

Jèdí Ò M'Àkòwé (Hemorrhoid Respects Not Even the Educated Elite): A Sociolinguistic-Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Yorùbá Herbal Medicine Practitioners

Adesolá Olátéjú
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The Yorùbá traditional medicine practitioners deserve a scholarly attention for three reasons: their depth and dexterity of language use, their popularity among the people, and their relevance to the contemporary Yorùbá society as alternative health service providers. The prohibitive cost and declining potency of western drugs in the treatment of certain life threatening ailments have made herbal medicine a popular and essential part of our healthcare delivery system. While advertising their wares, the local herb dealers, through deft linguistic manipulations, tell people about the various health conditions that their local herbs can effectively control. They also tell people that serious ailments such as hypertension *èjè rídu*, diabetes *àtògbè*, cancer *jejere* etc. are associated with affluence, while the less deadly ailments (low erection *ìdàkòlè*, venereal diseases *àtòsí* etc.) are common among the sexually incontinent. For hemorrhoid *jèdíjèdí*, it affects the rich and the poor alike. Hence, the stock expression *jèdí ò m'Àkòwé*¹ “hemorrhoid does not respect even the educated elite” by which they are known and identified. The happy news, they will impress on their audience, is that the medicines are potent and affordable.

The prohibitive cost of western drugs and their seeming declining potency have sensitized people to seek alternative therapy in the treatment of the above-mentioned health conditions. Today, a large number of hitherto obscure local herb dealers throng the major streets, road junctions, and market centers in big Yorùbá cities like Lagos, Ibadan etc. hawking their wares with microphones in their hands and loud speakers mounted on top of their cars. They are now very popular and constitute an essential part of our healthcare delivery system.

This paper therefore, attempts documentation and characterization of the language style employed in advertising Yoruba herbal medicines. The objective is to determine the kind of language used in hawking local herbs, whether the standard language (SL) or the literary language (LL). The paper also highlights the stylistic and communicative effects of the linguistic strategies, rhetorical devices, oral materials, and other pragmatic techniques employed in advertising/hawking Yoruba local medicines. The paper adopts sociolinguistic and stylistic methods for its analysis and interpretation.

¹ *Jèdíjèdí* is the Yorùbá word for hemorrhoid/ pile

2. Methodology

Locating the Yorùbá herbal medicine hawkers is often problematic because they are itinerant hawkers. Their activity is also nocturnal, from around 8.00 pm to near mid-night. The reason is that nobody wants to associate or identify with them because of the absolute vulgarity of their language. Most of the buyers therefore, hide under the cover of darkness to make a purchase.

The data used for this study was recorded over a period of six months as efforts to get them sometimes proved futile. Armed with a portable tape recorder, I have had to set out many times at night, driving around the city of Ibadan looking for them. As soon as one was found, I would hang out at some reasonable distance away from him to avoid causing him unnecessary distraction or embarrassment, and then set my recorder at work. Many of them were recorded in Ibadan, Lagos, Òyó, Àgò-Ìwòyè and other places whenever I travelled out of my base, Ibadan.

The data was then transcribed, collated and subjected to critical evaluation in terms of their material content and language style. Our evaluation of the data showed that virtually all of them hawk the same wares, with similar language patterns and advertising strategies. Some variations were however noticed in the variety of the Yorùbá dialects spoken by the hawkers. This depended on the dialect area or region a particular hawker came from. Nevertheless, we assume that whatever we say about one is true of the others. However, our illustrative examples were eclectically selected in order to present a fair representation of the hawkers.

3. Analysis

Petty trading is a fashionable economic activity among women in the traditional Yorùbá society. This, any way, is in addition to their motherly role and domestic responsibilities. A few of the items traded include local foods- raw and cooked, and daily needs. These items are advertised through hawking, an indigenous form of advertising which Òṣunḍàrè (2002) describes as *Ìpolówó*. Just like the modern forms of advertising on the electronic, print and other media, the essence of *Ìpolówó* (advertising) is to bring commodities being advertised to the consciousness and reach of the consumers. Through the instrumentality of language, the indigenous hawker goes around the neighborhood on foot, in the mornings and evenings, using affective language to tell how affordable, good, and nourishing (if it is food) her wares are. To her, advertisement is the medicine for business and language is its hallmark.

Unlike petty trading which is female dominated, Hawking of herbal medicines is a predominantly male activity. Coming from the same traditional background as the female petty traders, the Yorùbá herbal medicine hawker also regards advertising as very crucial to the survival of his trade, and language a critical part thereof. It is for this reason that he heavily decks his language with many traditional/oral materials, stylistic, rhetorical and other devices in order to strike the right cord in the buyers. These devices are here discussed.

3.1. Traditional/Oral Materials

The traditional oral materials usually employed include songs, proverbs, praise poetry (*oríkì*) and incantations (*oṣò*). Most of the herbal medicine hawkers recorded would naturally start and possibly, end the day with songs. Songs, (Olúkòjù 1978) maintains, naturally have inherent beauty and therapeutic appeal. With a song such as below, the hawker announces his presence as well as the various medicines he has for sale.

Akérékorò ti dé o
Akérékorò tẹ ẹ lẹ ẹ mọ rẹ é o
Tẹ ẹ lẹ ẹ mọ...

Òògùn rẹ̀ n pa tanmọ̀na
 Tẹ̀ ẹ̀ lẹ̀ ẹ̀ mọ̀...
 Òògùn rẹ̀ n wo jẹ̀dìjẹ̀dì
 Tẹ̀ ẹ̀ lẹ̀ ẹ̀ mọ̀

Akérékorò is here
 Here is the Akérékorò you claim you do not know
 His medicine cures scalp infections
 That you claim you do not know...
 His medicine takes care of hemorrhoid/pile
 That you claim you do not know...

This song serves as the signature tune and identification mark of the hawker. With it, he begins with the business of the day, and after he is done, he might end the day with another song.

The use of Yorubá incantation (*Oḡò*) is another feature of herbal medicine advertising. *Oḡò* is a Yoruba poetic form that is “cultic and mythical in expectations” (Ọlátúnjì 1984:139, Ilésanmí 2004). The sentence pattern of *Oḡò* becomes attractive to the herbal hawker because of its magical and assertive nature. To prove the efficacy of his medicines, he employs the kind of sentence patterns that characterize the Yorubá incantation e.g.

Kokooko lokó ẹ̀şin í le
 Àdómọ̀jú lèèkan í dógiri
 Àdólamilóju ni itu í d éwúré

Turgid is the way the horse’s penis is found
 Till daybreak is the way the wall-peg co-habits with the wall
 Cohabit-to-full-satisfaction is the way the he-goat cohabits with the she-goat

The above sentences which have *Adverbial + ní + Verb Phrase structure* are positive assertions that express the usualness and the timeless truth of actions predicated of the subjects (the horse’s penis, wall-peg, he-goat) mentioned in the excerpt. This expression proves the efficacy of his medicine in curing poor erectile or dysfunctional conditions in male. Though Vulgar, an average Yorubá person is conversant with the social and magical realities of incantation, the belief is that the herbal preparation will cure an erectile problem.

One thing that is amazing about the herbal medicine dealer is his fantastic knowledge of the various health conditions for which he claims to have herbal remedies. In his description of the ailments and their symptoms, certain features of Yorubá praise poetry (*oríkì*) are employed for their descriptive and characterizing effects. A good illustrative example is Alhaji Bàbá, a herbal seller’s cognomen, a description of himself as:

Èmi Àlǎǎjì Bàbá, Alala-kù-lala; Eḡereḡ- pòn- pòn- pòn

I, Alhaji ‘the Father’, The-sex-maniac; One-with-an-intricate-sexual-power.

The above is Alhaji Bàbá’s cognomen. It also serves as his business or trade slogan. Here is another catch phrase:

Òògùn Àlǎǎjì Bàbá, Alala-kù-lala
 The medicine of Alhaji the ‘Father’, The-sex-maniac

The descriptive epithets- *Alala-ku-lala* and *Egereg- pòn- pòn- pòn* which are idiophones and features of Yoruba praise poetry express the sexual prowess and vibrancy of the herbal practitioner. This strategy convinces his customers that his medicines will work fine for them the way it has done for him.

In the expressions below, which are nominalizations, users of his pile medicines are described as having a superb energy as far as sexual ability is concerned. For instance, the medicine will empower them and become:

Ò-gbórí - ìyá- tàka -sòmọ

One-who-cohabits-with-the-mother-and-also-makes-sexual-advances-to-the-daughter.

Ò-wà-lóri-ọmọ-wòyá-mòjò- mòjò

One-who-is-on-the daughter-and casts-a-seductive-look-at-the- mother.

Similarly, a woman that suffers from leucorrhea is derisively described in nominalization as:

Okọ-dúró-gba-nnkan-re

Husband-stop-and take-back-your-thing.

This nominalization describes a health condition whereby the vaginal of a woman throws back the sperm after having an intercourse. Sometimes, the medicines are described as:

Akére-korò (literal: small and bitter): to mean ‘small and strong/poignant’.

Abijá-wàrà (one –that- fights -instantly): to mean ‘a quick-action medicine’

Through nominalizations² such as the above, the hawker conveys the inherent therapeutic effects of the medicine.

Proverbs and prayerful expressions constitute parts of the traditional materials the herbal hawker uses in advertising his products. Like a psychologist and counselor, he uses the appropriate material to advise, warn and even pray as a way of attracting buyers. For example, a person who wants to share medicine with another person or beg to have a free share from another person’s purchase is promptly advised with the proverb:

Gbà-mu ò tan’bà, oko atoroje Kan kii tóbi.

The quantity of a medicine received by begging is never enough for a total cure of malaria; the farm of ‘one-who-begs-for-food’ is never big.

Similarly, the ignorant and the stingy are cautioned with this proverb:

Aroju owó kí í şşş, ọbẹ tó dùn owó ló pa á .

A stingy person never adorns himself; it takes money to make a tasty soup.

Apart from the proverbs that are already well known, the hawker creates new ones meet the exigency of his needs. Here are examples of such new proverbs:

Bí emi re ò bá bọ, o ó ò tún şowò mí-in tó tún lerè.

If you are alive, you can still make it again.

Jàgudà tí ò m’Ọlórún a ma á jí àpò owó kan mẹlòmíràn lówó.

A robber who cares not about God could snatch money up to a pound from a person.

² Nominalization is a vital linguistic strategy for coining new words in the Yoruba language, and is extensively used in Yoruba praise poetry. See Ọlátúnjí (1984) pp.87-90

Proverbs like the above are his creations. They emphasize the need to take good care of one's health and to note the fact that we make money only when we are alive.

Also in the course of advertising, the herbal dealer employs prayerful expressions such as the one below to appeal to the buyers:

Oḷorun má jẹ́ á ʃofò èmí tọ̀mọ̀tọ̀mọ̀, kòlùkòlù ò ní kọ̀lù yín
tọ̀mọ̀tọ̀mọ̀; nìtorí, ọ̀mọ̀ la fí n ʃìṣẹ́

May God save our souls, and those of our children; terrible things/ailments will not hit you, and your siblings. Children are the reason we work.

People are fascinated by prayers; and it is often said that prayers, no matter how little or short, are more desirable than curses. With prayerful expressions such as the above, people patronize him believing that prayers aid potency.

3.2. Stylistic/Rhetorical Devices

The Yorùbá practitioner of herbal medicine employs varieties of strategies in hawking his wares. Listing is one of such strategies. This involves compilations of nominals, nominal phrases or sequence of short sentences to indicate varieties of diseases for which he has herbal remedies. Since the advertising is done extempore, his address or speech does not follow a particular order, and does not have the benefit of critical examination or editing which a written speech, poetry, or radio/television advertising has. Here, for example, the list of such diseases/ailments (underlined) seems endless:

Ewé aturbò in tea, fun jèdídjèdíd, èyìn ríbor, ogbá in, atbí fun arrant, in
tó má a n' oroyam, ait in' tó n' atayawn, atògbá ...

Ours is a combination of leaves and herbs for hemorrhoid/pile, back pain, stomach ulcer or for intestinal worms and the stomach that aches and the stomach that pains ...

The herbal practitioner is an itinerant hawker, moving from one town place to another. He tells his audience the towns and cities where he has hawked his medicines to assure them of his popularity and availability at any time and anywhere. Names of such towns and cities (underlined) are listed or compiled thus:

E ẹ́ ti má a ʃalábapadé wa káakiri, bóyá nígboro ìlú Èkó,
ìgboro ìlú Ibadan, nígboro ìlú Ilorin, nígboro ìlú Ijebu, tabí
nígboro ìlú Owò...

You will probably have been seeing us in such places as the city of Lagos, the city of Ibadan, at the city of Ilorin, at the city of Ijebu or the city of Owò...

Piling up of sequence of sentences is also quite common. In the example below, the problems that any woman with hemorrhoid has to contend with are piled up in a sequence thus:

... ó di kó má a ʃe nnkan oṣù kó má a dúdu, / ó di kó má a ʃe
nnkan oṣù kó má a séjò, / ó di kó má a ʃe nnkan oṣù kó má a
rùn, / ó di kó má a ʃe nnkan oṣù kó má a wá dáadaa

Four sentences are piled up here.

...her menstrual blood becomes black/ her menstrual blood becomes irregular/ her menstrual blood will begin to smell/her menstrual blood will not flow very well.

The stylistic function of listing/compiling as used here is that it enables the hawker to list or mention almost *ad infinitum* the varieties of ailments, their symptoms and the medicines that cure them. This padding strategy provides the buyers with comprehensive information about the hawker and his wares.

Repetition is another major device in local herb hawking. It is the most dominant strategy through which most of the other devices are kept alive as the same messages or information are being passed repeatedly. Because of its stylistic significance, patterned repetition, similar to the type characteristic of D.O Fagunwa's writings (Bámgbóṣé, 1974), forms a significant aspect of the language style of herbal medicine advertising. For example, to show how powerful a particular medicine is, he reels out the multitude of ailments his medicine can cure, using a: {prep (fun) + NP} Structural pattern: e.g.

Kí í sẹ̀ Òoogùn ìyàgbẹ̀ ní tiwà, ó wà- fun jẹ́dìjẹ́dì, fun èyìn ríro, tàbí fun àràn.
Our medicine is not for running stool; it is for hemorrhoid/pile, for back pain for intestinal worms.

Sometimes, this pattern is varied, using the relative clause pattern: {NP + tí ... } e.g.

... inú tó máa n ròòyan, inú tó n kuń, inú tó n kùn, tàbí òpá èyìn tó n dùn ní.

...the stomach that pains, the stomach that constipates, the stomach that rumbles or the spinal chord that pains/troubles one.

It also could be in the form of: {bi ...clause} structural pattern:

...bèèèyan bá n yàgbẹ̀ èjẹ̀, bèèèyan bá n yàgbẹ̀ àsulé, bẹnu ìdí bá n tààyan, bẹnu ìdí bá n ròòyan.

...if a person has traces of blood in the stool, if a person stools repeatedly, if the anus becomes burning, if the anus becomes painful.

Here, the hawker piles up *bí* ...clauses to show the different ways in which jẹ́dìjẹ́dì (hemorrhoid /pile) manifests in a victim. His knowledge of the various manifestations of the disease as displayed above instills confidence in the buyers and thereby encouraging them to give the medicine a trial.

The use of expressive imagery through repetition also forms part of the language style of herbal medicine advertising. Rather than use a direct expression, he prefers an expressive imagery. For instance, the idea that a medicine is not restricted to any particular group of people is expressed thus:

Ọmọ́dẹ́ n lẹ́ ó, àgbà n lẹ́ ó, Obìnrin n lẹ́ ó, Ọkúnrin n lẹ́ ó.

The young use it, the elderly use, women use, and men use it.

Here, the different categories of people that can use the medicine are itemized for emphasis by piling up sentences having the habitual structural pattern:

NP +N (H.T.M) VP.

The simple message is that there is no restriction as the medicines are for people of all ages and sexes.

At times in addition, the repetition is stylized in form of permutation. The items or nominals being repeated are permuted within the sentence structure as in the example below:

Ewé àtegò ni tiwa, egbò àtewé, tó dájú pònbele

Ours (medicine) is made from leaves and herbs; herbs and leaves that we are very sure of.

Here, the ingredients used in the preparation of his medicines, leaves (ewé) and herbs (egbò) are permuted, not for symmetry alone, but to show that his medicines are original herbal preparations.

Below is another instance of a stylized repetition in which idiophones are permuted to give sound effect to the expression of farting as a symptom of hemorrhoid:

Ènu ìdí ó ma a dún pàtà poto, pòtò pata.

The anus will be making a kind of staccato noise, sounding ceaselessly.

Repetition, as Olatúnjì (1984:25) observes, is emphasis, and a feature of poetry. This being the case, the use of repetition is maximized in herbal medicine advertising to emphasize and intensify the subject matter of advertisement. Besides, whatever stylistic or poetic effect the language of local herb advertising has is indeed attributable to the stylized pattern of its language, repetition especially. The hyperbolic nature of the language of herbal medicine advertising must be pointed out here. The hyperbole lies in the multiplicity of ailments his medicine can purportedly cure because of its powers, which are unlimited. Likewise, the very many symptomatic manifestations of hemorrhoid are inexhaustible. This is one of the ploys to trap an unwary buyer.

The hawker of Yorùbá herbal medicine is naturally a humorist, and through this, he draws attention to himself and his herbal wares. One of the sources of humor in herbal medicine advertising is taboo, especially those that relate to sex. Taboo refers to the social custom whereby direct references to certain objects, actions or persons are forbidden. Rather, people talk about such things in a roundabout manner or euphemism. The herbal hawker sometimes keeps to this cultural norm. For example, the man's genitals (penis) is euphemistically referred to as *nńkan ọlọmọkúnrin* (a-thing-of-the-man), a woman's private part (vaginal) as *nńkan ọlọmọbínrin* (a-thing-of-the-woman) or *ọjú ara* (lit: the-eye-of-the-body). Euphemism is a source of humor in herbal advertising as evident in the example below where the hawker euphemistically expresses sex and sexuality thus:

Kí tọkọtàyà ó sùn pò, kí nńkan ọlọmọkúnrin doríkodò, tí ìbẹpẹ tó pón sì wa nítòsí.

For a man and a woman to sleep together, only for the man's thing to droop when actually there is a ripe pawpaw close by.

Here, a man's erectile problem is expressed euphemistically as *doríkodò* (drop-head-down) and a woman's availability for coitus is described as *ìbẹpẹ tó pón* (a ripe pawpaw) that is ready to be eaten. All this produces comic effects.

Instances also abound when the hawker throws caution to the wind, breaching the norms at will and lapsing into obscenity. Today, vulgarity is a hallmark of his language. For instance, apart from making direct references to man's genitals and woman's private part repeatedly in the course of advertising, sexual acts are flagrantly expressed without any reservation:

Ọmọdè n lo oògùn wa, agbàlagbà n lò ó. Egboogi Alhaji Baba to dájú, Alala-kù-lala, Èdumàrè jẹ o rẹnikan kù lẹpọn. Sọkí-lojijì, egeṛe-pọn-pọn-pọn. O ó ri i tí kiní ọlọmọkúnrin rẹ ó ma a yọ dọdọ, dọdọ. O ó ri i tí kiní ọlọmọkúnrin rẹ ó ma a ẹ biripapà, biripapà. Iwọ ọlọmọkúnrin, o ó gbọn ìdí obinrin wukẹ -wukẹ. O ó ya kafinntà moyawo ẹ lọwọ, o ó ma a kan an gbọn-ọn, gbọn-ọn; o ó ma a gbọ "mo ti dákẹ buròdá 'Johun pé ẹ rí nńkan lò lonii?'"

language of everyday usage. As Olatéjú (1998) contends, a *differentia specifica* exists between the SL and the LL. While the essence of SL lies in effective communication, the essence of LL is aesthetics. In other to communicate effectively therefore, with the prospective buyers of his product, the local herb hawker has always tried to strike a critical balance in his use of language. Hence, he has tried to avoid such devices as idioms, metaphors and other linguistic manipulations that push communication to the background, or that such devices have been sparingly used.

The paper noted that the language of herbal advertising though manifests a heavy presence of poetic features, it is still not appropriate to describe it as poetry because it is not. Contrary to the opinion held in earlier studies, the paper concluded that the Yoruba local medicine practitioner is not a poet but a language artist of a sort who decks his advertising with many poetic devices that give impetus, vivid imagery, and communicative effects to language, which is considered the sole of his business.

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