

E-orality, Language Development and Communicative Competence of a Yoruba Child: Issues and Challenges

Azeez Akinwumi Sesan* and Lucky Aikabeli

**Osun State University, Ikire Campus, Osun State, Nigeria
Moshood Abiola Polytechnic, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria*

Linguists and other language experts have acknowledged that language is primarily spoken before its secondary function of writing. The developmental stages of a child are pre-dominated by speeches of the adults and other caregivers in the child's environment. In the traditional Yoruba societies and before the modern social structures, the child's language and speech development was enhanced with series of oral performances. With the emergence of modern technologies of communication such as radio, television and internet, there has been a change in the psychodynamics of oral literature and hence, the phenomenon of e-orality. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine and discuss the issues and challenges of e-orality in the contemporary Yoruba societies and how this has impacted on the language development and communicative competence of a child. Data are gathered through unstructured interview at selected rural communities. Presentation and analysis of data reveal that the natural "texture" of orality is not felt in the contemporary stage of e-orality.

Keywords: *E-orality, communicative competence, oral literature, language development, modern technologies*

Background

The primacy of speech in human communication cannot be disputed irrespective of culture, climate and the speech community. This paper takes speech as words, oral expressions and other verbal arts that have literary qualities. To this end, the view of Ong (1982) on the significance of words in oral performance is corroborated:

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 (p. 47).

The above opinion by Ong (1982) shows that words do not occur in a vacuum but rather, they become a linguistic tool employed by oral performers and narrators to demonstrate their arts and skills. Similarly, the view of Sesan (2014) on the nature of words in oral performance and narrative is also corroborated:

*Corresponding Author. Email: azeezakinwumisesan@gmail.com

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 (p. 79).

The harmonisation of the view of Ong (1982) and Sesan (2014) reveals the centrality of words and the context in the performance of verbal arts and actions. The performer of a verbal art or oral literature is expected to demonstrate a commendable degree of linguistic vibrancy, particularly the creative use of words.

Appropriateness and adequacy of language for communicative purposes aid the attainment of communicative competence in any speech encounter. In the context of this paper, communicative competence involves the ability to identify and understand the denotative and connotative meanings that are expressed within the context of verbal arts. With communicative competence, children in the traditional Nigerian society are expected to know and understand what is said and not said with verbal expressions and body movement such as eye movement, head movement and gestures. Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, the significance of communicative competence has been acknowledged with the expression "*omo oju*" (a child that understands the non-verbal message with little or no stress) and "*omo enu*" (a child that understands nothing but verbal expressions).

The nature and characteristics of human language demonstrate its survival in the context of use either in the oral or written forms. The competence of the language use in human communication can be best adjudged by how it is used to achieve the communicative ends in the private and public domains as well as the formal and informal contexts. This success can be measured by the mutual intelligibility between the speaker and the audience. Thus, the speaker should share the same semantic orientation in communicative interactions as demonstrated in the effect the speech has on the interlocutors.

In the context of this paper, speech/verbal art is classified into two categories: literary and non-literary. A literary verbal art makes use of metaphoric and figurative expressions such as hyperbole, allusion, alliteration, simile, irony and metonymy to make reference to and inference from events and actions that are given in spoken expression, particularly in the genres of poetry and prose narratives (myths, legends and folktales). The discourses on the literary speech or verbal arts have crystallised into what is known today as oral literature or in a modernised expressions orality/oracy. Orality foregrounds the presence of literature before the arrival of colonisers on the shores of Nigeria and Africa, in general. It is therefore a misrepresentation of fact that literature came with the presence of the colonisers in Africa. The fact of the matter is that Africa did not come about literature or literary culture with the coming of the imperial government (Achebe 1978; Idiga, 2008; Sesan, 2014). Before Afro-European contacts, the African continent had various verbal arts that were narrated, performed and sung with a considerable degree of literariness. The contacts between Africa and imperial government only offered a new mode of literary expression in writing. These African literary verbal arts, in the course of presentation, recorded success with the way language was used in contexts of performance to ensure that the audience made meaning out of what was presented. The argument here, however, is that through the use of figurative expressions such as irony and sarcasm, the communicative competence of a child may be enhanced. This argument is made because the two figurative devices are meant to

present contradictions between what is meant and what is said. For elucidation, a scenario is presented below:

There is a family of five: a father, a mother and three sons. These sons are wayward to the extent that the parents have become tired of the complaints lodged against these sons by the neighbours. One fateful day, the father is travelling and he instructs the children to take care of the home and be of good character but this is done in ironical statements. He says: "I am travelling now. You can do whatever you like with the food items available in the home - you can invite your friends to hold a party and if they are not around, you can invite goats to feast on the food. I am saying all this so that when I arrive from my journey, I can display my lunacy for you". The father travels but before he returns the children have done exactly what their father "instructed" them to do- the goats have been invited to eat all the food items. As soon their father arrives from his journey, they tie him up with a strong rope claiming that they don't want him to disturb the neighbourhood with his lunacy.

From the scenario presented above, what brings the problem to the father is the lack of communicative competence on the part of the children. The father and the children do not share the same semantic orientation and thus there is communication breakdown between them. In the traditional Nigerian society, children were trained more in communicative competence in the process of language development through literary verbal art. The children are encouraged to be mindful of communicative competence, particularly in the mother tongue instead of the grammatical competence that is being encouraged in the second language situation.

Another instance of literary verbal art (orality) that demonstrates some degree of communicative competence in the traditional Yoruba society is the proverb. A case is made for the proverb as an example of a literary verbal art because it makes use of metaphor, imagery, allusion and symbolism to communicate meaning. To this end, the view of Finnegan (1968) on the proverb is therefore corroborated that:

Proverbs are generally marked by terseness of expression, by a form different from that of ordinary speech, and by a figurative mode of expression abounding in metaphor. (p. 399)

The submission of Finnegan (1968) further confirms the literariness of proverbs as one of the Yoruba verbal arts. The literariness of Yoruba proverbs makes it different from ordinary day-to-day language and hence, it is regarded as the guide for ordinary words. As a literary verbal art, the use of proverbs for communicative competence and efficiency require consideration for the context of usage. Among the Yoruba, it is wrong for a child to use proverbs in the presence of an adult without paying any homage. Any child, who does that is regarded as rude and uncultured. It is therefore not enough to have the mastery of proverbs by children, they should also learn how and when to use the proverbs for communicative effectiveness.

Non-literary verbal arts, on the other hand, are the expressions of day-to-day interactions. Apart from being linguistic animals, humans are also social animals. The degree of the sociability of humans is measured through the way language is used for social interactions. Ability to utilise speech and engagement in face-to-face communication/ interaction are among the yardsticks that are used to measure the socio-human relationship of individuals. Non-literary verbal art is used for opinion formation and expression, which is the hallmark of social harmony and cohesion. The deficiency in the use of language for day-to-day and face-to-face interaction can be linked to psychological and sociological disorders in child's upbringing. With this deficiency, a child grows to become introverted or withdrawn from others in social interactions.

Thus, parents and other caregivers are expected to be conscious of the linguistic, communicative and social development of Yoruba children.

Review of Relevant Literature

Orality, E-orality and the Postmodernist Culture

This paper conceptualises oral literature as all forms of literary verbal arts such as folktales, folksongs, oral poetry, festival dramas, etc. The nature of orality enhances communicative competence and efficiency between the performer and the audience. This is because for every session of oral performance, the performer and the audience utilise all the resources of language (verbal and non-verbal) to ensure mutual intelligibility and communicative effectiveness. This paper adopts the term oral literature because of its popularity in African literary discourses.

In the pristine orality, there used to be a physical, face-to-face relationship between the performer and the audience with spontaneous response and reaction from the latter. The issue here is that the response/reaction in the pristine orality is not delayed. The implication of this for communicative competence of the children that may form part of the audience of oral performance is that they will develop the ability to analyse and interpret the verbal clues within the context of performance in order to understand the implied and the expressed messages of the performer. Additionally, the audience and the performer learn role taking and role sharing in conversation. In this instance, they learn when to take the floor of conversation/performance and when to give another person an opportunity to take the floor.

The agrarian, traditional Yoruba setting provided a conducive literary atmosphere for the performance/narration of oral literature owing to the factor of communalism. In the traditional Yoruba society, folk performances were common because of their utilitarian functions such as entertainment, education and socialisation in the service of the community. This arrangement of the traditional Yoruba society gave way to [post] modernist culture that is characterised by individualism. The impact of postmodernist culture on agrarian societies has been observed by Sesan (2014), though in the context of the performance of Yoruba folktales. The critic raises the issues of disruption of space and time of performance, distortion of psycho-social relationship between the performer and the audience, as well as rupturing of cognition, retention and recall as ways through which postmodernism has affected the naturalness of oral literature in its performance and appreciation.

In the stage of e-orality, there is disruption of performance space and time. E-orality, in this paper, is inclusive of the performance of orality through the media of radio, television, video and in the recent time, the internet. Each of these media of e-orality has its individual nature and psychodynamics. The medium of radio, for instance, only demonstrates oral-aural quality with emphasis on moralisation and education of a Yoruba child. Thus, folksongs on radio and television, apart from giving audience the much-needed entertainment and relaxation, also dwell on certain aspects of morality and education (Akinyemi, 2011).

The performer and the audience relate with verbal arts without physical contact and any visibility. In this situation, the audience is unable to access the non-verbal resources that may contribute to the communicative competence and effectiveness of the messages. In the pristine orality, the audience had the opportunity to access and evaluate the non-verbal resources for the semantic interpretation of the literary verbal arts. The shortfall in the medium of radio motivated the innovations in the making of television. The medium of television demonstrates two principal means of perception and reception: audibility and visibility. This medium demonstrates oral-aural and aural-visible sensibilities in the performance, interpretation and analysis of any literary verbal

arts. Despite that the audience of orality in the medium of television is able to see the performer while at the same time listening to the performance, it lacks direct physical, face-to-face interactions with the performer. In this regard, the response is delayed.

The understanding of the impact of [post] modernist culture on the nature and the performance of oral literature makes it imperative to examine and discuss the nature and the dimension of postmodernism in the cultural productions including verbal arts. The assumption of postmodernism is that human society undergoes some inevitable changes owing to the factors of technological advancement and innovations. This assumption connotes that human society is not static but rather dynamic. The dynamism of human societies has precipitated the collapse and recreation of boundaries. To this end, the view of Layiwola (2010) on the dynamism of human society closely describes the tenets of postmodernism and its impact on cultural productions. The critic is of the view:

The world around us is growing more complex by the day; reality is changing or mutating at an amazing speed, such that the language and images to represent that reality must continue to mutate with it. In the process, boundaries are bound to emerge and re-emerge. (p. 17)

The deduction from the view of Layiwola (2010) is that human societies, across cultures and climes, cannot afford to be static as a result of some economic and sociological variables. This change when it occurs affects the cultural products and identity such as language and literature as a means of communication of a people. Oral literature has also been caught in the web of postmodernism as reflected in its narrative mode and language, performance space and audience factor. The postmodernist culture has encouraged the use of English as the language of socio-economic mobility as well as the language of wider communication (LWC). To this end, the indigenous language, which is the linguistic medium of performance of oral literature is endangered. The consequence of this situation on the competence and performance of children in the indigenous language is that they become incompetent in the use of their indigenous languages that can enhance native intelligence.

The complexity of the contemporary society makes social re-engineering inevitable. In the process, the society is able to advance to the postmodernist culture that is characterised by modern technologies, media of communication as against the traditional oral, face-to-face communication and the information superhighway made possible by internet and information and communication technologies. The knowledge of the characteristics of postmodernist culture makes it imperative to examine previous views on the definitions and descriptions of postmodernism. The origin of the postmodernist theory remains uncertain, though, often traced to Federico de Onis (Aliu, 2000). Despite the uncertainty that surrounds the origin of postmodernist theory, some scholars and theorists such as Iser (1980), Uche Mowah (1991) and Foucault (1974) have postulated on the theorisation of postmodernist theory. The core lexical choice in the definition and the description of postmodernism is "conversion", "advancement" and "change" as a result of improvement in technological know-how and use. In this regard, the descriptions of postmodernism given by Lyotard (1993) and Mowah (1991) are apt. For instance, Mowah (1991) is of the opinion that postmodernism is an assumption that the world of today has already become post-contemporary through overreaching itself technologically and culturally. In a similar direction, Lyotard (1993) avers that "the 'post' indicates something like a conversion: a new direction from the previous one". The inference that can be made from the views of Mowah (1991) and Lyotard (1993) is that technology and innovation cannot be divorced from the

realisation of postmodernist culture. Thus, it can be said that postmodernist theory suggests that human society is not static as a result of advancement in knowledge.

Statement of the Research Problem

That human society is not static is an indisputable fact. With innovation and modern invention, human society has been adapting to different stages of technological development. The dynamism of technological development has affected almost all facets of cultural lives of individuals or groups. Among the cultural lives of individuals that have been affected by technological development are folk narratives and folk performances. These folk literatures are discussed under a broader term of orality. Modern technologies have influenced the performance and appreciation of oral literature. Today, the performance of orality is mediated. Thus, it does not enjoy immediacy and spontaneity of performer-audience interaction. The situation becomes more worrisome based on the fact that a Yoruba child, like his counterparts from other cultural groups, does not enjoy communal and group socialisation that were in place during the pristine orality. Two of the important aspects where a Yoruba child has been affected with e-orality are language development and communicative competence. This is because during the performance of orality, a child acquires some language and communicative skills such as being expressive and receptive.

Research Questions

The general objective of this study was to critique the state of e-orality and its impact on the language development and communicative competence of a Yoruba child. The research questions which guided the study were:

- i. Does the contemporary stage of e-orality have an impact on the language development and communicative competence of a Yoruba child?
- ii. Has the evolutionary trend of modern means of literary expressions affected the sustenance and survival of pristine orality?
- iii. Has pristine orality stimulated and sustained language development and communicative competence of a Yoruba child?
- iv. Is there a generic interface between pristine orality and modern literature in any of the media of new technologies in the promotion of language development and communicative competence of a Yoruba child?

Research Methodology

This paper adopts two approaches. The first of the approaches is theoretical. Review of relevant literature on oral literature, e-orality, language development and communicative competence was done. With this, deductions and findings about the current state of orality in the era of new technologies were made. The second approach is empirical. Data were gathered, through unstructured interviews, in Olode and Pako rural communities to understand how the people of the communities have been coping with the performance of oral literature in the age of modern technologies. The data were also gathered to evaluate how the mediated performance of oral literature in modern technologies has affected language development and communicative competence of a Yoruba child. With the deductions from the review of literature as well as analysis and discussion of the data gathered, some findings were made.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The evolution of e-orality is systematic and gradual and in this regard, different researchers, directly or by implication, have discussed its evolution. For instance, Ong (1982) considers and discusses two stages of orality as primary orality and secondary orality. In the opinion of the critic, primary orality is purely verbal with no trace of writing and any other form of documentation. On the other hand, secondary orality enjoys documentation in writing. These different stages of orality uphold different psychodynamics in composition, preservation and appreciation. To this end, the view of Osundare (1981) on the mode and quality of production, mode of reception, immediate impact on receptor and basic linguistic elements between the oral and written texts is therefore corroborated as shown in the table below.

Table 1

Psychodynamics of oral and written texts

	Oral	Written
Mode of Production	Voice	Hand
Quality of Production	Utterance	Text
Mode of Reception	Ear	Eye
Immediate Impact on Receptor	Heard	Seen
Basic Linguistic Elements	Phoneme	Grapheme

Table 1 shows the psychodynamics of the oral and written texts. At the stage of primary orality, the performer relied solely on the voice and body to make his/her performance have impact on the audience while at the stage of the secondary orality, the text is mediated with writing and thus, there is a lack of immediacy and spontaneity between the performer and the audience. With a further advancement in technology, there is a transition from secondary orality to what is termed as "tertiary orality" by Ibitoye and Sesan (2007).

Discourse on "tertiary orality" as observed by Ibitoye and Sesan (2007) foregrounds a response to the issue raised by Olorunyomi (2008) that:

While noting that contemporary society is far removed from the era of pristine orality as a literary and human communicative mode, we posit that the concept of orality continues to shape scholarly discourse besides informing creative production. How then do aspects of the past inform the present, and also assist in better comprehension of this time interval in aesthetic–epistemological terms? How do social and technology development affect aesthetic and literary production and appreciation? (p. 190)

In some forms, technological development has affected the aesthetics of literary production and appreciation, particularly in the choice and use of language. In the pristine orality, the language of performance was the indigenous language of the performer and the audience. The performance at this stage enjoys communicative competence because the participants (the performer and the audience) enjoy mutual intelligibility. This mutual intelligibility is fostered by the fact that the participants in the pristine orality share the same semantic orientation and demonstrate a considerable degree of native intelligence.

Findings

From the presentation and discussion of data on the current state of oral literature and technological advancement, it can be said that "contemporary society is far removed from the era of pristine orality as a literary and human communicative mode". E-orality evolved with the invention of radio, television and in recent times, the emergence of the new media, such as digital communication. The effectiveness and the efficiency of the internet in the propagation of e-orality comes to realisation "with the latest technological revolution which brought into limelight the introduction of World Wide Web" (Ibitoye and Sesan, 2007, p. 91). The implication of the World Wide Web for communicative competence is due to the passivity between the performer and the audience. There is hardly a face-to-face interaction between the performer and the audience. The performance of e-orality is virtual and non-interactive, particularly through the internet.

The current state of the advancement in Information and Communication Technologies provides the motivation for the use of internet for information and message dissemination to heterogeneous audiences dispersed across the globe. In the instance of e-orality through the medium of internet, "the audience is large, but often is larger than the one in primary orality, sometimes numbering millions. This is an audience that would never be envisaged in the old orality" (Onyando, 2004, p.6). The internet, as one of the media of e-orality, has gained tremendously in the size and the largeness of its audience but is has not been effective in the enhancement of communicative competence of the performer and the audience. Like in the media of radio and television, the internet does not afford the audience the opportunity of analysing the physical and cultural contexts of the performance. There is thus cultural and psychological distance between the performer and the audience. The basic benefit of the internet as a medium of e-orality is that it makes the literary verbal art of a culture or a people and makes them available to global audience. With this, there is an interrelationship and interdependence of culture.

Among the challenges of e-orality are its availability, accessibility and affordability. The media of e-orality are not evenly available to the generality of the audience. Human society is stratified according to economic prowess and access to basic amenities of life, therefore residents in urban centres are more likely to have the resources of internet readily available to them than their counterparts in the rural centres. Besides, the residents in the urban centres may have access to the facilities, such as electricity to power the media of e-orality (radio, television and internet) while the residents in the rural centres may not always enjoy the same privilege. Even in the urban centres, there may still be an issue of economic inequity which may prevent all of the residents from acquiring e-orality resources.

In the discourse of the opportunities and challenges of e-orality, Onyando (2004) comments on the shortcomings of the secondary orality in contrast to the primary orality. In his study, Onyando (2004) emphasises the factors of audience audibility and visibility. He observes that:

The audiences in the new orality are invisible, sometimes inaudible. You may hear a radio group, or a talk show audience but you may or may not see them. Certainly, you will not interact with them as in a face-to-face situation. Secondly, orality may be immediate, but the response may not be spontaneous, it makes time for people to respond. (p. 6)

The deduction from the opinion of Onyando (2004) is that the media of e-orality do not offer utilitarian values to the audience of literary verbal arts. The moral of this situation is that each of the media of orality has its own shortcomings.

E-orality does not stimulate language development and communicative competence as it did at the stage of pristine orality. The audience, particularly children, used to engage in some

activities that stimulated language development and communicative competence at the pristine orality. Among the activities were tongue twisters aimed at fluency, listening skills and speaking skills. These language and communication skills were effective because the performance was not mediated. The children responded spontaneously to the content of the performance. Besides, pristine orality encouraged rote learning and the use of mnemonics for ease of language development and communicative competence among the children.

There is a generic interface between pristine orality and modern literature in any of the media of modern technologies. This is because modern writers make use of elements of orality such as incantations, proverbs and local idioms in their texts. In the course of doing this, they blend tradition with modernity. With this generic interface between pristine orality and modern technologies of literary expression, it is upheld here that pristine orality can still survive the wave of e-orality. Despite the challenges of e-orality in stimulating language development and communicative competence of Yoruba children, it will assist in sustaining orality in the collective consciousness of young children.

Conclusion

This paper discusses e-orality with its ability to improve the communicative competence of the audience and the performer. Orality is discussed from the perspective of verbal art (literary and non-literary). It is argued that the literary verbal art makes use of figurative and metaphorical expressions. The orality is also put in three stages: primary, secondary and tertiary. In the primary orality, it is argued that there is physical face-to-face interactions between the audience and the performer while this situation is absent in the secondary and tertiary stages of orality. The literary verbal art enhances communicative competence because it helps the audience and the performer to know how to use language in conversation, particularly the convention of speech as it borders on turn-taking devices in face-to-face conversation.

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