

# Morphophonological Deviation in Yoruba: Its Implication for Communication

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## Abstract

This paper examines the morphophonological violation of the linguistic rules of Yoruba especially by the literary artists in their attempt to achieve communicative aesthetics. Through observational method, we discovered that they manipulate the morphophonological resources of the language without a second thought on its implication for communication. In the work, we discover that this deliberate deviation from the linguistic norms of the everyday language do have some consequences (i) it may lead to ambiguity (ii) it often leads to derivation of a new words which may be out of context with the discussion at stake (iii) it could be for the ease of speech production (iv) it is also noticeable in ordinary discourse as against some views that it is only manifested in the literary discourse (v) it is capable of constituting communicative difficulty to the language learners.

**Keywords:** morphology, phonology, deviation process, derivation, communicative aesthetics, literary discourse

## 1.0 Introduction

Language is defined as a means of human communication. It could be written or spoken. Whichever, linguists especially literary scholars are conscious of the significant difference between language of common discourse as evident in our daily discussions and the language of literary discourse. Whereas the former is casual and void of any aesthetic or ornamental colouring Webster (1990), Fowler (1996) and Dare (1997), the latter is critically analyzed and garnished with stylistic ornaments. This distinction is predominantly dependent on their functions. For the common ordinary discourse, the ultimate goal is to facilitate communication between the interlocutors. This is remarkably different from the anticipated roles of the literary discourse which is largely aesthetic in nature. According to Ukaegbu (2003) a literary text is a work of art whose meaning is different from informative utterance which is cognitive in meaning and involves no emotion. As a result a literary artist chooses to manipulate language more than the average language user which he either can or wishes to exercise.

Generally, as indicated in the definition of the language, the underpinning function that belies the whole essence of language is communication. More often than not, in a bid to fulfill this communicative function of language, the language users especially those whose concern is more on the aesthetic aspect do use various linguistic devices towards achieving their goal --- linguistic stylistic. This literary motif appears universal. According to Olateju (1998) one of such linguistic means is linguistic deviation. Deviance according to Crystal (2003) is a term used in linguistic analysis to refer to a sentence (or other units) which does not conform to the rules of a grammar. Wales (1989) notes that language of poetry often deviates from the normal expectations of the users of the language. He says deviation could be described as divergence in frequency from a norm, or the statistical average. Such divergence may depend on

- (i) the violation of conventional rules of linguistic structure (whether phonological *sound level*, morphological/syntactic *form and structure level*, lexical or semantic *meaning level*) and so be stylistically unusual/infrequent; or,
- (ii) upon the overuse of usual rules of usage, and so be statistically unusual in the sense of over frequent.

The focus of this paper is on the linguistic deviation at the sound and form and structure levels.

## 2.0 Morphophonological Deviation: An Overview

Phonology forms the basis of linguistic analysis of any language while morphology feeds syntax and the other linguistic aspects with the basic ingredients of their operations. While phonology deals with the sound system of a given language, morphology deals with the manner words are derived in such language following certain processes which follow the sound pattern of the language in question. And the place of the two branches of linguistics is so fundamental in the study of the grammar of any language. The knowledge of the two aspects of language is an integral part of the native speaker's competence since competence is grammar in form of rules (Clark et al 2007).

If competence is the sum total knowledge an individual possesses of his or her language it then follows that no native speaker of a language is expected to violate any of the linguistic rules that make his or her competence and as well inform him/her of the judgment about the correctness or otherwise of any expression. The phonological examination of any given language cuts across segmental and suprasegmental features like tone, stress, intonation, nasalization etc. These suprasegmentals are phonological features which transcend

beyond segmental level; they are quite significant in language as they form crucial part of speech. Awobuluyi (1978) notes that it is essential for two or three of them to combine if any sense is to be made of any utterances or linguistic constructions. In fact, the meaning of the linguistic unit (word) formed with segmental phonology is derived largely from the suprasegmental like tone since they are contrastive in Yoruba. Moreover, every language is rule governed. This makes it a matter of necessity for any borrowed word to undergo linguistic scrutiny, that is, phonotactics of the recipient language. In other words, borrowed words are expected to undergo certain level of conditioning in the target language. Deviation from any of these phonotactic constraints is often described as phonological deviation.

However, this competence especially the phonological and morphological rules are violated more often by literary artists who in a bid to achieve stylistic aesthetic would go against their competence. This they do with impunity in the name of poetic license violating the norms of everyday language. This immunity allows them to deviate at will from the phonological and morphological norms of the language and manipulate same to achieve their intention. Though this literary phenomenon is also noted to a lesser extent in speech during casual and ordinary discourse; it is not without its own effects. The morphophonological deviations do leave their impacts on communication as they often lead to the formation of awkward words and phrases.

### 2.1 Forms of Phonological Deviation

As noted above, phonological deviation is apparent at the segmental and suprasegmental levels.

#### 2.1.1 Segmental Deletion

Generally, to achieve communication competence and proficiency, and in particular to ensure stylistic perfection, a consonant or vocalic segment is usually deleted or elided respectively from certain linguistic unit:

- (ai) a ò í rí àjẹkù orò 'no one sees the leftover food of cult'  
a ò í dáke' wíjọ' 'no one is accused of silence'  
a ò í wò sùn ùn dáràn 'no one commits crime while looking'  
a ò í ríbi lẹyin ò o 'no one sees evil by saying I heard'
- (aia) a ò í r\_ ẹni s\_ agbára 'no one flexes muscle when a helper is nearby'
- (aiii) \_on l'ákáín só jàkàà? 'they ask toothless person if he will eat beancake'

The actual form of the example above is given hereunder:

- (aiv) a kì í rí àjẹkù orò  
a kì í dáke' wíjọ'  
a kì í wò sùn ùn dáràn  
a kì í rí ibi ní ẹyin ò o
- (av) a kì í rí ẹni kí á ẹ agbára

From the examples above, (aiv) shows the deletion of the consonantal *k* of the negation marker, *kì í* is always dropped. In (av) the vowel *i* in *ri* 'to see' and the vowel *e* in *se* 'to do' are elided. Besides, a consonant *w* in *wọ* 'they' is equally deleted. This consonantal deletion leaves the fragment '*on*'. This consonantal deletion is often noted in our day to day conversation which takes little or no cognizance of aesthetics. As against Olateju (1998) that the phonological deviation is intentional and purposely for achieving aesthetic ends, the deviation could be primarily unconscious, unintentional and executed for the ease of speech production.

We make some observations from the segmental deletion:

1. they could be a resultant effect of phonological process to make for the ease of speech production
2. they are not peculiar to literary discourse alone. They are often noticeable in common and ordinary discourse. It should be stressed here that it is not only the sound segments noted above that can be dropped. In fact, it is a common observation that the consonant *f* is always deleted in the phrase of certain verse of the Ifa divination recitation as:

- (b) a díá fún... i.e a dífá fún 'Ifa divination was performed for...'

3. segmental dropping may or may not be meaning preserving.

Olateju (1998) notes that the use of phonological deviation is intentional and solely aimed at ensuring articulatory and aesthetic ends.

To justify the third observation highlighted above, the example below throws more light on such instances where phonological deviation could hinder conceptual meaning of a word or phrase in a language. A times, such hindrance can generate ambiguity:

- (ci) Iké ñlá ni iké Lágbájá 'big hunch is the hunch of Lagbaja'  
Iké ñlá tó ñ fa aṣọ ya 'hunch that can tear cloth'  
Iké tóńké wò lẹyin tó búsekún 'the hunch that hunchback sees and burst into tears'

In the above (ci) example, a semantic ambiguity influenced by the elision of the vowel *i* in three words viz *tí* preposition, the agentive morpheme *oni-* and *íké* 'hunchback' and the eventual assimilation of the phrase as shown in (cii) and rewritten in (ciii) below:

(cii) t\_ óń\_ ké\_

(ciii) ...tónké...

The example (ciii) above is ambiguous as it can depict two different meanings. These are

1. ...tí óńké... 'that the hunchback owner'
2. ... tí óńké... 'that is crying'

A further look shows that the vowel sound elided in the phrase reduced the syllable length and the constraints involved in the articulation of the words. In other words, the fewer the linguistic unit such as word, the faster the rhythm of the text.

Ambiguity can equally be noted in vowel assimilation. Bamgbose (1990) notes that vowel assimilation is the transformation of a vowel to become similar to another vowel. Oyebade (1998) sees assimilation as a phonological instance where two contiguous sounds which have different modes of production become identical in some or entire feature of their production, assimilation has taken place. One of such typical environments of vowel assimilation in Yoruba is noun and noun construction intermorphemically as shown in the example below:

(di) ...fí ọwọ ilá... '...use an okro-soiled hand...'

(ii) ...fí ọwọ ọlá... '... use a wealthy hand...'

With vowel assimilation, examples (di & ii) above would now be rendered, in fast speech for the ease of articulation, as;

(iii) fọwọ́ọ́lá 'use an okro-soiled hand'

(iv) fọwọ́ọ́lá 'use a wealthy hand'

A close look at the ambiguous forms in (iii & iv) above shows that the derivation is as a result of segment deletion and the subsequent anticipatory vowel assimilation between ọwọ́ 'hand' and ilá 'okro' in (di) and ọwọ́ 'hand' and ọlá 'wealth' in (dii). This vowel assimilation according to Bamgbose (1990) follows the rule below:

$$V1 + V2 = V1 + V1$$

Where ọ is the V1 and i & ọ in ilá and ọlá are the V2 in example (di & ii) above.

### 2.1.2 Tonal Manipulation

This involves a manipulation of the three lexical tone of a word or phrase such that a new word or phrase which may be non-existent in the language is formed. This tonal violation is called tonal counterpoint or contrast according to Babalola (1966) and Olatunji (1984).

- (e) Èmi ọmọ olódò kan òtéréré  
Èmi ọmọ olódò kan òtèrèrè  
Èmi ọmọ olódò tó sàń wèréke  
Èmi ọmọ olódò tó sàń wèrèke...

'I am the child of owner of river that flows far'

'I am the child of owner of river that flows in spiral form...'

Here, the word whose tone are manipulated are the nominalization *oterere* and adverb *wereke*. The real lexical tones of the word 'low-high-high-high' and 'high-high-high' respectively have been twisted to create a stylistic rhythmic harmony which appears pleasing to hear despite its meaninglessness. Although Awobuluyi (1978) notes that at times the deviation can imply some impressions. The high tone according to him tends to suggest smallness of size of weight while low tone does suggest bigness of size of weight. The foregoing notwithstanding, the manipulated forms here have no semantic value.

### 2.2.1 Forms of Morphological Deviation

Deviation can also occur as noted above at the morphological level. One of the roles of morphology is about the expansion of the lexicon of a given language through the derivation of more new words from the existing ones using different linguistic means technically known as morphological processes. However, morphemes in a bid to derive new lexemes do not just occur haphazardly. They follow due process.

But this systematic derivation is often violated in literary discourse for the purpose of communicative aesthetics as seen below:

- (fi) Mo sèbà olódùmarè  
Ọba ńlá tí ń fọba jẹ  
Ọba aládé tí kò bá sèbà Olódùmarè  
A di ọba aládé tí ò láşẹ lenu  
'I honour the Almighty God'  
'The Great King that enthrones another king'  
'Any crowned king who fails honour his Almighty'  
'We become a worthless king'

In the example above, there is ill-formation of agentive nominal form *aládé*. The derivation of the correct form *aládé* is given thus

|       |                |   |          |   |                |
|-------|----------------|---|----------|---|----------------|
| (fii) | a -            | + | dé       | → | adé            |
|       | the process of |   | to crown |   | crown          |
|       | oní-           | + | adé      | → | aládé          |
|       | owner of       |   | crown    |   | owner of crown |

We can see from the foregoing that the meaning of *dé*, (to crown) being the root is reflected in *adé* (crown). But *aládè* in the last line is meaningless. The meaninglessness is borne out of the ill-formation of the word, that is, *adè* which is meaningless in itself. And so the prefixation of *a-* to it to derive a nominal word like *aládè* could not help its meaninglessness since the meaning of the seemingly logical root *de* is not felt in the derivation.

### 3.0 Effects of Morphophonological Deviation on Communication

Scholars have noted that the effect of morphophonological deviation as a stylistic means of achieving aesthetics has now spread its tentacles beyond the scope of literature where its impact is felt more, to the other non-literary and casual discourse as given below:

- |       |                          |   |
|-------|--------------------------|---|
| (gi)  | Iyán mi ñkọ́             | ‘where is my pounded yam?’                |
|       | Iyán rẹ                  | ‘your pounded yam’                        |
|       | Iyán rẹ kọ́, iyàn rẹ ni  | ‘your pounded yam, no pounded yam at all’ |
| (gii) | ìbẹ̀pẹ̀ mi ñkọ́’?        | ‘Where is my pawpaw?’                     |
|       | ìbẹ̀pẹ̀ kọ ọ, ìbẹ̀pẹ̀ ni | ‘Which pawpaw?. There is pawpaw at all.’  |

As illustrated in example (fi) above the twisted version of the real word often yield yet some other word which may be out of context with the discussion at stake. The speaker (encoder) here is demanding his food (pounded yam) but met with negative response implying no food. The response is rendered in a awkward manner least expected of the speaker. The response *iyàn* (famine) is a homograph with *iyán* (pounded yam). The understanding of this requires the competence of the interlocutors. And it may create some communication gap for the second language learner.

The use of ‘low-low-low’ tones on *ibepe* instead of ‘low-mid-mid’ tones (*ibẹ̀pẹ̀*) is a clearer indication that *ibepe* is a violated form generated by unacceptable tones

The deliberate violation of the tonal pattern adds some aesthetic value to the literary discourse, and connotes a negative communicative impression in the ordinary communication where it could be seen as an insult to the person asking the question. The negation and insult are contained in *kọ́ ọ* and *ibepe* (deviant form) respectively.

Besides, the unacceptability of the ill-formed words noted in the morphological deviation further lend credence to the fact that morphemes do not just combine haphazardly. In other words, the grammaticality of any sentence is contained in the grammaticality of individual morphemes affixed together to form words in such sentence. In addition, each word formed in conformity to the morphological rules of a language is screened via the filter before getting into the lexicon. The implication this mal-formation has for communication especially a second language learner and a child under language acquisition (lateralization) could be confusing. These set of learners may not be able to distinguish between the acceptable and the unacceptable forms.

### 4.0 Summary of Findings and Conclusion

We have shown how the phonological properties of the Yoruba language are explained and exploited for stylistic and communicative purposes. The violation often runs contrary to the acceptable forms in the language. And this deviation poses difficulty to the language learners. The ambiguity which they often produce may not be able to decipher within the scope of the conceptual meaning of the learner since their meaning may be beyond basic dictionary meaning. The device is usually consciously contrived and the ultimate intention is to achieve certain specific effect- stylistic value. However, the deviation could be unconscious and unintentional as often noticeable in our casual conversations. So, we attribute this unconsciousness to ease of speech production. We know that most of the phonological processes are apparent during speech.

The deviation can equally lead to the creation of new words which may be out of context with the discussion at hand.

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