

SOME FEATURES OF LANGUAGE USE IN YORUBA  
TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Wale Adegbite

*1. Introduction*

From previous studies on traditional medicine in African societies, a lot of features have been found to characterize the practice (cf. Harley 1970, Maclean 1971, Idowu 1973, Dopamu 1977, Sofowora 1982). Some of these features need to be highlighted here in order to provide background information for the main discussion of this paper.

First, Yoruba traditional medicine (YTM) is a system which basically incorporates a four-square intersection of two pairs of terms in relation to medicine, viz. positive/negative and personal/communal. In the intersection of 'positive personal' medicine which is catered for by the data for this study, the goal is for a herbalist, or a priest of some divinity, to diagnose and treat an illness of a client or patient where the patient is a child, friend or relation of the client. Herbalists deal in various kinds of medicine (cf. Verger 1967); though many of them may treat cases of different types, they normally have different areas of speciality e.g. gynaecology, paediatrics, traditional midwifery, orthopaedics, psychiatry etc. However, the diviners or priests are well-reputed for handling complex cases that are linked to supernatural causation.

Second, YTM participants believe in the supernatural. There is the supreme Deity who exists in the psyche of the people (cf. Idowu 1962, Olayemi 1975). There are lesser gods who serve as intermediaries between the Deity and Man. Lastly, there are spirits among which two groups stand out because of their positive or negative attitudes to man (cf. Abimbola 1976).

Third, the people believe in the systems of magic and medicine. Dopami (1977) recognizes these as separate systems which merge in YTM practice. He further observes that medicine in the narrower sense may be used to treat minor ailments like cough, venereal diseases, aches and pains which have physical causation; but when divinations, incantations or esoteric systems are adopted to heal or prevent diseases which have supernatural or mystical causation, then magic will have been manifested in the wider medicine, or 'magical medicine'.

Lastly, the use of language in YTM is closely linked with the people's belief in the power of the spoken word (cf. Webster 1948, Carothers 1959, Dopamu 1977 and Olatunji 1984). The spoken word is believed to be enshrined with some hidden symbolic and inexplicable implications or importations the utterance of which can in itself produce the desired effect without the use of magical or medicinal preparations, objects or apparatuses.

'polylogical' structure which combines dialogical and monological transactions (Type-B). The dialogical structure thus features in all YTM texts, while the monological structure occurs, in accompaniment of the dialogue, only in the complex type of text.

The simple YTM text features in 'natural herbalism' where there is conversation between a herbalist and his client in a real communication situation. The conversation centres on the diagnosis of an illness and prescription of drugs or regimen for the client. In the diagnosis, the herbalist and client exchange information to discover the nature of the client's illness via its symptoms. In essence, the main linguistic requirement of a diagnostic exercise is the herbalist's ability to gather as much information as possible about the client's problem. He asks some questions about the nature of such problems, and perhaps the time, the place, the severity and causes of the problems.<sup>1</sup> Consider the herbalist's utterances below:

- (1a) Kí ló n ʃe é?  
What's wrong with him?
- (1b) Tó bá jẹ́ nínú egungun bá yí ló tì n ʃe é, ʃé kí bọ́ sibò míí?  
If he feels it in the bones, does he feel it anywhere else?

Very often, clients attempt to provide answers to the herbalist's questions, as can be seen below:

- (2) Kòkòrò nì. Ẹ̀ṣẹ́ kan wà nínú egungun tó n dùn ún.  
It's an infection. He feels pains in a bone in a leg.

Sometimes, however, clients may not be able to provide answers to the herbalist's questions when they are in a confused state or when they do not know the exact nature of their illness; on such occasions, the herbalist attempts to find out the problems via pragmatic means, e.g.:

- (3) OBINRIN: Ẹ́ gbà míí! Ẹ́ gbà míí!  
WOMAN: Help me!
- ONISÈGÜN: Kí ló dé! Kí ló dé?  
HERBALIST: What's wrong? What's wrong?

Client gives no response, thus the herbalist looks at the face of the client's child.

From the illustrations above, it is observed that the main marker of a diagnostic transaction is a herbalist's question, which may or may not be supported by a client's response. Other minor exchanges occur in this transaction which cannot be mentioned here for lack of space (cf. Adegbite 1991: 229ff).

<sup>1</sup> Note that the linguistic activity stated here may be accompanied by the herbalist's pragmatic examination of the patient.

The different transactions which language is used to carry out and the form of the language itself are discussed below.

## 2. *Language use in Yoruba traditional medicine*

Language plays a major role in accompaniment of other objects in the practice of African traditional medicine and investigations into this field never fail to point this out, even if only cursorily. However, just a cursory mention of the role of language is not enough. There ought to be a systematic investigation of this object in order to gain further insights into the practice of traditional medicine and enhance cross-fertilization of ideas between this system and modern medicine. Since language is the vehicle for carrying out the practice effectively, preserving and exploring it, an investigation of the form and function of language in traditional medicine will no doubt yield a lot of facts relevant to linguistics, sociolinguistics and the ethnography of communication.

This paper now reports some of the findings of a recent study of language use in the practice of YTM (cf. Adegbite 1991) as an instance of language of African traditional medicine. Following the previous study, it utilizes as data texts collected from several herbalist-client speech encounters (natural and representative) in the practice. The texts are analysed and described using insights from studies in sociolinguistics (cf. Sanchez and Blount 1975, Sherzer 1982), discourse analysis (cf. Burton 1980, Coulthard and Montgomery 1981), text theory (cf. Halliday and Hasan 1985) and systemic linguistics (cf. Halliday 1970, 1985; Berry 1975 and 1977).

## 3. *Some language features of YTM texts*

The features of language in YTM texts are described below under three subheadings: structural, formal and rhetorical features. The structural features relate the organization of text content to their messages, functions and uses; the formal features identify the lexico-grammatical patterns of the texts; and the rhetorical features identify stylistic features which pertain to the modes of the texts. Meanwhile, the features at the different levels above relate to each other and unite to enhance the effectiveness of texts in YTM practice.

### 3.1. *The structure of YTM texts*

The YTM text structure represents an interactional unit which is made up of a series of transactions. Five possible transactions may be carried out in a YTM speech encounter, viz. diagnosis, divination, prescription, incantation and supplication. Of these transactions, diagnosis and prescription are dialogical in structure while the other three are monological. Each YTM text selects two or more transactions from these available options and combines them to deal with cases of illness according to the peculiarities of such ailments.

Generally, a YTM text either has a 'simple' dialogical structure made up of the diagnostic and prescriptive transactions (Type-A) or a 'complex'

Note that it is possible for priests to render the narrative part of the divination in bits, interspersed with interpretations of the different bits; so also, it is possible for them to render as many narrative precedents as may be related to a case. Meanwhile, this narrative part is most often truncated in a YTM text and does not reveal all the parts of a prototype of 'narrative' divinatory text, e.g.:

- (5)... Wọn wí pe Olúṣogbó Olúṣogbó ni í sọmọ Ajáàniwájìn  
 Tíí sọmọ Ìwòrì Mẹfà  
 Ìwòrì Mẹfà iwọ lo bí mi, iwọ lo rà mí  
 Mo tún derú oníwọ Ìwòrì Mẹfà  
 Ló dífá fún Àkàlámàgbò  
 Níjọ tí n tínú iyá è bí ọmọ tuntun wálé ayé ...  
 They said Olusogbo Olusogbo was the child of Ajaayaniwajin  
 Who was the son of the Sixth Iwori  
 Sixth Iwori, you bore me, you bought me  
 I again become the slave of you Sixth Iwori  
 Ifa divination was cast for Akalamagbo (the Ground Hornbill)  
 On the day she was coming to the world as a baby in her mother's womb ...

No sharp distinction can be made between the transactions of incantation and supplication. Apart from having similar formal characteristics, the occurrence of one sometimes includes the other as part of it. The transactions are differentiated mainly by the socio-cultural criterion that an enchanter of incantation attempts to control the supernatural and natural powers while a supplicant submits itself to these powers in order to achieve their respective wishes. An incantation usually involves the uttering of words according to a formula and in a set order in order to achieve a set purpose (cf. Olatunji 1984: 140). In YTM, incantations are recited in different forms to achieve the purpose of medication. For example, they may occur as spells cast to suppress or counteract the evil forces responsible for an illness, or as appeals made to invoke for one's need the powers inherent in some objects and the supernatural, or as a combination of both of these forms. Furthermore, incantations may be recited independently of medicinal objects, or they may be used to enhance the potency of a medicine or medicines applied to certain ailments. Below is an example of a short incantatory text:

- (6) Èlà rọ wá  
 Èlà rọ wá  
 Báa fẹmọ ló jú, a ríran an  
 Bójúmọ tí n mọ  
 Bẹẹ ni kójú ẹ mọ  
 Èlā (the god of peace) descend  
 Èlā descend  
 When air is blown to a child's eye, he sees  
 As the new day dawns with light  
 So should your eyes see light

Prescriptions in YTM may come as instructions which simply recommend the preparation and mode of application of certain drugs, herbs, ointment etc. or the performance of certain magico-ritual actions; or they may occur as advice or warnings against doing certain things or using certain objects. While all these modes of instruction co-occur in a prescriptive transaction, we shall illustrate only two of them below:

- (4a) ONIŞEGUN: ... Tẹẹ bá délé, pẹlášọ tí m bá fún yín, ẹ ẹ bu kinni yẹn le lóri. Ẹ ẹ wáá bá a fọwọ tíí sínú ...  
 HERBALIST: When you get home, with the cloth that I give you, you will scoop that thing on top of it. You will then use your hand to push it in.
- (4b) BABALÁWO: Ọmọ rẹ un, kò fékèè o. Kò sì fẹ kó o purọ moun. Kò fẹrọ pípa. O gbọ. Kò fẹrọ, kò fékèé.  
 PRIEST: That your child, he doesn't like hypocrisy. And he doesn't want you to lie against him. Hear? He doesn't like lies, he doesn't like hypocrisy.

In contrast to the simple text, whose constituent transactions are stated above, the complex YTM text features in 'natural-cum-supernatural herbalism' where there is an incorporation of a diviner or priest's monological consultation of supernatural forces into a priest-client conversation. The complex text is made up of an obligatory (though truncated) diagnostic transaction, an optional prescriptive transaction, and three other transactions each of which is optional in the text. Depending on the degree of complexity of the problem being handled, one, two or all three of the monological transactions of divination, incantation and supplication must co-occur with the diagnosis and, perhaps, prescription in the text.

The divinatory transaction refers to the language accompaniment of the process of divination in YTM. This process itself refers to the special (divine) means of finding out the sources, causes and, almost always, the remedy for illnesses that are believed to have preternatural causation.<sup>2</sup>

The divinatory transaction is constituted by three parts: (i) the recitation or chanting of names or praises of some gods that should be invoked for the success of the divination, (ii) the rendition of a mythological narrative which predicts the present case from the repository of the mythological narrative by the priest and (iii) the interpretation of the myth recited in (ii).<sup>3</sup> While the first two parts stated above can be associated with divination as a diagnostic device, the third part which is always done with a client's participation can be identified as a divination prescription.

<sup>2</sup> Extensive information about the practice of divination in Yorubaland already abound in previous studies which focus on the subject (cf. for example, Bascom 1969, Abimbola 1976, Akinnaso 1982 and Olatunji 1984).

<sup>3</sup> The essence of this interpretation is to explain the content of the myth which is very often rendered in highly-specialized code - 'glossolalia' (cf. Samarin 1973).

The language of supplication is the language of prayers and appeals to supernatural beings. Just as it occurs in almost all spheres of Yoruba life, prayers may also be offered to God in YTM to grant good health to a client or ask for blessings. When such prayers are short in a text, they tend towards being mere phatic expressions and do not attract much special attention, e.g.:

- (7) *Yóó dáá fún ọ. Ọlọ́n ọ wò ọ ọ.*  
 May you be blessed. God will look after you.

But when prayers and appeals are directed at supernatural beings in monological transactions, they become a potent source of medication, e.g.:

- (8)... *Ọta íí kú*  
*Èrún íí rùn*  
*Ògíríṣákọ íí rárùn èsì*  
*Kí lágba já náà ọ mọ kùú*  
*Kọ mọ rùn, kọ mọ sòfò*  
*Kó jíṣẹ ẹ, Ọrúnmilà Àjànà*  
 ... A stone does not die  
 The palm kernel never falls ill  
 The *ogirisako* (young palm) tree never lacks growth in a year  
 Let so and so not die  
 Let him not fall sick, let him not suffer loss  
 Let him reap the fruits of his labour, Ọrnmila Ajana.

It is pertinent to note here that monological appeals may not occur in the mainstream of other transactions above. Since this transaction has to accompany the offering of sacrifices, for which certain preparations must be made beforehand, the setting on several occasions differ from the one in which the ailment is diagnosed.

Following the identification of transactions above, one can represent their order of occurrence in the overall organization of YTM interaction, thus:

The Simple YTM Interaction	The Complex YTM Interaction
(i) Diagnosis: obligatory	(i) Diagnosis: obligatory
(ii) Prescription: obligatory	(ii) Divination: optional
	(iii) Incantation: optional
	(iv) Prescription: optional
	(v) Supplication: optional

Note that the transactions of diagnosis and prescription mark the material aspect of traditional medicine from the magico-religious aspect. Thus while the simple YTM interaction above indicates the practice of medicine in the narrower sense of the term, the complex YTM interaction indicates the practice of medicine in the wider sense of 'magical medicine'. Both practices are however constituents of the YTM system.

3.2. *Some formal feature of YTM texts*

The formal features of YTM texts are identified below by considering features of the transactions which constitute them. Such features are identified under four subheadings, viz. the transitivity features, mood and modality features, lexical items and rhetorical features. The features of transitivity indicate the choice of items which reflect the ideational or cognitive experience of speakers about the processes, participants and circumstances of YTM events. The mood and modality features indicate options which reflect the social roles of participants. And the lexical items listed perhaps represent what one can consider to be the feature most distinguishing YTM texts from other texts. Lastly, the rhetorical features distinguish between the two types of YTM texts by playing a significant role in one and not in the other.

3.2.1. *The transitivity features*

The material process is the most predominant process option in the YTM text. This option dominates all the transactions discussed above, which shows that YTM texts indicate physical events which take place in the practice and physical actions which are either performed or expected to be performed by participants (see (1a-b), (3), (4a), (6) and (8)). Most of the actions performed have either a herbalist or an ailment acting on a patient (1, 3), or a patient acting on medicinal objects (4a). And the circumstantial information is very often about place and time.

The material process is most prominent in the prescriptive, incantatory and supplicating (or medicating) transactions,<sup>4</sup> but there are other options made which differentiate the other transactions. For example, the relational process in which a problem is identified marks the diagnostic transaction (2), while the verbalized process of 'saying' is a significant feature of the divinatory transaction (5). The verbalized process indicates a priest's reporting of divine powers in his recitation of divination myths.

3.2.2. *The mood and modality features*

The transactions of YTM texts are differentiated by the choices of items they make in respect of mood and modality. The diagnostic transaction is projected by both declarative and interrogative non-modalized clauses which realize the questions and answers in the transaction. The divinatory transaction is marked mainly by declarative non-modalized clauses since the transaction is most often a plain narration of events. Lastly, the medicating transactions are marked by imperatives and declarative modalized clauses because they indicate herbalist's

<sup>4</sup> It seems very convenient to group these transactions together under an umbrella term since they have similar formal features.

instructions, which are given as either commands or obligations of the client, prayers and wishes.

### 3.2.3. *Some lexical items*

Lexical items that are peculiar to YTM texts are those which indicate illnesses and medicinal and/or magical objects. Items which indicate illnesses are characteristic of diagnostic transactions, e.g. *inú rírún* 'stomach ache', *orí fífó* 'head ache', *ídí yíyó* 'piles', *òkà* 'fontanelle disease' etc. And items which indicate medicinal objects characterize the medicating transactions, e.g. *òşé dúdú* 'native soap', *àgbo* 'liquified herb', *òrì* 'shea-butter ointment', *àgúnmu* 'herbal powder', *epo pupa* 'palm oil' etc. Meanwhile, lexical items which denote symbolic objects and the supernatural characterize only monological transactions in complex YTM texts. Some of these items are names of divinities, ancestors and mythological characters, such as *Ifá*, *Ìwòrì Mefà*, *Òşéřtúrà*, *akogun Elésìí* etc.; and some refer to objects such as *ìgbín* 'snail', *epòn òbùkò* 'scrotum of a billy-goat', *àáké* 'axe', *àgbagbà aládìpò* 'double-fruited plantain,' etc.

### 3.2.4. *Some rhetorical features*

Since the monological transactions in the complex YTM text are poetic in structure, these transactions usually are rich in rhetorical devices which give them an air of mysticism. The poetic language of the transactions makes them appropriate as the language of consultation with the supernatural. Some of the rhetorical devices used in such consultations include fictionalization, figurative expressions and rhythmic features such as sound symbolism or repetition, syntactic repetition, syntactic parallelism, lexico-structural repetition etc.

- (9a) *Ògèřřjìmokò ló dífá fún wòn nìdònpétu*  
*Nìjò ikú n pa wòn lémèrè-lémèrè*  
*Bí enì wòn jìun Ikú jẹ*  
 Ogerejímoko it was who cast divination for them at Idonpetu  
 When they were all dying young  
 As if they stole a belonging of Death

(The above example identifies a simile).

- (9b) *Ọlọkúnrin ló nì kí n má dì wònran*  
*Nílè bàbá mí*  
*Kòóko kí kòóko a dì wònran*  
*A rẹ wàlẹ àşà*  
 If it is a man that says I should not grow old  
 In my father's house  
 The worthless grass will grow old  
 Before it does

(There is a repetition of the sound /k/ in the above utterance.)

- (9c) *Òrúnmilà ò le jẹ*  
*Òrúnmilà ò le mu...*  
 Orunmila cannot eat  
 Orunmila cannot drink

(The above example illustrates partial lexico-structural repetition in which the italicized items are matched.)

## 4. *Conclusion*

The discussion above has centred on language as a major accompaniment of YTM. In the description of language use of YTM, especially the preventive and curative medicine, it has observed that language plays important roles to accompany other pragmatic objects and processes in the transactions of diagnosis, divination, incantation and supplication. And it has within the limited space available identified some formal features of language with the transactions vis-à-vis types of YTM texts. Both the transactions and formal features described are expected to introduce readers to the content and form of language in African traditional medicine; so that these can be compared to language use in other areas of African experience.

Meanwhile, it needs to be said that this study is limited to the study of language in the 'positive' preventive and curative areas of what one can call 'personal' medicine. Further investigations can still be extended to other areas of language use in traditional medicine, e.g. areas that pertain to negative medicine (as opposed to positive) and communal medicine (as opposed to personal). Also further information about language use in the YTM field can be obtained from other participant interactions apart from herbalist-client, e.g. herbalist-herbalist and herbalist-trainee encounters.

## REFERENCES

- Abimbola, W. 1976. *Ifa: an Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Adegbite, A.B. 1991. Some features of language use in Yoruba traditional medicine. Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Akinnaso, F. Niyi. 1982. The literate writes and the non-literate chants: written language and ritual communication in sociolinguistic perspective. In *Linguistics and Literacy*, ed. by W. Frawley, pp. 7-36. New York: Plenum Publishing Corporation.
- Bascom, W. 1969. *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Berry, M. 1975-77. *Introduction to Systemic Linguistics. I: Structures and Systems. II: Levels and Links*. 2 vols. London: Batsford.
- Burton, D. 1980. *Dialogue and Discourse*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Carothers, J.C. 1959. Culture, psychiatry and the written word. *Psychiatry* 22: 307-20.

- Coulthard, R.M., and M. Montgomery (eds.). 1981. *Studies in Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dopamu, P.A. 1977. The practice of magic and medicine in Yoruba traditional religion. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Halliday, M.A.K. 1970. Language structure and language function. In *New Horizons in Linguistics*, ed. by J. Lyons, pp. 140-65. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- . 1985. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M.A.K., and R. Hasan. 1985. *Language Context and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social Semiotic*. Victoria: Deakin University.
- Harley, G.W. 1970. *Native African Medicine, with Special Reference to its Practice in the Mano Tribe of Liberia*. London: Frank Cass
- Idowu, E.B. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longman.
- . 1973. *African Traditional Religion*. London: SCM Press.
- Maclean, U. 1971. *Magical Medicine: a Nigerian Case Study*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Olatunji, O.O. 1984. *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Ọlayemi, V. 1975. The supernatural in the Yoruba folktale. In *Yoruba Oral Tradition*, ed. by W. Abimbola, pp. 957-71. Ile-Ife: University of Ife, Department of African Languages and Literatures.
- Samarin, W.J. 1973. *Tongues of Men and Angels*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sanchez, M., and B.G. Blount (eds.). 1975. *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Use*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Sherzer, J. 1982. Poetic structuring of Kuna discourse: the line. *Language in Society* 11: 371-90.
- Sofowora, A. 1982. *Medicinal Plants and Traditional Medicine in Africa*. Chichester: John Wiley and Spectrum.
- Verger, P.F. 1967. *Àwọn Ewé Ọsanyin* [Yoruba medicinal leaves]. Ile-Ife: University of Ife, Institute of African Studies.
- Webster, H. 1948. *Magic: a Sociological Study*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.