LLT Journal, e-ISSN 2579-9533, p-ISSN 1410-7201, Vol. 27, No. 2, October 2024, pp. 1019-1036

LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching
http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/LLT
Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

HUMOUR AND LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF AFRICAN FOLKTALES

Charles Alex Patrick
Osun State University Osogbo, Nigeria
charlespatrick282@gmail.com
correspondence: charlespatrick282@gmail.com
https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v27i2.9472
received 9 August 2024; accepted 22 October 2024

Abstract

African folktales manifest intricate and peculiar linguistic features, making their performance remarkable and invigorating. This paper explores the dual impact of humour and linguistic features on the written and performative nature of African folktales, arguing that the linguistic features of African folktales are imbued with humour which enlivens their oral performances. The data utilised in this study were harvested from folktales across Africa, including some collected during oral performances in Ipe-Akoko in Ondo State, Nigeria. Ten folktales were purposely selected from written sources while two were collected during performance. The performances of the folktales fostered a comprehensive understanding of the impact that the linguistic features laced with humour have on the audience. The data were subjected to critical reading using content analysis. The theoretical framework of this study was anchored in Henri Bergson's theoretical work; *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (1923). The results showed that many African folktales manifest sterling linguistic devices laced with humour that embellish the narrative structure of the written folktales while enhancing the performative experience of the audience during the performance in Ipe-Akoko. The study concluded that folktales function as a means of galvanising and lubricating African languages and other verbal components whenever they seem to be inadequate.

Keywords: African folktale, formulaic device, humour, linguistic feature, non-linguistic device

Introduction

The language of folktales is generally simple, direct, conversational and melodic. This is because children often constitute the audience during folktale performances, elaborate descriptions and surface difficulties which are the hallmark of written literature are minimal or sometimes avoided in traditional storytelling. A gifted performer holds the attention of the audience all through the performance by deploying all the linguistic resources at his/her disposal. Since folktales are passed down verbally from one generation to another, their linguistic medium undergoes all forms of modifications according to the orientation and verbal skill of each performer engaged in the narrative performance. So, the tale itself is not more important than its linguistic medium of expression "because performance styles

vary, no two oral performances ever contain the same material. For this reason, the manner of expression is often more important than the content" (Mphande, 1992, p.122).

A few scholars have engaged the language of folktales with peculiar results. Surjowati (2019), for instance, probed the use of figurative language in folktale translation with a particular focus on how language enhances the coherence of the stories. He argues that figurative language serves three functions in folktales; clarity, forth and beauty (p.414). Ball (1954) examines language and style in folktales and reveals that language and style of folktales include:

> Intonation, voice rhythm, continuity, speaking rate, pitch, voice intensity, pauses, facial expressions, gestures, pantomime or voice imitation (even of the opposite sex or animals), methods of reacting to audience response – in fact, the whole delicate and complex process of participating with the audience in the story-telling situation (1954, p.170).

This submission seems to dwell more on the paralinguistic aspect of the language of folktales. In many ways, it captures part of the argument that would be raised in this paper, only that the focus of this paper is on investigating how these linguistic features itemised by Ball are induced with humour during oral performances and in the written form of folktales.

Theory

In this study, descriptive texts were purposely harvested across the different regions in Africa. Some of the texts were gathered from books while others were collected during live performances in Ipe-Akoko in Nigeria. This approach privileged a synthesis of empirical and secondary sources, allowing for a holistic understanding of how humour and linguistic features intertwine to generate meaning in African folktales. Qualitative content analysis was adopted in evaluating the linguistic elements and humour in the oral narratives. The study focused on how both the linguistic and paralinguistic elements like gestures, facial expressions, tone etc. function to generate humour in the selected texts.

Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (1923) provided the theoretical framework upon which our arguments were anchored. Bergson's work proves appropriate in framing the discussions on the intersectionality between humour and linguistic features in African folktales, especially his conceptual explorations of comic elements in words. Bergson's postulations on how words shape humour crystalise our arguments about how certain linguistic features enhance humour in African folktales.

Theoretically, linguistic features consist of formulaic devices, repetition, ideophones, proverbs, hyperbole, irony, allusion, paralinguistic devices, tonality, gestures, and facial expression. In the following, the first three features are presented. First, formulaic devices consist of two types in most African folktales which have fixated opening and closing features. The opening is usually a call-and-response exchange between the performer and the audience and it serves several purposes. The opening formula is different from the closing formula. These formulaic phrases are peculiar to African folktales; Western folktales do have them.

Second, repetition is a prominent device in most oral narratives. According to Orlik, "Repetition is everywhere present, not only to give a story suspense but also to fill it out and afford it a body. This repetition is mostly threefold, though in some countries, because of their religious symbolism, it may be fourfold" (Thompson, 1946, p. 456). It is doubtful if one can find any African folktale in which repetition is absent. Okpewho (1992) enumerates the importance of repetition in oral narratives: "It has both an aesthetic and a utilitarian value: in other words, it is a device that not only gives a touch of beauty or attractiveness to a piece of oral expression (whether song or narrative or other kind of statement) but also serves certain practical purposes in the overall organisation of the oral performance" (1992, p. 71).

Third, an ideophone is one of the peculiar features that shape the humour found in African folktales. "One of the unique features of African languages is the widespread use of what has come to be known as the "ideophone" (Mphande, 1992, p. 117). A lot of scholars have offered many definitions of ideophones. Kunene (1965) defines it as "a recreation of an event in sound" (p.21). Doke (1935), the respected South African linguist who is credited with being the first person to have done extensive work on the term defines it as "a vivid representation of an idea in sound" (p.118).

Theory application

Formulaic devices

The folktales collected from Ipe-Akoko provide an opportunity to experience these formulaic phrases. For instance, in the tale titled "The Argument between Soldier Ant and Harvester Ant", the opening phrases go thus:

Narrator:	Aluuure ooo (A tale is on its way)
Audience:	ẹrọọọ (let it come)

This is slightly different from the formulaic phrases of Igbo folktales:

Narrator:	umuaka, o nwere akuko m ga akoro unu (Children, I have a tale to tell you.)
Audience:	kooro anyi ka obi di anyi mma. Kooro anyi kama ya dikwa mma (Tell us to make us happy Tell us but let it be a nice one) (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991)

One of the functions of the opening formula is to gain the attention of the audience; it is a way of preparing them mentally to move from their world of reality to the surrealistic world of folktales where animals and human beings enjoy a robust interpersonal relationship. Sometimes the opening formula serves as a synopsis of the tale. It could also serve as "an opportunity for the narrator to test his popularity" (Nwachukwu-Agbada, 1991, p. 22), with the audience especially when the narrator is in the age bracket of the audience. Riddles usually form the opening formula for children's narrators. After this introductory exchange, the audience hangs onto the lips of the narrator as he observes a little pause which is another way of intensifying their interest.

At the end of the tale, the narrator also closes with another set of formulaic phrases. The audience is meant to respond but among some ethnic groups in Africa, it is merely to signal the end of the tale without any expected reaction from the audience. The audience is then forced to return from the world of illusions together with the narrator. The narrator may then go ahead to bring out the moral in the tale in the form of a question or a proverb which the members of the audience are expected to internalise. Among the people of Ipe-Akoko where some of the tales were collected, their closing remarks go like this:

Narrator:	Anana e idu mẹ minẹ ba kodi mẹ fẹẹẹlee (This is where I last saw it before I lost sight of the trail)
Audience:	bodhẹ. (Welcome)

In a typical Yoruba land, the narrators have more dramatic closing remarks:

> Idi alo mi ree gbangbalaka;
> Idi alo mi ree gbangbalaka;
> Bi n ba puro, kagogo enu mi ma ro;
> Bi n ko ba puro, kagogo enu mi o ro leemeta.
> O di po...po...po!
> (This summarises my tale;
> This aptly captures my tale;
> If I lie, may my mouth fail to make a whistle;
> But if my tale is real, may mouth makes three resounding whistles.
> Po! Po!! Po!!!) (Babalola & Onanuga, 2012)

It is obvious from these excerpts that formulaic remarks add colour to the humour enjoyed by children in folktales. These stock phrases are parts of the touchstone that have defined African folktales over many generations.

Repetition

Repetition ensures the smooth rendering of words in storytelling. In many of the folktales selected for this study, there are excellent examples of repetition. In "Ijapa and the Hot-water Test" taken from the Yoruba ethnic in Nigeria, the deployment of repetition as a narrative device is very pronounced:

> The chief sent for a calabash. Ijapa filled it to the brim. He carried it to the chief, saying: "See it, great chief, see how full the calabash is!"
> The chief replied: "I see it. You do well, Ijapa."
> Ijapa carried the calabash back and forth saying: "Family of the chief, see how full the calabash is!"
> The chief's family called out: "We see it. You do well, Ijapa!"
> "Men of the village," Ijapa chanted, "see how full the calabash is!"
> The men of the village called out: "We see it. You do well, Ijapa!"
> "Women of the village," Ijapa sang, "see how full the calabash is!"
> The women of the village answered: "We see it. You do well, Ijapa!"
> "Boys of the village," Ijapa chanted, "see how full the calabash is!"
> The boys chanted back: "We see it. You do well, Ijapa!"
> "Girls of the village," Ijapa chanted, "see how full the calabash is!"
> "We see it. You do well, Ijapa!" the girls replied. (Courlander, 1973)

The usefulness of repetition in the above excerpt speaks for itself. Bergson's (1923) position that repetition "makes us laugh only because it symbolises a special play of moral elements, this play itself being the symbol of an altogether material diversion" (1923, p. 24a). Aptly captures the role it played here. Ijapa's successful escape from the punishment that he rightly deserves is made possible through his witty use of repetition. This very act constitutes the high point of the humour in the tale as repetition becomes "simply a tool of pleasure" (Okpewho, 1992, p. 78) and it is also the repetition that sustains the dramatic twist in the narration.

Similarly, in the folktale chosen from Somalia titled "The Battle of Eghal Shillet," repetition is copiously expended. In this tale, a certain coward of a warrior mockingly prepares for a war in which he knows quite well that he is not going to partake. After mounting his horse, like Ijapa in the hot water, he resorts to a trick:

> He looked again. The Essa men were still going out to battle. He said to his wife, "Help me on my horse!"
> She helped him on his. The Essa men were meeting the enemy on the hill.
> He said, "Give me my knife!"
> She gave him his knife.
> He said, "Give me my shield of elephant hide!"
> She gave him his shield.
> He said, "Give me my spear!"
> She gave him his spear. The men were still fighting. He sat in his saddle.
> Then he said, "Give me another spear!"
> She gave him another spear and said, "Are you ready?"
> Eghal Shillet said, "Yes, I am ready."
> .....
> He looked. The battle on the hill was furious.
> "Give me another spear!" he said.
> His wife gave him another spear. He said: "I am ready. If I do not return from the hill, remember only how I scatter the Haweia dogs to the wind!"
> He sat in his saddle and scowled. "Give me another spear!" he said.
> "There are no more spears," his wife replied.
> He closed his eyes.
> "I leave you," he said. Then he opened his eyes and asked: "Has my horse been fed?"
> "Your horse has been fed," his wife said.
> "Has he had water?" (Courlander & Leslau, 1950).

This circle continues until the war comes to an end. Okpewho calls this "formulaic use of repetition" which, according to him, "covers the broad pattern on which most if not all of a story is organised" (1992, p. 77). The whole tale is one long huge repetition. This tale presents an exceptional case of a prolonged repetition. Unlike the use of hyperbole, usually when repetition as a literary device is overstretched to its elastic limit as it was done in this tale, it tends to go sour.

Ideophones

Okpewho (1992) defines an ideophone as "a stylistic technique that relies on sound," he goes further, "it means "ideas-in-sound," in the sense that from the sound of the word one can get an idea of the nature of the event or object referred to" (p.92). However, some scholars have erroneously equated it with onomatopoeia.

However, there is a slight difference between onomatopoeia and ideophones. While onomatopoeia is restricted to words that imitate sounds, ideophones are sounds which create all forms of sensory events such as taste, smell, gait or feelings (Buhler, 1934, p.13). Okpewho (1992) testifies to a slight difference between ideophones and onomatopoeia:

> There is a subtle difference between the two terms: while an onomatopoeia has been adsorbed into the verbal lexicon of a language (e.g. *bang*, *whack*, *swish*), an ideophone retains the purity of the original sound from which the standard word has emerged, so that it lends a more dramatic effect to the business of description in a narrative performance (p.87).

But because the two have to do with conveying meanings with sounds, many scholars tend to regard the words as the same.

Ideophones abound in oral narratives because they help oral artists create mental images that may be difficult to capture in words. Mvula (1982) gives a comprehensive list of the usefulness of ideophones to a storyteller: "The storyteller exploits ...and employs ideophones which vivify his speech, lend him eloquence, complete his thought and help him to create a fresh picture of an event, and to convey contrasting images..." (p.62). Ideophones abound in many of the tales selected for this study. In the tale selected from the Acholi ethnic group in Uganda titled "Hare and His Mother-in-law, there is an interesting example which is used to enhance the musicality of the song embedded into the tale:

> Pengle-pengle-pengle-pengle,
> Pengle-pengle-pengle-pengle,
> O Hare and his mother-in-law pengle,
> Did a certain thing very sweet, pengle,
> Nuk-nuk-kanuk-kanuk nukere,
> Nuk-nuk-kanuk-kanuk nukere (p'Bitek, 1978)

The ideophones in the above excerpt evoke two feelings; the first one, "pengle-pengle-pengle-pengle" indicates sensational feelings to denote the erotic attraction between Hare and his mother-in-law while the second one, "Nuk-nuk-kanuk-kanuk nukere," has a melodramatic touch which invokes an act; the sexual act between Hare and his mother-in-law. This justifies the argument that ideophones do more than just words imitating sounds; these samples demonstrate the view that ideophones evoke sensory events.

In the tale "The Greed Spider" selected from the Ngoni ethnic group in Malawi, there is another sample:

> It did not take him long to get there and soon the sound of the drum could be heard throbbing, faintly in the distance places, loud and clear nearby.
>
> "Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-tat, rat-tat,
> Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-tat-tat." (Eisner, 1996).

The sounds come from Spider's drum which he uses to summon his children whenever their attention is needed. The ideophonic sound of the drum could also pass for onomatopoeia because this is a clear case of words imitating sound. The

ideophones capture the sound made by the drum of a spider from a long distance. The ideophones are most insightful not because they capture the sounds made by the drum but because they show the distance between the drum and those for whom the drumming is meant. A different ideophone like "duu duu duu" might have been used if the drumming were done at a very close range.

The tale taken from Mauritania gives us another sample of ideophones as a "phonaesthetic resource" (Okpewho, 1992, p.87) in the hands of a gifted artist. In this tale, Hare always goes to the King's Pond to bathe all the time against the warnings and threats of the King who finds the pond unsuitable for his use each time Hare has bathed in it. After unsuccessful attempts to catch the culprit, the tortoise offers to help in catching the culprit:

> Tac, tac, tac. The hare comes. The hare sees this black object on the side of the road, he stops and looks. The tortoise has hidden her head and legs under her shell. Nothing moves. Tac, tac, tac, the hare approaches cautiously: nothing moves. He stays there a moment motionless. The tortoise doesn't move more than a rock. The hare thinks. He turns around, and looks some more: nothing moves. This time, he calms the beating of his heart, he is no longer fearful... (Baissac, 1888)

The ideophone here portrays the movement of the hare. It indicates the gait of the hare as he approaches the pond. The ideophone seems very appropriate because, in this gait, one can discern a creature with a gleeful sense of mischief, pleasure and suspicion. In his steps also, there is a sense of urgency propelled by expectations and happiness. However, the hare eventually suffers a terrible fate as he is caught by the meticulous tortoise as the hare mistakes the tortoise's back for a seat placed there for his comfort.

A quick look at yet another sample from the tale "Jackal and Hen" selected from the Basotho ethnic group in Lesotho indicates that ideophones hold the potential for expressing humour:

> "*Kekekeke!*" laughed Hen, for then she knew that the story of the peace was just a big lie. And she knew that if she had taken snuff with that fellow, he would have caught her, so she made up a story herself and with it, she had caught him beautifully.
> "*Kekekeke*!" she laughed. "I caught the storyteller with another story!"
> (Postma, 1974)

This is a sample of a humorous ideophone. It indicates the triumphant laughter of the Hen over the wily Jackal who tries to trick the Hen into feeding on her. It could also be treated as onomatopoeia because there is an edge to the sound which indicates that it is a throaty laughter made by a little creature. The sound invokes humour because it is strange to the ear, which favours the thesis of the incongruity school of thought that whatever is strange holds potential for laughter.

Proverbs

Africa is saturated with proverbs; every community in Africa, no matter how small, seems to be swimming in proverbs. Courlander observes that "Proverbs are plentiful throughout most of Africa, and a great many of them have self-evident

meanings requiring no explanation" (p.85). In the same vein, Finnegan (1970) notes, "Proverbs seem to occur almost everywhere in Africa, in apparent contrast with other areas of the world such as aboriginal America and Polynesia" (p.389). The norms and customs of any society can be deduced from its proverbs because they are the emblematic signposts upon which each society documents its values (Patrick, 2022, p.156). Elderly persons are more disposed to the use of proverbs since they are always at the centre of witty conversations that require proverbial statements. Okpewho (1992) outlines three occasions during which Africans use proverbs:

> There are three main situations in which proverbs are used in Africa. The first may be broadly classified as a speech-act situation, meaning roughly a situation in which two or more people are holding discourse or exchanging statements on a formal or informal basis. A second situation is a formal performance, such as a storytelling event, in which proverbs are employed for a variety of purposes. A third situation of proverb use is in the performance of chants of a somewhat ritual kind. Some people would add a fourth situation, verbal contests, in which proverbs are bandied by two people (p.229).

From Okpewho's revelation, it is obvious that proverbs are central to storytelling in Africa. Proverbs are short epigrammatic statements of truth employed "not only to retrieve communication gone astray but to speed it up, slow it down, convey weighty messages, deliver light-hearted jests, sharpen arguments, blunt criticism, clarify difficult ideas and disguise simple ones beyond easy recognition" (p.105). There are many other uses to which proverbs can be put.

Many African proverbs are end products of folktales because "a proverbial saying may be the distillation of a principle established in a particular tale or parable" (Courlander, p.85). Sometimes a proverb could come before a tale; Okpewho (1992) calls it a "proverbial prelude" (p.234). It is a common practice where the narrator is an elderly person. When this occurs, the artist merely uses the proverb to trace the tale and to stimulate the interest of the audience. Other times, it is the tale that crystallises into a proverb at the end of the narrative performance. Some of the folktales selected for this work contain such proverbs. The tale "The Hunter and The Talking Leopard" selected from the Bakongo of the Democratic Republic of Congo is an example:

> The leopard spoke then. He said, "It is my stupidity that brought me here. You, it is your cleverness that brought you here. One of us was too foolish. The other was too clever. We end up in the same place.
> So, it is said: "Too foolish and too clever, they are brothers (Courlander, 1962)

The tale is about a hunter who, in the course of looking for a game in the bush, stumbles on a talking leopard. Out of excitement and pride, he tells the leopard that it is its stupidity that got it into his trap only for the leopard to talk back. He then runs home to fetch people to show that he has achieved novelty in hunting. To convince the people from his village to follow him to the spot where the talking leopard is, he swears on oath to live forever in the forest never to return to the village if they find out that his claim is false only to get to the spot and the leopard refuses to talk. The above excerpt takes place only after the people leave him behind with the leopard. So, the proverbs, "too foolish and too clever, they are brothers" which

ends the tale reinforces the moral of the tale, that one should discipline his ego, for it is the hunter's mad desire to impress the people to be venerated as a great hunter that brings him disgrace and shame.

Another example is the one that ends the Ijapa tale in "The Ijapa and the Hot-water Test" in which Ijapa tricks everyone including the king and gets away with his crime, "When Ijapa accuses the whole community, He himself must have something to hide" (Courlander, 1973, p. 95). This proverb is a good example of those forms of proverbs in which the moral and content of folktales are buried such that to explain the proverb, the folktale has to be performed to gain full knowledge of the meaning of the proverb. Proverbs planted in folktales such as this are helpful in that they help children retain the tales in which they appear and are useful tools for language acquisition and moral suasion.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is another name for exaggeration and it is a rhetorical device used by oral artists and writers to create humour and to place emphasis on something. Hyperbole or exaggeration is an overstatement or the act of blowing issues, ideas, events or situations out of proportion and are not meant to be taken literally. Exaggeration can be brief or long. Brief exaggerations are sometimes enhanced with some other literary device like similes or metaphors to create humour. Some other humorous tales thrive on prolonged exaggeration. Bergson notes the humorous potentials of prolonged hyperbole:

> Exaggeration is always comic when prolonged, and especially when systematic; then indeed, it appears as one method of transposition. It excites so much laughter that some writers have been led to define the comic as exaggeration, just as others have defined it as degradation. As a matter of fact, exaggeration, like degradation, is only one form of one kind of comic (p.39b).

When utilised by a gifted performer or writer, hyperbole is a great tool for creating strong emotions like humour, amusement, fear, anger or suspense. Exaggeration is the basic element in farcical drama; it is sometimes used to create humour around events or situations that are in themselves ordinary. However, it is noteworthy to state that not all hyperboles are humorous and contrary to Bergson's view that many prolonged exaggerations are humorous, prolonged exaggerations do not always guarantee humour.

In folktales performed before a live audience, hyperbole performs the same function. This is evident during one of the folktales collected from Ipe-Akoko. The folktale embodies very amusing exaggeration:

Tegwa and the Big Fowl

Narrator: A tale is on its way
Audience: Let it come

> Long ago in a certain town, at a time when people had no means of transportation other than their legs for trekking to distant places, a certain man, a very tall man, had a rare privilege to travel in a truck. In those days, there were not as many cars as we have today. Even in the big cities, cars were a rarity. Lorries were what almost everyone used to travel even in the cities. In

> the villages, even the lorries were a rarity. This certain man had the privilege to go to Lagos from the money contributed by the whole of that community. He was so chosen because he was regarded as the smartest, the most enlightened, outspoken and well-travelled. This is because he knew all the neighbouring towns because he was a trader who took his goods to these towns on their market days by foot of course and as such happened to be the most travelled and could talk. He was more travelled than even the king. Lagos itself during this town was not as it is now. It was more like a civilised village.
>
> There was to be an installation of a new king and he was saddled with the responsibility of getting some fine royal paraphernalia for the new king when his coronation was at hand. In those days, one had to travel to about four towns before he could board the truck which only passed that way only once a week. This was the first time a son of the soil would be travelling in a truck. The whole community had not seen the truck not to talk of riding in it. All they knew about the truck were stories of its glorious body and speed. So, this man travelled and after over a week he came back with the items required.
>
> A day after he arrived with the required items, people trouped to his house to hear stories of the truck, Lagos and the people he met on his journey. So, he became the centre of attention for the whole community. Two of his very close friends also visited him and met many people seated in the house. They were glad to see him and he was glad to see them also. He told them many stories about the truck, Lagos and the people he met. Tegwa was his name. Then he told them something which they found very hard to believe:
>
> "I saw a wonderful thing over there," he said.
>
> "What is it?" asked one of his friends.
>
> "I saw a fowl that is as big as this," he demonstrates the size of the fowl by putting his palm far above his head. His friends and many of the people present shouted.
>
> "Haba haba, Tegwa, how can?" One of the people lamented.
>
> "Alright, it is like this," he brought the hand down a little.
>
> "Haba, haba Tegwa, nobody will believe you," one of his friends said.
>
> "Ok, it is like this," Tegwa further brought down the hand again.
>
> "Tegwa, be sincere," said another person.
>
> "I think it is like this," he brought down his hand again.
>
> And on and on Tegwa went lowering his hand until he got angry and said that whoever doubted him should go to Lagos.

Tegwa's exaggeration of the fowl's size is as comical as his subsequent renouncement of the outrageous size. Tegwa, it is said, is a very tall person and for him to claim that the fowl is taller than himself is a clear statement of exaggeration with humorous effects. He does not attach any importance to honesty and because no one followed him on the trip, he feels that he has the monopoly to make any claim without fear of contradictions. The humour is further intensified by the comic way he is forced to renounce his claim by the people. His eventual outburst shows his frustration at having to revoke his words is also very amusing.

Irony

Like hyperbole, irony is mostly deployed for emphasis and comic effects. Irony is a rhetorical device in which one says the opposite of what is intended. Fowler (1926) defines it as "a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear & shall not understand, & another

party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more & of the outsiders' incomprehension." (Fowler, 1926, p.23). Bergson presents a definition of irony, "sometimes we state what out to be done, and pretend to believe that this is just what is being done; then we have IRONY" (p.40a). Bergson views irony beyond the verbal, his definition includes situational irony. For the benefit of this work, Bergson's definition seems to be the most suitable because most times when ironies occur in folktales, they go beyond the verbal.

It will help if a few of them are reviewed here to gain full insight into the issue at hand. In the tale "The Tortoise and The Monitor," for instance, the encounter between the tortoise and the monitor in which the tortoise claims the monitor's tail as a sword is an example of comic irony:

> The tortoise, seeing the Monitor's tail exposed, put out his hand and seized it, saying "I have found *mbonimboni*" (*mboni* is something found and considered lawful spoil).
> The monitor said, "You have got hold of my tail, my friend, let me alone."
> The tortoise said, "I did not touch your tail, I have found spoil, a beautiful sword."
> The monitor besought him, "My friend this is my tail, you cannot claim it as spoil."
> The tortoise said to him, "Let us go to the elders." They set out and arrived.
> The monitor said, "I was running away from a fire and I entered a small hole, but my tail was outside; this person came along and said 'It is a sword,' I said 'It is my tail,' but he would not listen. (Woodward, 1925).

What is the semblance between a sword and a tail? The significance of the irony in this excerpt is to draw attention to an earlier injustice suffered by the tortoise in the hands of the monitor. In order words, while the tortoise seizes the irony as a veritable tool to articulate the pains he endured as the result of the monitor's initial insensitivity, the monitor views the tortoise's behaviour as lacking clarity of thought which is what gives birth to the humour enjoyed in the encounter. When the monitor gets to understand the equation, it is too late. There is a similar situation in the tale selected from the Tsonga ethnic group in Southern Mozambique titled "The Lion and the Rabbit":

> **The Lion and the Rabbit**
> One day, the lion ordered all the forest animals not to eat mangoes on his farm. He was the only one who had permission to eat the mangoes because he was the king. The rabbit was very upset with what the lion said. He decided to get revenge. He went near the fence of the king's house and shouted,
> "Help, help, help…"
> Suddenly the guards appeared and asked,
> "What are you doing here? You are disturbing the king's sleep." The rabbit answered,
> "I have bad news for the king if he will hear me."
> The guards began to laugh, and then they said,
> "It is obvious that he won't want to hear what you have to say, and he will not want to see you here either."
> The rabbit insisted one more time,

> "If you don't want to call him, you had better tie me in this tree, please, because a dangerous storm is coming and it will destroy us all."
> After the guards heard what the rabbit had said, they ran to tell the lion. The lion quickly came and asked,
> "Is it true what you said?"
> The rabbit answered,
> "If it is not true, I swear, you can take out my eyes and cut out my tongue."
> The lion easily believed what the rabbit said, so he told the rabbit to tie him first in one of the trees. Then he was to tie his guards too.
> The rabbit heard what the king said and he tied all of them. While he was tying the last guard, he pretended to be worrying about who could tie him, so he said,
> "Who will tie me? Who will tie me?"
> "Be quiet, close your mouth, don't say anything!" answered the guards.
> After all of them had been tied up, he went off to the mango tree and he ate mangoes as much as he wanted. Then he put more mangoes in a bag and went away singing,
> "You are really silly, you are a donkey, and what am I? I am so clever…!"
> After a time, the lion realized that the rabbit was lying because he only wanted to eat the mangoes. And he decided to take revenge on the rabbit as well. But he has never got the rabbit again until now! (Schechter, 2014)

Like the case of the monitor and tortoise, the encounter between the lion and Rabbit contains both verbal and situational ironies. Like the Tortoise, Rabbit's action is motivated by vengeance and the desire to get at the mangoes reserved for the king alone; he works on the weaknesses of a lion who is known to be very selfish, greedy and pliable. Thus, Rabbit's trick brings about a successful reversal of roles with a touch of humour; one cannot help laughing at the king who with his cronies, ends up being tied up while Rabbit takes over the forbidden mangoes.

The tale selected from Chad Republic titled "Gizo's Counting Trick" presents another irony. After wreaking havoc on the crocodile island by eating up the eggs kept in the room where he is accommodated, Gizo makes a tactical retreat from the island before his sin is discovered:

> Then Gizo was escorted to the river and put into a bongo. An old grandfather crocodile paddled for him. When they were in midstream, one of the crocodiles, who was smarter than the rest, said, "Let us go look at the eggs."
> They did and saw only one was left. They scrambled over one another in their haste to get back to the river. They called, "Bring the stranger back! Bring the stranger back!"
> The old crocodile who was paddling could not hear very well. He asked, "Eh, what do they say?"
> Gizo said, "They say, 'Hurry with the stranger. Hurry with the stranger!" So, the old crocodile paddled faster and faster. And soon he had Gizo safely to the other side (Aardema, 1969).

This is a case of both verbal and situational irony. Gizo can escape due to the hearing impairment of the old crocodile. Thus, the implication of the impairment of the grandfather crocodile for the rest of his kin accounts for the humour enjoyed in the tale. Instead of apprehending Gizo, he helps him to escape, a situation which

tends to justify Bergson's position that "certain deformities undoubtedly possess over others the sorry privilege of causing some persons to laugh" (p.9b). It is humorous because the audience knows that the grandfather crocodile will be sorry when he gets back to the island to discover the implications of his action.

Similarly, the South African tale titled "The Lion and Jack" illustrates a comic irony. Unlike the situation which pushed Rabbit to trick the lion in the Mozambican tale, in this tale, Jackal plays on the intelligence of the lion to undermine his powers:

> "Yes, Uncle Lion, I will let down a rope and then you can climb up."
> Jackal whispered to his wife, "Give me one of the old, thin hide ropes." And then aloud he added, "Wife, give me one of the strong, buffalo ropes, so Uncle Lion won't fall."
> His wife gave him an old rotten rope. Jackal and his wife first ate ravenously of the meat, then gradually let the rope down. Lion seized it and struggled up. When he neared the brink, Jackal gave the rope a jerk. It broke and down Lion began to roll-rolled the whole way down, and finally lay at the foot near the river.
> Jackal began to beat a dry hide that lay there as he howled, cried and shouted: "Wife, why did you give me such a bad rope that caused Uncle Lion to fall?"
> Lion heard the row and roared, "Jackal, stop beating your wife. I will hurt you if don't cease. Help me to climb up." (Honey, 1910, p. 17)

Jackal's act is plain mischief designed to achieve nothing except to humiliate and degrade the lion. It is a case of dramatic irony; the plight of the lion is very clear to the audience who find it humorous because the lion ignorantly cares about the person who causes him pain. The lion's threat has a comic effect because he is more in danger than the person he is threatening. Had he known that he was the one suffering, he would behave differently. But being the bully that he is, he still thinks that he has the power that has been taken away from him. Ironically, he could say that he would hurt Jackal if he did not stop beating his wife when the wife is also responsible for the pain that he is going through. The plot only becomes clear to the lion when Jackal and his wife walk away.

Another excerpt taken from a tale selected from Gabon presents an interesting case of another type of irony. This time, Leopard plays the dupe while Rat is the trickster. It is a case of dramatic irony. The Leopard has been friends with Rat and each time Rat visits Leopard, the latter always pours out his mind to Rat about the animals that he intends to hunt the following day without knowing that after their discussions Rat always goes back to the animals to reveal his plans which then makes hunting a futile exercise for leopard. When the situation becomes unbearable, Leopard decides to visit a native doctor who reveals the situation to him. He then cooks up a strategy with the support of his wife to capture Rat. Leopard sets a trap for Rat by pretending to be dead:

> Rat, having his caution, had not sat on the chair, but stood off, as he wailed, "Ah! Njega is dead! Ah! My friend is dead!"
> Rat called out, "Wife of Njega! Njega, he was a great person: but did he not tell you any sign by which it might be known, according to custom, that he was really dead?" She replied, "No, he did not tell me." Rat went on to speak, "You, Njega, when you were living and we were friends, you told me in confidence, saying, 'When I, Njega, shall die, I will lift my arm upward, and

> you will know that I am really dead.' But, let us cease the wailing and stop crying. I will try the test on Njega, whether he is dead! Lift your arm!" Leopard lifted his arm. Rat, in his heart, laughed, "Ah! Njega is not dead!" But, he proceeded, "Njega! Njega! You said if really dead, you would shake your body. Shake! If it is so!" Leopard shook his whole body. Rat said openly, "Ah! Njega is dead indeed! He shook his body!" The wife said, "But, as you say he is dead, here is the chair for you, as a chief friend, to sit on by him." Rat said, "Yes: wait for me; I will go off a little while, and will come." Leopard, lying on the ground, and hearing this, knew in his heart, "Ah! Ntori wants to flee from me! I will wait no longer!" Up he jumps to seize Rat, who, being too quick for him, fled away. Leopard pursued him with leaps and jumps so rapidly that he almost caught him. (Nassau, 1970)

The tale portrays Rat as a sagacious, cautious and swift creature that can sense danger very fast. After all the efforts put into the drama meant to trap Rat, he can see through Leopard's trick. Here, the foolishness of Leopard is a serious source of humour, whoever heard of the deadlifting the arm or shaking any part of the body. Ironically, Leopard who sets out to catch Rat by trick ends up being tricked by Rat.

Allusion

Allusion is a rhetorical device that forms the componential element of the language of African oral narratives. It is a brief and indirect reference to something or someone linking them to an external context. Literary allusion is a little different. Abrams defines literary allusion as "a brief reference, explicit or indirect, to a person, place or event, or another literary work or passage" (1957, p.34). Allusion is generally regarded as a passing comment requiring no details, it is its referent that provides the meaning or reveals the meaning.

Allusion is a valuable tool for generating humour in folktales. Okpewho observes that allusions "come frequently in the form of compressed metaphors" (p.100). As compressed metaphors, an allusion is only effective when the members of the audience can discern what is intended. If the intended meaning is not clear or is incomprehensible to the audience, the allusion becomes meaningless. The story of a father-in-law and his son-in-law taken from the Kimbundu people in Angola is a perfect example of the humorous potential of an effective allusion:

> One day at night, a father-in-law and his son-in-law were outside spending the evening. The darkness grew great and the father-in-law stood up whence he sat, saying; "My son-in-law, let us go to sleep! There is darkness like the gloom of a blind eye." His son-in-law then remained with shame, for he was dead of one eye; but he kept quiet.
>
> One night, when moonshine had come, they were again gossiping outside, both the father-in-law and son-in-law. The son-in-law then tells his father-in-law, "O sir, let us go to sleep; for this is a moonlight of bald-head shine! That will do us harm outside, where we are."
>
> The father-in-law then goes into his house. He will no longer wish goodbye nicely to his son-in-law. His son-in-law also then goes away into his house. (Chatelain, 1894)

Many times, allusions are deployed for negative purposes as exemplified by this excerpt. This humorous scenario presents a case of mutual insults traded in

allusions. It is interesting because the father-in-law draws his insult from nature just as the son-in-law retaliates in the same manner.

Paralinguistic devices

Paralinguistic features are non-verbal means of communication that enhance verbal communication. They include tone, gestures, facial expression and expressive movement. They enhance dialogue during the oral performance of folktales because many oral artists rely on them to help emphasise or project their narratives. Under this subtitle, the ones that bear direct significance to oral performance shall be discussed.

Tonality

Experiences in fieldwork show that tonality is an essential aspect of the language of African folktales "because the text of African oral literature is performed by the human voice, it benefits greatly from the flexibility of the voice, which is not easily represented on the printed page" (Okpewho, 1992, p.88). Thus, part of what makes a good oral artist is the ability to manipulate vocal sounds to achieve graphic descriptions that give vivacity to their narratives thereby retaining the attention of the audience. The experience of Smith (1940) with a great oral artist in Morocco underscores the significance of tonality in the character creation and delineation in oral narratives:

> The finest raconteur I ever heard of in Africa or beyond was my old friend, Mungalo. With him there was no lip-mumbling; ...the tones of his voice varied in an inimitable manner. When he told a beast-tale each animal spoke in its own voice; the deep rumbling of Momba, the ground Hornbill, for example, contrasted vividly with the piping accents of Sulwe, the hare (p.65).

A gifted raconteur like the one identified by Smith (2005) uses tonal patterns to achieve aesthetic and comic effects during oral performances as well. During the recordings of some of the tales collected from Ipe-Akoko at the home of Pa James Jogba, the few children who constituted the audience found the tonal patterns of Pa James Jogba amusing while narrating the tale "The Argument between Soldier Ant and Harvester Ant" such that many of them laughed all through the performance. Pa James Jogba adopted tonal differentiation and gestures to define each of the characters. A narrator requires more than just knowing the plot of the story, if he or she is to be a great raconteur, there is the need to acquire other narrative resources which enliven oral performance. Akporobaro (2012) gives more details:

> A good storyteller has his focus not on the moral theme of the folktale but on its aesthetics, its entertainment qualities. He must exploit the resources of language, song, body language and even mime to entice, enthral, and thrill the audience. Narration must be presented so as to generate stisperse, create laughter, solicit shouts, surprise and evoke pity, suspense, and interest (p.141).

Any oral performance in which tonal patterns are taken for granted becomes a mere recitation that is sure to lull the audience to sleep. Tonal patterns are essential for folktales' foundation and structure.

Gestures

Gestures are elements of non-verbal communication which reinforce meanings conveyed through speech. Like the study of humour in the Western world, gesture is a serious area of scholarly research in Europe and America. There is a journal known as *Gesture* dedicated to research on gestures founded in 2001 by Adam Kendon and Cornelia Muller.

Gestures are very essential art of storytelling because the artist is not just a raconteur but an actor as well. Gestures spice up dialogue. Bergson identifies gesture as an element of humour. He observes that "by gestures, we here mean the attitudes, the movements [...] by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching." (p.45). Most folktales are full of dialogues involving many characters and the performer is expected to put life into the narrative performance by acting out the role of each of the characters involved in the tale. To achieve this, the artist relies on non-verbal communication features like tone, gestures, and facial expression to enhance his speech and

> Where dialogue is not furnished, it requires that the storyteller depend on the reader's life experience to supply the speech that amplifies the intercourse between the actors. In depicting a silent sequence of interaction, the comic teller must be sure to employ gestures and postures easily identifiable with the dialogue being played out in a reader's mind (Eisner, 1996, p. 57)

Gestures are essential because they enhance eloquence; they remain in the audience's mind long after words are forgotten.

Some gestures in themselves have humorous potential especially for the members of the audience made up of children. While illustrating the mood of the harvester ant after he lost the opportunity to eat the crumbs that fall from the man-eating bean cake, Pa James Jogba's gestures evoked laughter from the children in the audience because the gestures adopted him seemed stridently awkward but aptly captured the mood of the disappointed harvester ant. Thus, Bergson's summation, "As soon as our attention is fixed on gesture and not on action, we are in the realm of comedy" (p.45a) is justified.

Facial expression

The significance of facial expressions as a means of non-verbal communication cannot be overemphasised. Facial expression is another form of non-verbal communication which involves strong emotions being relayed by constricting the muscles of the face. It is a useful tool for actors and oral artists. The emotional states of the mind are conveyed through facial expressions. Today, there exist over a million electronically created facial expressions known as emojis used in electronic messages.

The oral artist brings extraordinary vivacity and humour into his performances many times through facial expressions which are lost in the printed texts. During the recording of the oral performance at the home of Madam Esther Obaile, the audience's attention was occasionally captured and retained through her dexterous use of facial expressions as they looked at her face. She arrested their attention and interest by creating emotions such as fear, happiness and anger by manipulating her

facial muscles in meticulous ways that kept them waiting for more. They found many of the facial expressions humorous. This is evident from their thunderous laughter at regular intervals.

Conclusion

Folktales are powerful tools through which the viability of African linguistic heritage could be upheld. In other words, they act as a means of galvanising and lubricating African languages and other verbal components whenever they seem to be inadequate. According to Babalola and Onanuga (2012), folktales are reservoirs of cultural elements which can play a great role in the nourishment of African languages (p. 160). African literature has been enriched by folktales and other oral narratives. The works of D. O. Fagunwa, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Okot p'Bitek (1978), Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Niyi Osundare and a host of others are living testimonies. Most of these writers carried out their literary productions in the English language which they beautifully garnished with folktales, proverbs, legends or epics, a situation that has revitalised the English Language.

Lindfors's (2002) remark about Achebe's ability "to utilise folktales as relevant social commentary in symbolic form" (2002, p. 102) symbolises how folktales have enriched the English language. It is the same with other African writers who wrote in French and Portuguese languages. This fact informed the arguments of some African writers at the Kampala conference in Makerere University in 1962 where they gathered to determine what constitutes African literature and that the continual production of literary works in these foreign languages enriches them at the expense of African languages.

References

Aardema, V. (1969). *Tales for the third ear from equatorial Africa*. New York: E. P Dutton & Co. Inc.

Abrams, M. H. (1957). *A glossary of literary terms*. New York: Rinehart.

Akporobaro, F.B.O. (2012). *Introduction to African oral literature*. Lagos: Princeton Publishing Co.

Babalola, E.T., & Onanuga, P.A. (2012). Atrophization of minority languages: Indigenous folktales to the rescue. *International Journal of Linguistics, 4*(1), 158-173.

Baissac, C. (1888). *Le folk-lore de l'Ile-Maurice*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Ch. Leclerc.

Ball, J. (1954). Style in the folktale. *Folklore, 65*(3/4), 170-172.

Bergson, H. (1923). *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*. London: Public Domain Books.

Buhler, K. (1934). *Sprachtheorie: Die darstellungsfunktion der sprache*. Germany: UTB Stuttgart.

Chatelain, H. (1894). A father-in-law and his son-in-law. In H. Chatelain (Ed.), *Folk-tales of Angola: Fifty tales, with Ki-Mbundu text, literal English translation, introduction, and notes: Vol.1 of American Folklore Society memoirs* (pp.239-242). New York: G. E. Stechert and Co.

Courlander, H. (1962). *The king's drum and other African stories*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.

Courlander, H. (1973). *Tales of Yoruba gods and heroes*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc.

Courlander, H., & Leslau, E. (1950). *Fire on the mountain and other Ethiopian stories*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Doke, C.M. (1935). *Bantu linguistic terminology*. London: Oxford University Press.

Eisner, W. (1996). *Graphic storytelling*. Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press.

Finnegan, R. (1970). *Oral literature in Africa*. Nairobi: Oxford University Press.

Fowler, H. W. (1926). *A dictionary of modern English usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Honey, J. A. (1910). *South African folktales*. New York: Baker and Taylor Company.

Kunene, D.P. (1965). The ideophone in southern Sutho. *Journal of African Languages, 4*, 19-39.

Lindfors, B. (2002). *Folklore in Nigerian literature*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications Limited.

Mphande, L. (1992). Ideophones and African verse. *Research in African Literatures, 23*(1), 117-129.

Mvula, E. (1982). Chewa folk narrative performance. *Kalulu, 3*, 32-45.

Nassau, R.H. (1970). *Where animals talk*: *West African folklore tales*. New York: Negro Universities Press.

Nwachukwu-Agbada, J. (1991). The Igbo folktale: Performance and internal characteristics. *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 20*(2), 33-48. https://doi.org/10.5070/F7202016765

Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature: Background, character, and continuity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Patrick, C. A. (2022). Linguistic revitalisation and the drama in African indigenous languages. *UC Journal: ELT, Linguistics and Literature Journal, 3*(2), 156 - 172. https://doi.org/10.24071/uc.v3i2.5469

p'Bitek, O. (1978). *Hare and hornbill*. Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

Postma, M. (1974). *Tales from the Basotho*. Texas: University of Texas in Austin.

Schechter, I. (ed.) (2014). *Old stories by Mozambican writers*. Mozambican Writers.

Smith, A. (2005). Blues, criticism, and the signifying trickster. *Popular Music, 24*(2), 179-191.

Smith, E. (1940). The function of folk-tales. *Journal of the Royal African Society, 39*(154), 64-83.

Surjowati, R. (2019). Figurative languages found in folktales translated by native and non-native writers. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 338*, 414 – 418.

Thompson, S. (1946). *The folktale*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Woodward, H. W. (1925). Bondei folktales I. *Folklore, 36*(2), 178-185.