

Linguistic Dynamism and Language Aesthetics in the Oral Presentation of Yoruba Folktales

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Abstract

The rich oral arts and culture of Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria have attracted scholarly attention of varying degrees and depths most especially from the perspectives of performance and performers. Folktale is one of the core genres of Yoruba oral art that has attracted scholarly attention, but very little attention has been paid to the language and style of folktale. The paper undertakes a comparative study of linguistic dynamism and language aesthetics in a collection of Yoruba folktales published in both the English and Yoruba languages. This is done with a view to underlining how the language and style of the narratives have contributed to the overall thematic presentation and understanding of the selected tales. The findings reveal that the contexts of performance contribute to the contextualisation of meanings and overall performance aesthetics of the folktales. The paper concludes that a serious attention is required in the cultural renaissance of Yoruba oral arts with the inclusion of folktales for cultural sustainability.

Key words: Yoruba folktales, Yoruba trickster stories, cultural linguistics

Introduction

The aboriginal Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria can be located in Oyo, Ogun, Lagos, Ondo and Ekiti states. The people in these states have similar cultural index in the performance cultural identity as found in their various oral narratives and performances. Across various ethnic groups in the country, oral cultural practices predated colonial presence in Africa thereby establishing unique cultural identity for the people. The oral performances before the colonial incursion in Africa cut across the genres of poetry, prose and drama. In the prose genre is the performance of folktales which underlines some fundamental cultural ethos and moral principles among the Yoruba people.

The epistemological understanding of Yoruba folktales adopts different interpretive models with due consideration for the linguistic mechanisms and language utilities which demonstrate denotative and connotative meanings. The significance of the language in the performance of folktales is explained by Edward Said's (1984, p. 174) conceptualisation of affiliation which underlines the semantic connection between cultural texts and their various languages of expression. While enunciating the meaning of affiliation in the discourse of folktales and other cultural texts, Said (1983, p. 174) avers that:

Affiliation is what enables a text to maintain itself as a text, and this is covered by a range of circumstances status of the author, historical moment, conditions of publication, diffusion and reception, values drawn upon, values and ideas assumed, a framework of consensually held tacit assumptions, presumed background, and so on...

The establishment of affiliation in the oral text of folktales is achieved through the effective deployment of linguistic resources rich in metaphors and native intelligence. Thus, performers of Yoruba folktales usually demonstrate competence in the use of language as shown in the various rhetorical devices. This demonstration of language competence is not peculiar to performers of folktales. The audience also needs to have the competence for cognitive mapping of the matter and meaning of the folktales under consideration. This situation, therefore, is consistent with Wilkins' (1972, p. 164) view on the appropriateness in the use of language that it is "the ability to produce an appropriate response to a stimulus". Following the submission of Wilkins, the contents of folktales are expected to generate direct or indirect responses through clapping, gestures and laughter. The appropriateness of stimuli through various performance tropes make folktales responsorial most especially between the performer and the audience.

Discourse on the issues of language and style in Yoruba folktales are important considering the demographic features of the audience in most of the performance contexts. The demography of the audience is usually young children who still passes through the cognitive, affective and psychomotor stages of human development. Thus, "among the training that is given to a child from childhood is the competence in language and communication skills through series of verbal arts and performances such as tongue twisting, oral poetry and folk narratives (Sesan and Sanni, 2019, p. 151). It is based on these submissions from scholars such as Sesan and Sanni (2019), Isola (2008) and Osundare (1981) that the present writer explores the centrality of language and style in the performance of Yoruba folktales.

Language Use in Yoruba Folktales

Language is a human possession which differentiates humans from animals (Akwanya, 2007; Ibitoye, 2004; Sesan and Sanni, 2019). Humans are able to acquire language through what Noam Chomsky describes as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This LAD covers the acquisition of the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment of a child. In Yoruba socio-cultural context, it is expected that Chomsky's LAD covers the acquisition of Yoruba language as the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment of a child. Sadly, the current sociological configurations of Yoruba societies have underplayed the centrality of the acquisition of Yoruba language for communicative purposes. Rather, most Yoruba homes have placed priority on the ability of their children to speak in English – the language of colonial administration in Nigeria. Consequently, this has generated unhealthy

linguistic interactions between the two languages. In this line of thought, Sesan (2013, p. 153) aver:

As a result of the unhealthy linguistic rivalry and competition between the English language and indigenous Nigerian languages, Yoruba Language is being threatened for its linguistic survival. This is premised upon the understanding that when two countries/languages are in contact, they suffer in different ways and with different degrees. The dominant culture or language survives the challenges and trials while the dominated culture or language is forced into a moribund state or it is endangered.

Following the submission of Sesan, Yoruba language is endangered owing to the fact that most of the oral arts and folk performances have lost their places in most of the Yoruba homes. Children are forbidden to speak in Yoruba language. These children are also not encouraged to watch programmes in Yoruba language. This practice has also endangered the cultural practice of Yoruba people. In most of the Yoruba homes, folktales are no longer narrated or performed to children. This situation has surreptitious negative impact on the language development of children.

With the above background on the impact of the negative cultural practice on the performance of folktales, the present writer explores the nuances of Yoruba language usage that users are expected to benefit with the consistent use of Yoruba language for communicative and aesthetic purposes. Like the European prose fiction, Yoruba folktales thrive more with the use of language denotatively or connotatively in the course of the performance. Among the language aesthetics that are common with the performance of folktales are figures of speech, figures of sound, proverbs, imagery, symbolism, parallelism, allegory and idiomatic expressions. All these linguistic apparatuses perform communicative functions at the surface and deep structure levels of interpretation. The discourse on the language of Yoruba folktales adopts the framework of Leech (1981), Perrine (1982) and Layfield (2019). Specifically, our discussion in the present paper focuses on figurative language as adopted in the performance of folktales across Yoruba land.

While describing figurative language, Layfield (2019) is of the view that it is the use of words, phrases, and sentences in an unconventional and non-literal manner. In the course of corroborating the view of Layfield, Surjowati (2019) averred that figurative language makes concrete any abstract object or situation mentioned in the performance of folktales. The deduction from the submission of Layfield and Surjowati (2019) is that figurative language adds more aesthetics and communicative potential to the texts of folktales. The figurative language is usually non-literal and connotative based on the various types of figurative language observed by Leech (1981, p. 11). In a study, Leech (1981, p. 11) identified the following types of figurative language – (i) metonymy (ii) irony (iii) hyperbole (iv) litotes (v) simile (vi) metaphor and (vii) personification. These categories of figurative language express different types of meanings that have either direct indirect connotations in the narration and reception of matters and meanings of folktales.

The deployment of figurative language in the performance of Yoruba folktales performs some functions ranging from aesthetic to communicative roles. In the light of this position on the functions of figurative language in folktales, the present writer upholds the view of Perrine (1982) on the functions of figurative language in oral performance with the inclusion of folktales. In a study, Perrine states that figurative language performs the following functions: (i) imaginative pleasure (ii) imagery (iii) emotional intensity and (iv) precision. All these functions are interrelated with much intensity to add to the glamour and message of the entire narration. The use of figurative language such as metaphor helps to convey much message in few words. The use of metaphor is significant in the narration/performance of Yoruba folktales owing to the nature of the texts. Most of Yoruba folktales usually have animals as the protagonists or villains thereby establishing metaphorical representation of human societies. Thus, the present writer corroborates the view of Dasylva (1999) that narration of folktales is the metaphorical representation of human societies thereby reflecting and refracting every human action. This notional description of Yoruba folktales is made possible with the effective use of language in the course of the performance. The precision of the language use in the narration is made possible with the use of imagery and symbolism in the course of the entire narration. Thus, words in the narration of Yoruba folktales are active and purposeful for sustained cognitive and semantic relationship between the narrator/performer and the audience. To this end, the present writer upholds the view of Ong (1982, p. 47):

Words acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat, which is not, as in a dictionary, simply other words, but includes also gestures, vocal reflections, facial expression, and the entire human existential setting in which the real, spoken words always occur.

Similarly, the present writer subscribes to the view of Sesan (2014, p. 79):

During the performance of Yoruba folktales, words are not formless, baseless, passive and void. They rather contribute to the full realization of the subject matter and thematic significance of the folktales. The performer of folktales therefore relies on the verbal and non-verbal gestures for the purpose-driven utilization of words and language aesthetics during the performance. Words in the performance of folktales therefore make use of psycho-stylistic devices for active participation of the audience and the performer.

The active use of words and by extension language is a reflection of the communicative competence and linguistic dexterity of the aboriginal Yoruba people in the verbal and non-verbal communication. Every gesture made by the narrator/performer of folktales have communicative potent meanings to the audience irrespective of their demography. In the light of this position, the performers of folktales are expected to have the skills in the harmonisation and coordination of the verbal and non-verbal

linguistic resources in the whole process of the narration. Close to the language of the performance is the style of the performance.

How to Perform Yoruba Folktales

The style of the performance of Yoruba folktales points to how to tell the story to the audience without compromising the message and meaning. As an oral art, the performers of Yoruba folktales are expected to be conscious of the personal, cultural and sociological factors that could limit or promote their delivery of the contents of the entire performance. In the light of this observation, the narrator/performer of the folktales need to consider the rendition with the consideration for the voice and audience composition along the line of the chronological age and the mental age. In the light of this position, the present writer aligns its argument with the view of Sekoni (1990, p. 141):

After the narrator's beautiful voice, skillful use of language and effective manipulation of his body have attracted the attention of the audience to the narrative experience, the narrator still needs to retain or hold this attention till the end of the story. Although a good voice and facility with language are devices for retaining audience attention, a more important factor in this respect is the organization of the story itself.

The discourse on the style of narration as submitted by Sekoni also points to the significance of language in the whole performance process. Another discussion made from Sekoni's submission is that style of narration varies from narrator to narrator but depending on the context and audience of the performance. As parts of the efforts to retain and sustain the attention of the audience, the narrator adopts different techniques demonstrating its creative ingenuity. Among these techniques (linguistic and paralinguistic) are the use of opening glee, the use of riddle or brain-racking tale before the actual narration of the folktales and the use of songs that are in-built in the story (Sesan, 2012, p. 189).

The techniques of the narration are not homogeneous – this is the point that Sesan missed out in his submission. Although Sesan (2012) submitted that the narrator makes use of different techniques, he fails to establish that there is no hard and fast rule in the adoption and deployment of these techniques in the entire narrative process. The present writer, therefore, submits that the style of narration is dependent, individualistic and unique to each of the narrator/performer. Following this observation, the present writer upholds the different categorisations of styles – (i) style as choice (ii) style as deviation (iii) style as variation (iv) style as situation and (v) style as individual. Tariq (2018) avers that style is unique in the interpretation of a text because each performance text usually demonstrates difference and areas of divergence. The handling of a text is different from one performance context to another thereby establishing a difference between grammar of the language and the grammar of the text.

Barry (2011) underlines this difference with focus on the mode of delivery or rendition of the text. Based on this observation, the present writers extend the frontiers

of Barry's position that there is a difference between the grammar of the language and the grammar of the performance of the text. In the light of this, we adopt the postulation of Barry that stylistics goes beyond "sentence grammar" to 'text grammar' considering how the text works as a whole to achieve (or not) its purpose (for instance, to amuse, to create suspense, or to persuade) and examining the linguistic features which contribute to these ends" (Barry, 2011, p. 207). How the text of the entire performance works as a whole depends on the narrative technique or style of narration that a performer adopts. This view fundamentally stresses the mannerism and idiosyncrasy that the narrator adopts in a view to substantiating the view that style is a variation/choice/individualistic. The variation of the style of narration is welcome because the text of the performance is dynamic and elastic with no specific limitations to the quality of the contents. The performers of the folktales are always at the liberty to determine the narrative technique to be adopted and how the audience will be co-opted into the entire narrative events.

This variation of style could be seen at the opening glee or the middle of the narration through the interjection of songs or the use of onomatopoeia (the use of sound to represent an object or event in a discourse or narration. Barry's text grammar further indicates that any study on the style of a text cannot be separated from the mode of language use. Thus, there is a need to consider the linguistic and performance virtuosity in the course of the performance of a text. It is imperative here to consider a text of a folktale for illustration on the styles of the performance.

The Tortoise and the Elephant

Once upon a time. In the land of animals, there was a great trouble because their king was sick for some time. After the divination, it was revealed that the only solution to the trouble in the land was for their king to be healed. Before the king would be healed, a live elephant must be used for sacrifice. The hunters in the land found it difficult to bring a live elephant into the land. Tortoise came out to announce to them that he would deliver a live elephant to the town on the condition of a huge reward. The chiefs, on behalf of the king, promised Tortoise half of the estate. To carry out his plan, Tortoise began to make friends with Elephant and in the course of this, he sweet talked the elephant with the promise of making him the king of his (Tortoise's) town because their king had just died. Elephant was not critical to analyse Tortoise's information and agreed to the proposal. Upon his return home, Tortoise instructed the chiefs and the palace workers that they should dig a very deep and big hole that could accommodate an elephant.

After this had been done, there was a need to cover the hole with a very big mat. On the appointed date, tortoise went to Elephant's house with drummers and different performers to take Elephant to the palace with fanfare. As the Tortoise and the people were singing. Elephant was dancing throwing all caution to the wind. In the palace, Elephant was encouraged to dance to the throne with the death trap of the dug hole. As the Elephant was carelessly dancing to the throne, he fell into the hole. The sacrifice was done for the sick king and he became well. There was no more trouble in the town and Tortoise was handsomely rewarded.

The above folktale can be narrated through different stylistic approaches by different narrators/performers. Even a single performer can perform the folktale in different ways while performing in different performance contexts. A narrator may start the performance with songs that are built in with the whole of the narration. This song may serve as the opening glee to arouse the interest of the audience. The song may be accompanied by drumming, clapping of hands and dancing. Alternatively, a narrator may start with the description of the land of the animals, Tortoise and Elephant. He/she can give a clearer image of the animals by making reference to a zoological garden where the children audience might have visited. The narrator can also make reference to series of realia, flora and fauna around the performance context. The essence of this approach is to make the audience have the mental and vivid image of the characters and actions in the entire narration. The story may be concluded with a song that might serve as the closing glee. This illustration shows the dynamism and flexibility in the narration/performance of folktales. In this line of thought, Osundare (1981, p. 5) stated thus:

And owing to the dynamic, flexible, and ever-growing nature of oral literature, this telling may enjoy varying virtuosity in the hands of different raconteurs. In fact, it may be said that no two narrators tell the same folktales exactly the same way, since situational factors such as type of audience, their reaction, venue of performance, and mood and temperament of the narrator are anything but constant.

From the above submission, Osundare emphasises the plasticity of the text and creativity of the performance in Yoruba folktales. The plasticity of the text is a reflection of the stylistic approach of the performer. Thus, a performer is expected to make a choice of the illustration and signification which underline variations induced by performance contexts, demography of the audience as well as the historical period of the narration. A performer may also make the performance dramatic through the voice modulation for characterisation. Although the characterisation may not make use of costumes and props, the voice modulation will register the contents, messages and the meanings of the entire performance in the minds of the audience. The contents of the text may be constant but the performance varies from context to context or from one performer to another. This understanding takes us back to the concept of style as variation. Thus, the present writer sees style as textual analyses and discourse analyses following Tariq's (2018) submission. While explaining further the concept of style as variation, Tariq also stated that the stylistic variation of individual authors/narrators differentiate them from others. This is evident in the linguistic choices that are made by the narrator/performer. The following excerpt reveals thus:

The time language comes in use, especially with literary and creative writers, the sustained engagement, creative and authoritative impulse, infinitive nature, and unique artistic ways of expression with a variety of language use become the medium of recognition which shape the identity of a writer. The

choice of certain words, phrases, expressions, syntactical structures, periodic and non-periodic sentences and the choice of short and long sentences develop and form a particular style, which keeps an individual apart from the other writers' i. e. aphoristic style of Bacon, known for short and witty sentences, which are full of practical wisdom and the autobiographical style of Charles Lamb, known for sensational style and also the style of antithesis and wit of Lyly.

Through the voice of the narrator and the mode of rendition, performers cut identities for themselves. Thus, it can be said that style as variation is a sort of identity construction through language usage.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the issues of language and style in Yoruba folktales. With the qualitative approach of literature review, the paper explores the nature of Yoruba folktales from the perspectives of performance tropes and the patterns of language used in the course of the performance. The paper also discusses the significance of the indigenous language to the performance of Yoruba folktales. The mode of language in Yoruba folktales are figures of speech, figures of sound, proverbs and idioms that are indigenous to people. Prominently, metaphors are used in the performance of folktales because most the animal characters in Yoruba folktales are metaphorical representation of human characters. The paper also establishes the link between language and style. Based on this, the paper establishes the point that style as variation also relates with the identity construction of performers in the performance context.

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