



Review

The imperatives of Tiv oral poetry and its influence on oral language development among Tiv children

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There has been an appalling use of Tiv language among some of its younger generation of speakers and writers, as evidenced in their attempts to use the language on social networks and other media. This development could be attributed to the absence of the oral culture, where families no longer spend quality time in telling moonlight stories, which has been overtaken by other forms of relaxation. The position of this paper was to highlight the Tiv oral poetry and the benefits that accrue to children who are exposed to very rich oral language backgrounds in their mother tongue and in learning a second language. Towards reviving the oral culture, it was recommended that debates should be organized on topical issues in Tiv language, screen plays should be made out of popular Tiv folktales. An annual folktale competition for families and individuals should also be considered as a way of rekindling interest in the oral culture.

Key words: Tiv Language, oral culture/poetry and oral language development.

INTRODUCTION

Before the era globalization, when the Nigerian home videos had not infiltrated the society, evenings were spent with family members taking turns at story telling until children all fell asleep and retired for the night. These stories, songs and choral renditions, not only entertained the children, but contributed to developing their verbal language, widely recognized as a foundation of reading skill acquisition. The family as a socialization agent was a means of initiating its younger members into its speech community through the perpetuation of its oral culture. This was variously done through performances in everyday activities of the Tiv people, which ranged from descriptive abusive terms, proverbs/riddles, storytelling and songs (religious and secular). These oral/verbal renditions contributed immensely in shaping the

worldview of the Tiv children as well as contributing to their development of oral language, an important skill in reading readiness.

This paper identifies seemingly, diminishing Tiv oral culture as the missing link in the oral language development of Tiv children, hence, their lack of proficiency in Tiv language, like other mother tongues (MTs), lays a solid foundation for learning a second language (L2). In this case, English language which Tiv learners must contend with in the course of their eventual educational advancement and for global competitiveness. To reverse this trend, it is advocated here that debates on topical issues in Tiv language should be organized for primary and secondary school students. Screenplays should be made out of popular Tiv folk tales and Tiv folk

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tale competition should be organized annually for families and individuals. This will be to encourage and instil the oral culture among the younger generation of Tiv language learners, for the gains that could be ostensibly made from perpetuating a verbal culture among them.

Theoretical Framework

The point of view of this paper hinges on the social constructivist theory which holds that culture and context are important in understanding what goes on in the society and in constructing knowledge based on this understanding. This theory was propounded by Jerome Bruner in 1996 based on his constructivist theoretical framework of 1960 to encompass the social and cultural aspects of learning, focusing on the process of learning and on individuals working together within the learning environment (Bruner, 1960 & Bruner, 1996).

Culture defines people and language as the vehicle that transmits culture. Children who are well grounded in the oral aspects of their culture will use their culture as a spring board to interpret and understand other cultures irrespective of their heterogeneity. Tiv children who have mastered Tiv poetry to learn and master the poetry of other lands, be it Caribbean, African, English and American poetry as they appear on the senior secondary school syllabus, thus, underscoring the imperative of the oral culture of the Tiv in the oral language development of their children.

Oral/Verbal Language Development

Oral or verbal language is believed to be the ability to acquire sufficient spoken language by children for adequate and accurate self expression. It is an important aspect of reading (Harris & Smith, 1980) and as well extends children's language background. A child who does not acquire sufficient oral language finds it difficult to speak and to read (Okwudire, 2003). Tiv oral poetry provides a rich repertoire of activities and experiences that are essential to providing children with the requisite knowledge of their culture and oral skills. It is therefore imperative for Tiv children to be adequately given the necessary exposure to environments that are potential sources of oral/verbal language acquisition.

Tiv and their Oral culture/Poetry

The term Tiv variously refer to the ethnic group or race found in Benue State, Central Nigeria and also to the language spoken by these people. According to Udu (2009), Tiv is a splinter group of the Bantu and belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, further classified as Benue-Congo language. Until the advent of the Christian missionaries who brought western education as a means of evangelization among the heathens, the Tiv people maintained an absolute oral culture. Their genres of oral literature had no form of documentation, they depended solely on their verbal/cognitive ability to keep their poetry (songs, poems, folklore, incantations etc) in memory to be recalled and put to appropriate use when there was need for it. Hagher (1981) has underscored the relationship

between speech art and doing art and has stretched the meaning to cover all doing arts before an audience and has called it Tiv oral poetry.

Oral poetry is poetry that is composed and transmitted without the aid of writing and is sometimes considered to include any poetry which is performed live (Wikipedia, 2009). Similarly, Hansen (1972) has contended that, "oral poems reflect extensive narrative patterning, obvious or subtle, on almost every order of magnitude from main story patterns down to brief themes." Tiv poetry had assumed this form until the post missionary era of Tiv written literature when Tiv scholars became at liberty to delve into divergent themes to express literary ideas that bothered on the Tiv world view. Even then, most of the Tiv literature is still traditional, not much of it has been documented. Ker (2002) considered and classified the following as Tiv oral poetry;

Performance in Everyday Life

This involves the eruption and resolution of crisis among the Tiv people and their kin, other Tiv people and foreigners. Descriptive abusive terms were used by the Tiv people on those they had issues with, whose language required craftily woven derogatory language to lampoon, disgrace or shame them. It involved commenting on their body parts or other striking features that brought ridicule to them. Examples of these abuses are as follows;

□ *Ahenga er or tume ave shin inya ndor;*

Meaning: Your nose is like a man's fingers in soft mud. This abuse refers to a man who has very wide nostrils.

□ *Wanikor er u ngu yengen agbe*

Meaning: The back of your head is like a man looking up the tree for for branches to make hoe-handles.

The image of the pointed head as one gazes upward into a tree seems obvious.

These personal abuses offered poetic apprenticeship to onlookers, especially children, who are bound to use such on their play mates, peers and siblings. Nowadays, these abuses will now be considered unchristian but are still the practice on streets, motor parks and market places.

Riddles also provide avenues for apprenticeship in Tiv poetry in daily life. Expertise in riddles is acquired through observation of nature and natural phenomenon as metaphor for peoples' actions or even other objects. In a riddle competition, children as well as adults participate either among themselves or with adults. A riddle (query) is given and a participant gives the reply to the hearing of the entire gathering. For example;

□ Riddle: *Wantor tem ichegher kper nan or kera nenge a apusu ga.*

Answer: *Asan*

Meaning: The princess breaks or peels melon and the following day, no one sees the melon peels.

Answer: Stars.

□ Riddle: *Ankon mende ken toho gba mule ken gbenda.*

Answer: *Ambi.*

Meaning: A tree grows in the bush and casts its shed by the road side.

Answer: *Faeces.*

Proverbs

Proverbs were used by adults or elders in conversation to prevent young listeners from understanding what they were talking about (Bergsma as cited by Hagher, 1981). Other reasons advanced for the use of proverbs were as opening glee during story telling performances in order to create a rapport between the audience and the actors. They were also used to elicit situational response and for dialectical arguments. For example,

□ Proverb: *Ihyo yough ese kpa m loho u sunda u wua ga.*

Translated: Although your knife is very sharp, I didn't invite you to help me cut my corn.

Meaning: You are not part of this conversation, no matter how brilliant your ideas are.

□ Proverb: *Inyom ka i a vihi u yo kwa mondo kpa u ese u.*

Translated: when the year is your bad year, even a cocoyam leaf can give you a deep cut.

Meaning: When things don't go well with you, even things that should be of no consequence become issues for you.

□ Proverb: *Ambe ye ishu dzwagh ga.*

Translate: The crocodile does not eat fish that hole up with it.

Meaning: One should not commit anti-social acts within one's immediate inner circle.

Songs

These include ballads, religious songs, songs in accompaniment to dances and the popular Tiv puppet theatre. Tiv songs are divided into songs of protest, educational songs, songs of social criticism, religious and praise singing songs. The songs all bother on individual experiences of the composers who may sing the song to themselves and to those around them. Sometimes, the songs serve to complement story telling events, others for praise singing or to abuse and criticize other individuals and evil forces. They or may not be accompanied with music (Hagher, 1981). Here is an example of few popular Tiv songs;

1. Tiv Highlife Song

Abakpa wam tondo ve o

Hi kpang.

Abakpa wam tondo ve o

Hi kpang.

Kwase ka abakpa o tondo amo hen gbenda ve o

Hi kpang.

English Translation

My slippers is cut

Hi kpang. (ideophonic for a cut slippers)

My slippers is cut

Hi kpang.

A woman is like a slippers which cuts on the road

Hi kpang.

This song expresses the suddenness with which men are disappointed by women who promised them love but suddenly abandon them and run away to other men. It is a song that comments on the attitude of women who end their relationship with men probably on account of the size of their pockets or socio-economic status.

2. Songs of Enmity

Kwagh wam a doo or shima ga

Puur mngerem ma kpe,

Kwagh wam adoo or shima ga

Yam waninyon kura ya,

Kwagh wam a doo or shima ga

Nyia kura ya cica,

Puur mngerem ma kpe.

English Translation

If anyone hates me

Drink boiling water and die,

If anyone hates me

He should buy and consume bird poison

If anyone hates me

Drink boiling water and die.

3. Marriage Song

(Solo) Too azembe wan sha aya oo

lor yevese oo,

Igyuve wan sha aya oo

lor kura ayeme.

(Chorus) Too azembe wan sha aya oo

lor yevese oo,

Igyuve wan sha aya oo

lor hembe ayeme.

English Translation

(Solo) Snatch a kite's chick from its nest

Run! people,

The eagle's eaglet from its nest

People! run.

(Chorus) Snatch a kite's chick from its nest

Run! People,

The eagle's eaglet from its nest

People break into a Run.

Elopement is a type of marriage that is rampant in Tivland, nowadays; it is popularly called 'anyam amough' (Lion arise). It is practiced by people who do not have a strong financial standing to conclude all marriage rights before the wife is rightfully given to them. Girls who keep many suitors may also fall victim to this type of marriage, an impatient contender may decide to elope with the girl for fear of being outdone by a fellow contender. This song expresses the metaphor of elopement and the snatching of the young of a kite and eagle from its nest.

4. Songs of Protest

M venda! m venda! m venda oo!

A lu Geri hen kwa ne yo mnyor ga,

A lu Geri hen kwa ne yo m venda oo.

English Translation

I reject! I reject! I reject oo!

If it is Geri this time, I reject,

If it is Geri this time, I reject.

In this political dispensation, songs such as these are used to verbally stage a protest and send a message to the political opponent that he or she does not stand a chance and stands rejected.

5. Songs in a story

Gyaang, tor a yaan a naan mo ga kpa

Man a lum ayaa her lee.

Gyaang, tor a yaan a naan mo ga kpa

Man a lum ayaa her lee.

Una kpe yo a kpe tso ga,

Una lu her yo man a er nyi?

English Translation

Gyaang, (ideophonic sound of crickets) the king's largesse was not extended to me

Even then, he would have been alive for me.

Gyaang, the king's largesse was not extended to me

Even then he would have been alive for me.

Let him die what could he have done if he were alive?

This is a song sung by 'cricket' a less favoured wife of the king who died and was mourned by the wife he had no love lost for. His favourite wife cared very little and found the dirge of 'cricket' disturbing to her ears. It sends a moral message as well, to love people equally.

6. Educational songs

Ahungwa ngu angahar a mee?

Ahungwa ngu angahar ahar aa.

Ahungwa ngu angahar a mee?

Ahungwa ngu angahar ahar aa.

Ahungwa ngu ave amee?

Ahungwa ngu ave anyiin.

Ahungwa ngu ave amee?

Ahungwa ngu ave anyiin.

English Translation

How many legs has a grasshopper?

Grasshopper has two legs.

How many legs has a grasshopper?

Grasshopper has two legs.

How many hands has a grasshopper?

Grasshopper has four hands.

How many hands has a grasshopper?

Grasshopper has four hands.

Ker (2002) cites a good number of Tiv educative poetry, the one above was considered because of its potential to teach children numeracy skills or the concept of numbers as well as introduce them to basic science.

The overall implication of the Tiv oral poetry cited above on the oral language development of Tiv children is that they are fundamental to their education and socialization process (Ker, 2002). They are immersed into the cultural system and language of their society using oral poetry of their land. This goes a long way to help them to encode and decode the poetry of other peoples and cultures when encounter them in later life.

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the role of Tiv oral poetry in

the provision of a rich verbal culture to children of Tiv extraction by making them highly proficient in the language of their birth. It has brought to the fore, the many folktales and songs for different occasions, riddles and proverbs that have the potential to offer and extend the language backgrounds of Tiv children if the recommendations given are adhered to.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Having examined the role that Tiv orature plays in the oral language development of Tiv children and the non existence of favourable environments for such experiences to thrive, the following recommendations have therefore been made;

Parents and guardians need to be enlightened at forums such as Mzough u Tiv and Mzoughu kasev Tiv on the need to re-awaken story telling in the home due to the attendant benefits that Tiv children will gain from them. They should give quality time in giving quality education to their children.

There is need to make screen plays and cartoons out of Tiv folktales to catch the fancy of Tiv children who are addicted to TV programmes such as Cartoon Network and Kidco etc. Annual competitions in Tiv folktales, riddles and proverbs should be organized for families and individuals. This should also include debates on topical issues that concern Tiv language and culture.

Tiv oral literature should be incorporated in the school curriculum due to its usefulness across the curriculum. It makes inputs not only in language learning and literature but in mathematics, basic science and other subjects as well.

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