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GHANA LOCALIZATION *Guide*

How to adapt products, content and
services to the Ghanaian context



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*The Independence Square,
a public place where key
national events are held,
such as the Independence
Day Celebration marked
on March 6 every year.*



Introduction

This guide aims at providing a bird's-eye view of the Ghanaian culture and language with information that can enable businesses and organisations to adapt their products, content and services to the Ghanaian context.

Localization refers to the process of adapting one's product or services to the language, culture and dynamics of a particular setting. It includes translation and cultural adaptation of materials such as software, websites and books, audio, video, or other multimedia. Localization can be of significant benefit to businesses and organisations striving to expand their reach to meet the needs of new targets in different settings.

What is the significance of language and culture in localization of products, content and services?

Sociocultural factors and language could play a huge role in determining the success of a business or organisation in adapting products, content and services to a particular setting. However, much emphasis is usually not placed on these. An analysis of this nature is pertinent, considering the close relationship that exists between language and culture. It is often said that language is culture and culture is language. The culture of a people is almost always revealed in the way that language is used. In Africa, a stark example of this is in the use of proverbs and symbols.

Within the language services industry for instance, it is usually recommended that only language professionals who have lived in and experienced the culture of a particular setting for several years be allowed to work into a specific language. For instance, a French interpreter who has not lived in a French-speaking country for several years might interpret considerably well, but might be unable to relate with some cultural nuances that might be present in the language. This might in turn have a negative impact on the interpreter's rendition. Considering the importance of cultural and linguistic factors for businesses and organisations, Bolingo Communications and Media Consult has developed this national level localization guide following consultations with locals. This guide can therefore be considered as a "first point of entry" into Ghana.

Overview of Languages in Ghana

Ghana is a multilingual country with an estimated 50 ethnic languages that are spoken by people from different tribes in the country.

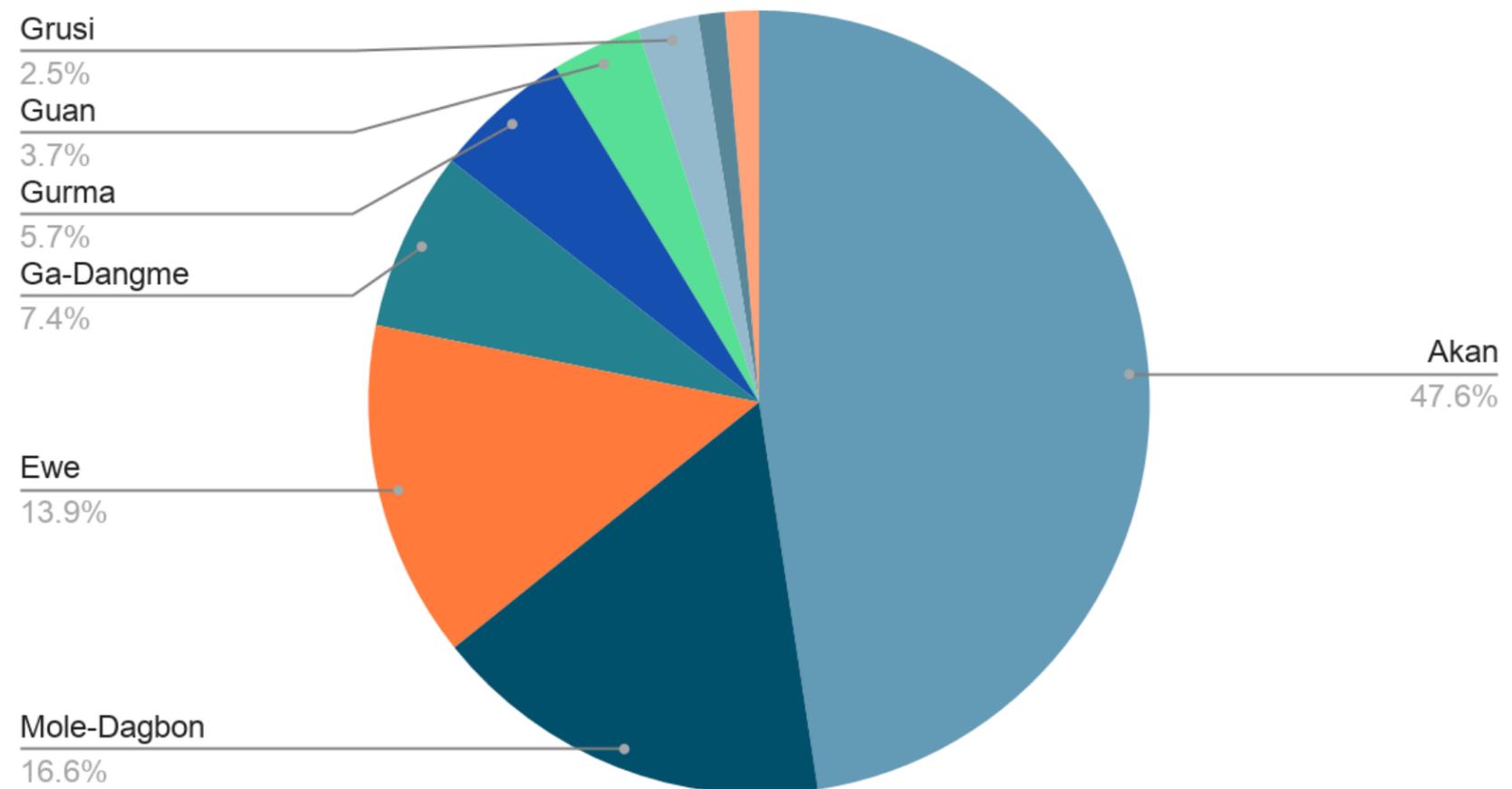
¹ More than half of the population is Christian, about one fifth is Muslim, and a small segment adheres to the traditional indigenous religions.²

The major ethnic groups in Ghana are the Akan 47.5%, Mole-Dagbon 16.6%, Ewe 13.9%, Ga-Dangme 7.4%, Gurma 5.7%, Guan 3.7%, Grusi 2.5%, Mande 1.1%, other 1.4%.³

English is Ghana's official language, due to its past colonisation history with Britain. English is used for all legal, administrative, official procedures and documentation. The major Ghanaian local languages used in publications are the Twi dialects of Asante, Akwapim, and Fante.

Other written languages are Nzema, Ewe, Gonja, Wali, Dagaare, Dagbane, Ga, and Kasena (a Grusi language). Out of Ghana's local languages, only 11 languages are taught in the schools.

Major Ethnic Groups in Ghana



Apart from the indigenous Ghanaian languages, there are other West African languages such as Hausa that are spoken widely in Ghana especially in the northern parts of the country.

The 2010 Population and Housing Census reports that 63.6% of Ghanaians, fifteen years and above (15+) speak English while 0.8% of Ghanaians aged 11 years and above speak French.⁴ French is taught in Junior High School and Senior High School. Language is considered as an important identity in Ghana. As such, when Ghanaians meet in other parts of the world, they feel comfortable speaking any of their indigenous languages.

The average Ghanaian would wish to be able to carry out basic communication in French, considering that the country is surrounded by only French-speaking nations, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Togo.

The usual reasons given for the inability to speak French are failure to take French lessons seriously while in Junior High School or Senior High School, and the fact that French is not spoken in the Ghanaian society which implies that most people tend to forget the French lessons they received while in school.

Written English in Ghana is generally known to be British spelling, although the use of American spelling is also widespread. However, it is advisable to stick to a specific spelling throughout a particular text.

“The average Ghanaian would wish to be able to carry out basic communication in French, considering that the country is surrounded by only French-speaking nations, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Togo.”

“Product labels are required to be in English. Therefore, if the original label is in a foreign language or in a Ghanaian local language, it should be translated into English to meet FDA standards. For packaged items, a supplementary label in English can also be added to the product instead of completely changing the label.”

Adapting Products to the Ghanaian Context

The Economic Times defines a product as an item offered for sale. It further explains that a product can be a service or an item and can be physical or in virtual or cyber form. For the purposes of this publication, a product will be considered as a physical item.

a. Product Label and Name

The Food and Drugs Authority (FDA) and the Ghana Standards Authority are two statutory regulatory bodies in Ghana. In its 2013 guidelines for labelling of products in Ghana, the FDA advises producers to ensure that the name of their products is not “offensive, unethical, socially or traditionally unacceptable, superstitious, magical, etc.”

Product labels are required to be in English. Therefore, if the original label is in a foreign language or in a Ghanaian local language, it should be translated into English to meet FDA standards.

For packaged items, a supplementary label in English can also be added to the product instead of completely changing the label. A product name should be decided upon with consideration of the illiteracy rate in Ghana, to ensure that it's easy to pronounce for everyone. As at 2018, there were an estimated 3,893,564 illiterate people in Ghana.

b. Branding

Product name, tagline and colours are important considerations for branding a product. Depending on the nature of the product, it is advisable to find out the existing widespread appellation for the product in the country so as to ensure adequate branding to give the product a strong presence. This is because Ghanaians tend to use specific brand names to describe some products instead of the specific product names. For instance, “pepsodent” could be used in lieu of toothpaste; “omo” in lieu of powdered soap; “pampers” in lieu of “diapers” etc.

The tagline of a product, whether it’s in English or in a local language, should be simple and relatable. The colours of the product should also be colours that Ghanaians can easily identify with.

c. Buying & Selling

In markets and small shops, people normally prefer to interact in their local languages. It is also very common to find people switching between English and the dominant local language. Most transactions are usually either done with cash or through Mobile Money payment systems, known as “MoMo.” Mobile Money as a payment system has been in Ghana since 2009, and is gradually gaining ground as a widespread means of paying for goods and services.



Fruits displayed for sale in a market in Winneba, Central Region of Ghana

According to the Bank of Ghana payment system statistics, there were 345,000 active mobile money accounts in Ghana in 2012, and by March 2019 this had grown to 12.7 million. Ghanaians are used to bargaining when it comes to buying and selling. Clients therefore stand a better chance of getting a good bargain when they have prior knowledge of the average cost of a product or service. To reduce the likelihood of clients bargaining for products and services, some sellers place price tags on their products, which implies that bargaining might not be allowed.

Adapting Content to the Ghanaian Context

Content is a very broad term which can also be termed simply as information. A definition of content by TopRank Marketing is something that is “engaging, relevant, reliable, interesting, entertaining or enlightening in the form of text, image, video or audio.”

a. Messaging

Messages that are crafted for campaigns and public communication must be done with a consideration of media-related guidelines and policies. The 2014 Broadcasting Bill of Ghana requires that broadcasting promote, “national identity, culture and languages of the country.”

For messaging to represent the national identity, it must reflect the diversity of the nation. For instance, when producing content that will depict religion, it is essential to take into account all the key religions in the country, namely Christianity, Islam and traditional worship. Messages that are crafted in the local languages tend to have more impact and acceptance within the Ghanaian society, especially when targeting grassroots populations.



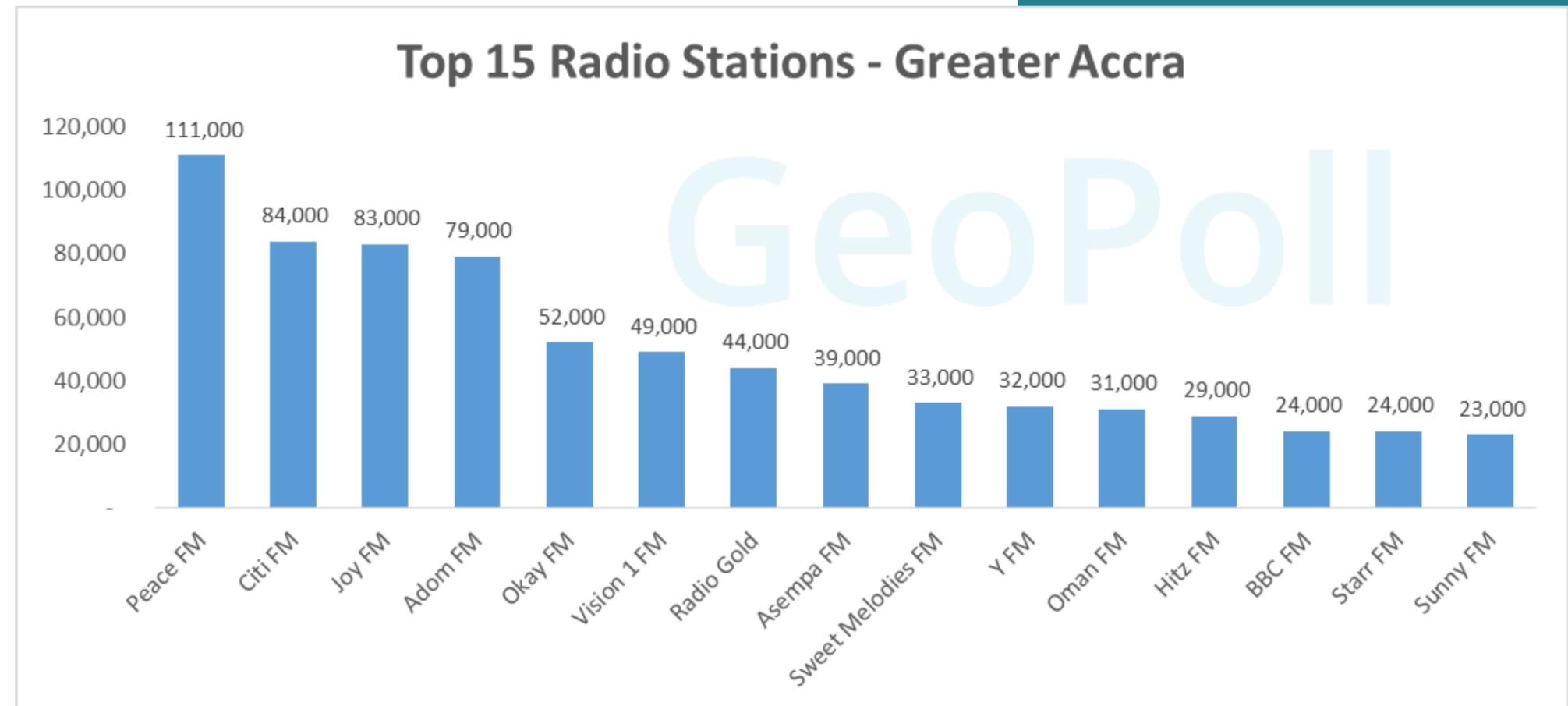
Billboard of a bank in Ghana [the central message is in Twi, a local language commonly spoken in Ghana].

b. Audio, Video and Pictures

Accent is key in producing audiovisual content for Ghanaian audiences. It is preferable to use native speakers with whom the public can easily identify with, unless the content specifically requires foreign accents. Most organisations that embark on campaigns in Ghana produce audio messages both in English and in the dominant local languages.

An example is the Covid 19 sensitisation campaign of an organisation called Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) conducted in three major Ghanaian cities, namely Accra, Kumasi and Tamale. The organisation produced audio messages in English and local languages Dagbani, Twi, Hausa and Ga that were played on radio, information vans and other public communication channels.

Popular TV and radio stations in Ghana broadcast in the local languages, and the ones with the largest following broadcast in Twi. The 2017 Ghana Media Measurement Report placed Adom TV as the most popular television station in Ghana with over 600,000 average viewers. The same report indicated Peace FM as the top radio station in Greater Accra with 111,000 average listeners. These two media houses broadcast in Twi.



2017 Ranking of Top 15 radio stations with Peace FM, a station which broadcasts in a local language having the highest number of listeners.



Left: *Smock*

Image source: <https://streetmarketafrica.com/african-batakari/>

Below: *Kente*

Image source: <https://kuwala.co/blogs/news/52875777-african-fabrics-101-kente-cloth>



The language and channel for dissemination could be selected based on the content and the target audience. Apart from the usual radio and TV, sharing content in a dominant language at an “information centre” can be an effective means of reaching a grassroots audience. The main difference between radios and information centres is that information centres use loud speakers instead of radio signals.

Generally, in advertisement and communication campaigns, it is preferable to use images that locals can relate to. Images of the local setting, famous sites and renowned personalities such as actors and musicians can go a long way to promote acceptance of a product or service. Cultural diversity can also be represented in images through the use of key cultural identities. For example, Akans can be represented with Kente and northerners with smock.

Ghanaians are very conservative by nature when it comes to obscenities and nudity. Whether the content is for commercial or public sensitisation purposes, the use of pictures should be carefully planned. Nudity is taken even more seriously when it comes to children.

For instance, the Cybersecurity Act 2020 criminalises the publication of indecent or nude photos of children. As such, it is always better to use implied meaning rather than overtly displaying nude or obscene images, be it on traditional media or social media.

c. Use of colours and symbols

When localizing content for Ghanaian audiences, it is preferable to use symbols which the population easily identifies with. Some of these are the Adinkra symbols, Kente, and famous cultural sites.

Ghana's national flag is also a cherished symbol which can be used to create a feeling of acceptance.

A perfect example of using local symbols is the image Twitter used when they announced that they were setting up their first Africa office in Ghana. The image was designed with the Ghana flag and Kente, thereby producing colours and imagery that Ghanaians easily identify with.

It is also advisable to take into consideration the meaning of various colours within the Ghanaian society when producing content. For instance, red and black are colours generally worn during funerals.

Red and Black are used for mourning cloth especially by the Akans, and therefore symbolises death and mourning. White is usually worn when a person 70 years of age or older dies, because the event is considered a “celebration of life” rather than a sad occasion.

Politics is a key part of the Ghanaian society. Colours and their meanings in the political domain should therefore be examined to avoid a product or service being tagged as belonging to one political party or the other, unless this is done deliberately.



🇵🇸 Twitter is now present on the continent.

Thank you Ghana and @NAkufoAddo. #TwitterGhana 🇵🇸



Establishing Twitter's presence in Africa
blog.twitter.com

*Tweet by the CEO of Twitter, Jack Patrick Dorsey
announcing Twitter's presence in Ghana*

“ Major businesses take into account dominant local languages when offering customer service. For instance, available languages when dialling the help lines of most telecommunications companies are English, Twi, Dagbani, Ga and Hausa. ”

Identification with one political party could affect the general perception about a business or an organisation and subsequently the way in which services or products are patronised. The major political parties are the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). The NPP's colours are red, white and blue, and the NDC's colours are green, white, red and black.

d. Tone

Ghanaians love humour, as is evidenced by the nature of advertisements that are produced for the Ghanaian context. Therefore, when producing audiovisual content, a touch of humour, and a combination of English and a local dialect will definitely be appreciated.



Image source: <https://freshdesk.com/customer-service-training>

Adapting Services to the Ghanaian Context

The American Marketing Association defines services as activities, benefits and satisfactions which are offered for sale or are provided in connection with the sale of goods. The defining characteristic of a service is intangibility.

a. Customer Service Culture

Clients generally expect service providers to abide by high customer service standards. In the Customer Service Index for 2020 produced following surveys with clients, the Ghanaian hospitality sector came first with 76.63 per cent, and retail malls were second with a customer service percentage of 74 per cent. Insurance services came third with 71.79 per cent, online businesses were fourth with 69.99 per cent, and the banking sector was fifth with 65.84%.

Major businesses take into account dominant local languages when offering customer service. For instance, available languages when dialling the help lines of most telecommunications companies are English, Twi, Dagbani, Ga and Hausa.

Ghanaians are generally courteous, and they like the use of “please” and “thank you” during business transactions and daily conversations.

“ Available languages when dialling the help lines of most telecommunications companies are English, Twi, Dagbani, Ga and Hausa.”

“When a virtual event is scheduled, sending reminders a day to the event and perhaps an hour to the event might boost participation.”

b. Punctuality

It is important to consider general attitudes related to punctuality when offering services in Ghana. The culture of punctuality is not generally reflected in the Ghanaian society. An event that is slated to begin at 9 a.m. might start at 11 a.m., because guests might start arriving at that time. The same goes for showing up for appointments. The language used to describe timing also depicts some level of uncertainty.

Ghanaians are usually not specific when scheduling meetings, for instance, a meeting time could be set as “around 10 a.m.,” “between 8 and 10 a.m.” etc. Interestingly, the Greenwich Meridian Time (GMT) is generally called “Ghana Man Time.”

When an appointment is scheduled, it is always advisable to send a reminder a few days before the selected date or even an hour to the time in order to avoid disappointment.

Similarly, when a virtual event is scheduled, sending reminders a day to the event and perhaps an hour to the event might boost participation.

The dire need for discipline when it comes to punctuality is perhaps evident in the existence of Punctuality Ghana Foundation, which carries out campaigns to promote punctuality.



Other cultural considerations

In Ghana, appearance matters. To gain enough respect and consideration, it is advisable to look decent and to dress based on the occasion or the setting. For instance, wearing slippers to work or public offices is not recommended.

Ghanaians are usually hospitable, and they easily connect with people who display a good sense of humour. For visitors who wish to impress their Ghanaian hosts or acquaintances, making an effort to speak a few words of the local languages will surely do the trick.

Tricycles used in Tamale and in other parts of northern part of Ghana, commonly known as 'yellow-yellow'

The most common form of public transportation in Ghana are public buses known as 'Trotros'. In other parts of the country such as in Tamale in the northern part, the use of motorbikes is more common, as well as tricycles known as 'yellow-yellow'. Tricycles are gradually becoming more common in the southern parts of the country as well.

When it comes to greeting, it would be considered rude to meet someone and immediately start talking about an issue. Ideally, the first thing to do is to greet that person. Basic conversation is expected in most environments, even in corporate environments or a few minutes before or after business meetings and especially when asking for something.

Some Common Terms and Expressions used in Ghana

1. Pants [pants in Ghana is generally used to refer to underwear, and not trouser as is the case in the US]
2. Trotro [the name used for minibuses used for public transportation]
3. You are invited [used to invite someone to eat]
4. I hear you [this means that the person is skeptical about what is being said]
5. MoMo [refers to mobile money payment system]
6. “Obroni” [a term in Twi used to describe non-Africans] NB: Calling or describing someone based on the colour of their skin is widely accepted in Ghana.
7. “Bibini” [a Twi term for an African or a black person]
8. Flash [to call someone and cut the call before the person picks, in the hope that the person can call back]
9. Dumsor [refers to frequent and intermittent power cuts]
10. Cos 90 [means that something has not yielded any positive results]

Endnotes

- 1 M.E Kropp Dakubu, 1996 “Language and community: the view from Accra”, Accra: Ghana Universities Press
- 2 <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghana/Religion>
- 3 <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/30294/The%20choice%20of%20English%20as%20a%20home%20language%20in%20urban%20Ghana.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- 4 <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/bitstream/handle/123456789/30294/The%20choice%20of%20English%20as%20a%20home%20language%20in%20urban%20Ghana.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>



We are poised to assist organisations and businesses in developing customized and targeted localization strategies for Ghana.

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