. This is in tandem with Heuberger (2025), who argues that literature can create an idealised world to bridge the dichotomy between human beings and the natural world through the use of anthropomorphic language, such as shared body parts (‘finger’ and ‘nose’). This means that, while dissimilar lexical items create a dichotomy between groups, similar lexical terms create harmonious relationships. This supports Zhdanava et al.’s (2021) argument that the closer the connection between humans and the more-than-human world, the less likely we are to harm it.

Interestingly, both humans and nonhuman beings in the selected Akan proverbs have similar spiritual endowment. The study revealed that nonhuman animals and plants have a spiritual ontology, as they possess *ɔkra* ‘soul’, have their lives predestined, and demonstrate spiritual importance, as seen in the role of the Odum tree as a key informant for the king or chief, echoing a mutual spiritual connection. This understanding reflects the view that the *ɔkra* ‘soul’ encompasses an individual’s destiny, applicable to both humans and animals (Akersson, 1965). This contrasts with the detachment from nature in industrial cultures, which leaves people “so oblivious to the presence of other animals and the earth that our current lifestyles and activities contribute daily to the destruction of whole ecosystems” (Abram, 1996, p. 137).

Human–nature interconnectedness is further revealed through concepts such as ‘city’, ‘town’, ‘home’, ‘sleeping place’, and ‘house’. This is consistent with Wikström’s (2021) findings, where the term ‘city’ was used in an English text instead of ‘jungle’ or ‘wilderness’. Such depictions may persuade speakers, listeners, and readers that the more-than-human world has inherent value and deserves consideration (Stibbe, 2021; Wikström, 2021). There is also the use of kinship terms to refer to nonhuman animals, such as *ase* ‘in-law’, *yere* ‘wife’, *nua* ‘sibling’, *ɔni* ‘mother’, and *ba* ‘baby’ or ‘child’, suggesting that nonhuman animals can form families, that is, experience things that humans do, thereby linguistically advancing our understanding of shared experiences and social orders in the more-than-human world. Kinship terminology such as *ase* ‘in-law’, *yere* ‘wife’, *nua* ‘sibling’, *ɔni* ‘mother’, and *ba* ‘baby’ or ‘child’ suggests that nonhuman creatures can be said to form families in the Akan language. This corroborates Zhdanava et al.’s (2021) findings, where nonhuman animals were referred to using kinship terms such as ‘mother’ and ‘baby’ in vegan campaign posters.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that nonhuman animals are granted agency. Nonhuman animals are presented as entities with intentions that consciously undertake

activities in the ecosystem. That is, they are deemed to have feelings, mental lives, or intelligence (Stibbe, 2021). By granting them agency and personhood, they may be considered worthy of moral consideration. The study also suggests that nonhuman animals are ethically responsible, since they engage in both good and bad acts. They are portrayed as sentient beings who deliberately make moral decisions that come with consequences.

The findings further reveal that the eco-characters in the proverbs are depicted as speakers or communicators, with animals functioning as sayers in verbal processes. According to van Leeuwen (2008), portraying animals in this manner gives speakers, readers, and listeners access to their minds. This aligns with Zhdanova et al.'s (2021) findings, in which nonhuman animals were endowed with speech to express their emotions. The study also discovers that nonhuman animals are socially organised. We observed that, in the Akan ecoproverbs analysed, nonhuman animals are presented as living in socially organised societies, typically of Akan origin, where familial roles are assigned based on gender. This gives credence to Mühlhäusler's (2003, p. 54) assertion that language can be employed "to establish similarities and differences". Through these representations, Akan culture models nonhuman animals as autonomous beings with personhood, speech, moral responsibility, and social organisation. By framing the more-than-human world in this way, nonhuman animals are seen as sentient beings who live in societies of their own, much like humans (Agyekum, 2023; Arhine et al., 2024). Bridging distinctions benefits speakers and encourages readers and listeners to do the same. Viewing the world through Akan proverbs urges us to challenge anthropocentric ideas and consider entities of the natural world as sharing similar processes, anatomical parts, and spiritual compositions. This shift in thinking can result in a more welcoming and considerate attachment to the natural world, acknowledging the inherent value and interconnectivity of all living things (Keat & Adugna, 2024). The findings suggest that Akans adopt multiple identities and form diverse relationships based on these identities. Such relationships, as discovered in this study, may promote equality, well-being, and fairness between humans and other species. Unlike European languages, which tend to use distancing language, the language of Akan proverbs can be considered "physiocentric" in that it treats nonhuman beings linguistically in the same way as humans.

8. Conclusion

Ecological issues remain a major problem facing the world today, as they have dire consequences not only for the present generation but also for the survival of the entire human race. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct ecological studies that focus on global issues from different perspectives. This crisis is said to be fostered by linguistic and discursive representation and the meanings humans confer on the natural world while interacting with it through their everyday activities. The linguistic patterns embedded in the texts (proverbs) determine whether they are ecocentric or anthropocentric. In line with the findings of the present study, we conclude that the ecological discourse in the selected Akan ecoproverbs

propagates an ecocentric ideology as opposed to anthropocentrism. The selected proverbs are ecologically beneficial as they represent and construct human–nature relationships from an ecocentric standpoint because no lexical distinction is drawn between them. This positions Akan proverbs as enriched from a cosmological perspective that values the relationships among all living things as belonging to the same environment. Culturally, the findings model the more-than-human world as ethically responsible, being endowed with speech, actively participating in the activities of the ecosystem, as well as being socially responsible and organised. The natural world, especially animals, is portrayed as being composed of rational beings who are organised and intentional about what goes on around them.

The findings contribute to Akan culture and linguistic studies. For Akan language pedagogy, the present study demonstrates that teaching Akan proverbs merely for their rhetorical or aesthetic devices misses in-depth insights as bearers of ecological relationality. Therefore, curriculum developers should integrate the teaching of Akan ecoproverbs into language teaching and environmental education, as they are positioned as cognitive and cultural models which contain environmental ethics and control human behaviour towards the environment, and not just linguistic art. The study also highlights Akan epistemologies as valid and theoretically relevant in understanding the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world. This contributes to the current attempt to decolonise knowledge production. Lastly, the study offers a pioneering systematic analysis of Akan ecoproverbs as a new genre, which could serve as the basis for consciously integrating environmental topics into the Akan syllabus.

Beyond the study's implications for Akan studies, this study addresses some broader theoretical debates. First, the study suggests that unlike folk biological taxonomies, where humans are ranked above animals (Atran & Medin, 2008), Akan ecoproverb conceptualisations of the natural world reject the strict ranking of human beings above other species or the separation between humans and nonhumans. On the contrary, Akan folk biology suggests shared attributes and continuity, challenging the universalist framework of human–nature classification. This extends the notion that folk biology is not universally ranked, since some cultures like Akan classify living beings based on their shared attributes rather than nested layers. Second, with regard to anthropomorphism, it is usually criticised as a naïve projection of human qualities onto animals. However, our analysis revealed that in Akan, anthropomorphism is systematic, as it extends kinship, spirituality, agency, and anatomical terminologies onto the natural world, thereby presenting it as an ecocentric technique to promote ethical interaction, respect, and environmental awareness. This implies that anthropomorphism is a multidimensional continuum rather than a binary concept. Future theories on anthropomorphism should account for what are considered human qualities which are projected onto nonhuman beings and the reasons behind this. Third, in relation to comparative cognition, the present study has implications for ongoing debates in the Western world on whether nonhuman animals have “morality” or “theory of mind”. By representing animals as decision-makers and thinkers, being intentional for

others' welfare, and being able to disobey, the proverbs reflect an indigenous cognitive framework that pre-existed and is somewhat similar to ongoing animal cognition research.

The study has a number of limitations. The analysis is limited to the selected corpus of 34 Akan ecoproverbs, which may not be representative in terms of variation and diversity in the contexts of Akan proverbial discourse. Also, the study relies on textual and interpretive analysis without recourse to in-depth ethnographic confirmation from modern speakers, which could hinder deeper insights into cultural contextualisation. Finally, the findings of this study are limited to Akan proverbs with eco-characters and therefore cannot be generalised to other Ghanaian languages such as Ga, Gurene, Ewe, Gonja, Nzema, and others. In spite of these limitations, the study demonstrates that Akan ecoproverbs are not merely aesthetic in function but rather vibrant ecotexts that offer a compelling alternative discourse to the lexical distancing found in dominant European languages.

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