

KIU Journal of Education (KJED)

Volume 1 Issue 1: Page 1-12

ISSN: 2790-4172

September-December 2021

<https://www.kjed.kiu.ac.ug>

Songs, Rhymes and Stories as Linguistic Tools for Language Development

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Abstract

From time immemorial, songs, rhymes, and stories have always been part of human society that portray many aspects of the cultural heritage of many people. Thus, they portend to be important devices in educational development, especially in terms of language acquisition. The linguistic features in these three genres of oral literature make it possible for language to be learnt in a very enjoyable, pedagogical and natural manner. This study was carried out to bring out the peculiar linguistic features in children's oral literature with the aim of describing how songs, rhymes, and stories aid language acquisition and learning. The data for the study are eight (8) songs, seven (7) rhymes, and two (2) stories randomly selected from some English reading materials. Linguistic Stylistic Model and Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar formed the bases for the analysis. The findings of the study show that composers of children songs, rhymes and stories strategically deploy language to enhance children's skills in spellings, pronunciations, identifications of words, and arrangement of words into meaningful sentences. The study concludes that songs, rhymes, and stories are useful tools to introduce children to a language and to make the acquisition and learning of such a language easy with fun, activity and motivation.

Key words: language development, stylistics, systemic functional grammar, oral literature

1. Introduction

Songs, rhymes and stories feature prominently in every human society. They portray many aspects of the cultural heritage of many people from ancient to modern times. Furthermore, they have immanent powers and occur in all phases of the life of individuals from birth to death (Geyer, 2001). Thus, songs, rhymes and stories play important roles in shaping the experiences of people, especially children.

By the way, a song is a set of words metrically composed and musically expressed, with or

without musical instrument accompaniment (Shaw, 1976). A rhyme, as defined by the Online Oxford Dictionary, is a composition that has or ends with a sound that corresponds to another, while a story is simply an account of an incidence or event that is either true or fictitious, in prose or verse and narrated for an intended purpose.

Songs, rhymes and stories have been widely used as a carrier of messages and cultures (Teng, 2013). This unique oral transmission has allowed them to become a heritage to be passed down from generation to generation (Opie, 2005). It was opined that one of the reasons why songs,

rhymes and stories have been prevalent through the ages might be the fact that they are made up of integration of melody and text which are accessible to both adults and children. Another reason must have been the rich language exposure and friendly learning environment that they create in the minds of learners (Teng, 2013, Bamigbola, 2017).

Songs, rhymes, and stories are three interrelated devices in children's literature that serve as both the avenue and the repertoire for learners to practice grammar, speaking, reading, and writing skills. When stories are immersed in songs and rhymes, learners might have the potential to use the rich resources provided by these literary genres and thus, develop the various modalities needed for communication (Mizener, 2008). Therefore, in children's literature, songs and rhymes greatly contribute to enhancing a young learner's language development and further form the basis for various language skills in later learning (Baleghizadeh & Dargahi, 2010).

Though it has been submitted that children are born with musical taste (Cakir, 1999) and that they enjoy playing with sounds (Richards, 1969), sociological factors or influences also have a role to play in children's love for songs, rhymes and stories. As young children grow to recognize the sounds produced in their environment and the beauty that lays therein, their taste for songs and stories become increased. When they cry, they want their parents/guardians to sing for them. When they are restive, they want to be sung a song, a rhyme or told a story that will lure them to sleep or calm down. When they are in the midst of their friends, they want to engage in language plays such as the recitation of poems and rhymes, singing of songs, and narration of stories. Underneath all these activities lie the power to acquire and learn language naturally, as "through chanting and singing of songs and rhymes, children are actually learning language within the joy of playing with sounds" (Teng, 2013).

According to Bruner (1984), "language is most daring and most interesting when it is learnt in a playful setting".

The benefits of songs, poems and stories to language acquisition must have informed its incorporation into the curriculum of the educational system of most nations of the world, especially for the teaching of languages in elementary schools. It has been observed that teaching language with songs and stories tends to exaggerate the characteristic features of the language (Cook, 2000); therefore, making young learners find it easy to be aware of, to perceive and even to command the manipulation of the linguistic features of such a language (Crystal, 1996).

Teaching language via songs, poems and stories then seem like inviting children to acquire language through oral literature (Cook, 2000). There is no denying the fact that songs, rhymes and stories have some elements of language that are deliberately used to call the attention of children to them. These language features are the beauty of songs, rhymes and stories themselves. They are the intriguing features that appeal to children and consequently negotiate their love for them. Bamigbola (2015) recommended a more pragmatic way of teaching English or any other language, as a second language. Unfortunately, not all users of children's songs and stories can identify these features; those who can, are either not being able to describe them in concrete linguistic terms, or cannot give a good reason for their deployment.

Some studies have been conducted on how songs and stories can be used as language teaching tools for young children. For instance, there are studies on the role of songs in language teaching in a classroom setting (Wu, 2001). There are also works on the role of songs and rhymes on learning attitude (Huang, 2007). A study was carried out on how songs and stories develop children's language proficiency (Lin, 2008), and

another on how songs help the phonemic awareness of children (Lee, 2006). However, none of these studies has focused on the linguistic characteristics of these literary genres with a view to bringing out the identifiable language tools or features embedded in them, and describing how they help children to acquire language in a natural and enjoyable manner. This study, therefore, attempts to fill this gap.

The aim of this study is to accurately and systematically analyse the content of songs, rhymes and stories with a view to bringing out the peculiar features that make them attractive to children and thus, make it easy for them to learn the language. Specifically, the study intends to examine the morpho-graphological, phonological, lexical features and syntactic choices in the selected songs, rhymes and stories, and their relevance and implications to language acquisition and learning.

2. Theoretical background

In their composition and recitation, songs, poems and stories appear as communication in written and oral forms respectively. The effectiveness of these forms of communication largely depends on the writing style, grammar, vocabulary, and clarity of expressions. Therefore, the theories that are relevant to this study are Stylistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics.

2.1 Linguistic stylistics

According to Leech and Short (1981:10), style refers to the way in which language is used in a given context by a given person for a given purpose. They also state that stylistics is the linguistic study of style. To them, styles deal with relating language with literature in which linguistic tools are used to describe and analyze the literary language of texts. Literary texts are examined in order to determine how appropriate the lexical choices are, how suitable the syntactic structure is, how meaning is effectively achieved

and how convenient the marriage of the form, the function, and the contents is, depending on the goal the analyst sets to achieve.

The major focus of linguistic stylistics is on the phonological peculiarities, the functional import, the lexical characteristics, the structural patterning, and the situational categories that combine to give the text being examined its shape on the one hand, and how the message and the medium relate without being totally exclusive of literary features, on the other hand. One advantage of linguistic stylistics for the study of literary texts is the opportunity it provides the reader to systemise his response to the various works of literature he has cause to study (Awonuga, 1988). Linguistic stylistics recognizes the two aspects of literature: the verbal and the artistic (Hassan, 1985). Thus, the major purpose of linguistic stylistics is the study of language as used in literary texts with the aim of relating it to its artistic function (Leech & Short, 1981).

2.2 Systemic functional linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language that centres on the notion of language function. It is an interface between choices of words and how they are structured and the meaning made by those words. The theory details the syntactic structure of language and emphasizes the function of language as the central theme. SFL considers how language acts upon social context and how it is constrained by it. It looks at how language is used in social contexts to achieve specific goals.

The SFL theory attempts to understand the manner by which language is utilized for various reasons and in various scenarios thus, serving as a communicative motivation in the learning of language. According to Halliday (1994), the language we use in different text types serves a number of functions simultaneously. These functions are experiential, interpersonal and textual functions. The words we choose and the

way we organise them within texts reflect these functions and help the text achieve its purpose (Humphrey et al, 2011).

3. Data analysis

The data used in this study are copies of songs, rhymes and stories rendered verbally to Primary One pupils of Faith Standard Nursery and Primary School, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. The data for the study are eight (8) songs, seven (7) rhymes, and two (2) stories randomly selected from some English reading materials (Read, 2007), all of which are listed below.

The linguistic Stylistic Model (Awonuga, 1988) and Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar formed the bases for the analysis. This study investigates the peculiar linguistic features of the selected children's songs, rhymes and stories to determine how they are stylistically suitable to aid the teaching of the English language to young learners. The analysis is based on the different levels of stylistic analysis such as morpho-graphology, phonology, lexis and syntax. The songs, rhymes and poems selected for the study are listed as follows:

Songs

1. Education
2. Baby
3. Johnbull my son
4. Mississippi
5. Good better best
6. Moon
7. Cat and rat
8. See

Rhymes

1. Peter Piper
2. Song of bird
3. Part of the body
4. Call and response
5. Old Rodger
6. Wish
7. Hard work

Stories

1. The Bakers 1
2. The Bakers 2

The numbering of the data in the analysis is according to how they appear in the above list and was carried out to reveal the peculiar stylistic devices used in the songs, rhymes and stories to make learning easy and very enjoyable for young learners, especially as the language of instruction is foreign. The analysis was also carried out in line with the four linguistic levels - morpho-graphological, phonological, lexical, and syntactic levels.

3.1 Morpho-graphological analysis

This section focuses on the analyses of the structure of words and segments of words, such as stems, root words, prefixes, suffixes. It also examines intonation, stress, and some other typographical nature of words in the data. In some children songs and rhymes, emphasis was placed on the morpho-typographical nature of the target language in a bid to expose young learners to the intonation, syllabic structure, and spellings of some words in the target language. Instances of this are presented in the data below.

Datum 1

E-du-CA-tion
E-du-CA-tion
Education is my pride
Silver is good
But they are not my pride
My pride is E-du-CA-tion
Education is my pride

Datum 2

When I was a baby, baby, baby
When I was a baby, my mother used to carry me
B-A-B-Y
Baby!!!

Datum 3

Johnbull, my son
 I'll send you to school
 You don't know how to spell your name 2x
 J-O-H-N-B-U-L-L that is how to spell your name
 Johnbull, my son
 I'll send you to school
 You don't know how to spell your name.

Datum 4

Mississippi 3x
 "M", "I",
 Double "S", "I"
 Double "S" "I"
 Double "P" "I"
 Mississippi
 That's the longest river in the world.

In the data presented above, some words were intentionally broken down into units to reveal their morphological and typographical structure to young learners of English language. In Datum 1 for instance, emphasis was placed on the syllabic structure, stress pattern and pronunciation of the word "education". By breaking it down the way it is presented above and also making it to be recited, children are being taught to identify the syllabic structure of the word, to stress the stressed syllable, and also to pronounce the word correctly.

In Data 2, 3 and 4, a pedagogical way was devised to develop and enhance children's spelling skills. In the data, children were made to learn spellings of the word "baby", "Johnbull", and "Mississippi" through songs and recitations. The lesson was passed to them by emphasising the letters that make up these words and making the children pronounce them. For instance in Datum 4, there is a peculiar deployment of the word "double", which indicates that a letter is to be spelt twice in succession. That will help the children to know that whenever they are to spell the word and they resolve to use the song as a spelling aid, they are to write the letters "S" and "P" in Mississippi twice. This technique helps the

young learners to be familiar with the morpho-graphological features of the target language and to master them easily.

3.2 Phonological analysis

In children's songs and rhymes, emphasis sometimes is placed on teaching the sound system in the target language. This is done to expose children to basic phonemes that make up the target language, teach them how they can be combined to make pronounceable and meaningful words, help them develop a tolerance for ambiguity, and also teach them to pronounce words the way they are pronounced in the target language. Instances of these are presented below:

Datum 5

Good, better, best
 I will never rest
 Until my good is better
 And my better
 Is best

Datum 6

I see the moon
 moon sees me
 God bless the moon
 God bless me

Datum 7

A cat, a rat
 A fat cat and rat
 A fat cat sat
 A fat rat sat
 Both sat on the mat

Datum 8

See, see, see
 I can see a zig-zag-zip
 Lying on a see saw seat
 If I have my way,
 I will seize the Zig-zag-zip

Datum 9

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper
 A peck of pickled pepper Peter Piper picked
 If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper
 where is the peck of pickled pepper Peter Piper
 picked?

In Data 5 to 9 above, songs and rhymes were codified in such a way that they exposed the children to rhymes, the realization of different phonemes, pronunciation of sounds, and realization of different allophones respectively. Data 5 and 6 were used to teach the children primary rhymes, to get them acquainted with the melodic flow of the English language sounds. Datum 7 teaches phonemes, which is the study of any of the perceptually distinct units of sound in a specified language that distinguishes one word from another. In Datum 7, it can be seen that the word “cat”, “rat”, “fat”, “sat”, “mat” are distinguishable on the basis of their phonemes /k/, /r/, /f/, /s/ and /m/ respectively.

This is important for children to know, so as to get them familiar with different distinct units of sounds in the English language. In Datum 8, the pronunciation of the sounds /s/ and /z/, was the primary aim of the composer of the poem. By giving different instances of the word where /s/ and /z/ can be realized, as illustrated in Datum 8, the composer has been able to devise a pedagogical way of teaching these sounds without children knowing the main aim of reciting the poem. Through the pronunciation of words such as “see”, “saw”, “seat”, “zigzag” and “zip”, children are taught to differentiate between the voiceless fricative alveolar /s/ and the voiced fricative alveolar /z/.

Datum 9 is tailored towards the teaching of allophones, which is the study of any of the various phonetic realizations of a phoneme in a

language, which do not contribute to distinctions of meaning. In Datum 9, we see instances of phoneme /p/ being realized in different allophones. For instance, while sound /p/ in words like “Peter”, “Picked” and “pickled” are aspirated, it is not aspirated in “peck” and “pepper”. These are allophones of the same phoneme /p/.

3.3 Lexical analysis

In children stories and poems, emphasis is usually placed on teaching children words they can easily identify and also pronounce. They are usually words of one or two syllables and the aim is usually to make the children know the names given to basic objects in the target language. Below are examples of songs and poems that could help to expose learners to the knowledge of lexis.

Datum 10

The song that the bird sings
 Is the song of the home
 When the goat bleats
 It is all about home
 The snail values its home
 And it carries it all about
 When I go East and West

North and South,
 I dream about my family
 My home, my family
 The one I am proud of
 My father, my mother
 My brothers, my sisters
 There is no one like you

Datum 11

My head, my shoulder,
 My knees, my toes,
 My head, my shoulder,
 My knees, my toes,
 My head, my shoulder,
 My knees, my toes,
 All belong to me.

Datum 12

Call: Hello! Hello!! Children!!

Response: Hello! Hello!! Tutor.

Call: How are you, this morning?

Response: We are fine this morning.

Call: Point to the windows

Response: Point to the doors

Call: Point to the ceilings

Response: And point to the floor

Call: Put your hands together...

Response: On your knees

Call: Put your hands together...

Response: On your knees

Call: Alright, shake your body (*Repeatedly*)

Response: Oh! (*Saying it repeatedly after the call*)

From Data 10 to 12 above, it will be noticed that all the underlined words except the word “family” are in one or two syllables. That is to show that children’s songs and poems are composed to help the children to be familiar with the pronunciation of words in the target language. From the data, it will also be noticed that most of the words highlighted are nouns. The essence of this is to teach children how to identify or name things around them in the target language. For instance, in Datum 10, words like “family”, “father”, “mother”, “brothers” “sisters”, “goats”, and “snails” form the hyponyms to the word “home” and this is meant to teach them what the people and animals that live around them at home are called in the target language (the English language).

In Datum 11, the words “head”, “shoulder”, “knees”, and “toes” that form the hyponyms to the word “body” expose children to what the parts of their body are called in the English language; while Datum 12 was aimed at teaching children basic greeting terms, materials at home and parts of the body. It should be noted that all the referents to these words are what children can easily identify with because they all revolve

around objects or people they come across every day.

All these techniques are tailored towards introducing children to basic terms in the target language without having to go through many difficulties learning them.

3.4 Syntactic analysis

In children songs, rhymes, and stories, some syntactic features are essentially deployed to make the learning of the target language easy and also to enhance comprehension. First, they are related in first, of or a combination of simple, compound and complex sentences; second, the tenses deployed are usually either in simple past or simple present and the verbs are performative verbs; and third, adverbial and adjectival phrases and clauses are peculiarly employed. Instances of this syntactic deployment are presented below.

Datum 13

Old Rodger was dead

and buried in grave

[Hun ah, gone to his grave.]

They planted an apple tree over his head

[Hun ah, over his head]

The apple grew ripe and ready to drop

[Hun ah, ready to drop]

There came a whirlwind that blew them all off

[Hun ah, blew them all off]

There came an old woman to pick them all off

[Hun ah, pick them all off]

Old Rodger stood up and gave her a knock

[Hun ah, gave her a knock]

Which made the old woman go hippity hop?

[Hun ah, hippity hop]

Datum 14

If I had all the clothes I needed
 My wardrobe would be full of clothes
 If my wardrobe was full of clothes
 I would attend many parties
 If I attended many parties
 I would know many people
 If I knew many people
 I would receive many gifts
 If I received many gifts
 I would give them to everyone I saw
 And if I gave them out to everyone
 Everyone would love me

Datum 15:

Be hardworking my friend
 So that you will not be poor
 You move up higher with hard work
 If there is no supporter, my friend,
 Then work hard.
 If there is nobody to depend on,
 Then you try to work hard, my friend.

Your father may be rich,
 Your mother may be rich,
 Don't depend on their riches.
 Whatever you do not labour for
 Can slip out of your hands
 Whatever you do not labour for
 You may not give much care
 Work hard, my friend

Datum 16

Long time ago in the land of White People, there was a family who lived in a city called Ticut. The head of the family was a man. His name was Baker. He had a wife whose name was Lisa. They both loved each other dearly. ...

Datum 17

Mr. Baker and his family left Alabama for another place. None of them could talk for a long time. For the first time, Scot was seen shedding tears at the back seat where he was seated. No one knew what was going on until his father looked at the inner mirror and saw Scot sobbing silently. ...

In Data 13 to 17 above, it will be noticed that all the three types of sentences in the English language are combined at various levels to form the children's songs, rhymes and stories presented above. They all perform pedagogical functions. Simple sentences are deployed mainly to teach children how to express simple actions, facts and declare intentions. They are often stylistically encoded in a way that it is made simple and follows a predictable pattern of Subject-Verb-Object-Adjunct (SVOA) formation. For instance, line 4 of Datum 13 expresses an action and it is made up of a combination of SVOA, (They planted an apple tree over his head), while lines 8 and 10 declare something that happens with a syntactic structure of Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) (There came a whirlwind that blew them all off and There came an old woman to pick them all up). In Datum 17, where we have a story, there is the intentional deployment of this same predictable pattern where we have "Mr. Baker and his family left Alabama for another place" (SVOA).

The importance of this is that whenever children find themselves in scenarios where they need to express or declare similar events, it will be easy for them to express themselves correctly because of the predictable formation of the simple sentences they have come across in songs, rhymes and stories.

The compound sentences in the data above are deployed mainly to make children know how to join two independent clauses together, especially when they express two actions that come after each other in a succession. For instance, in line 12 of Datum 13, two independent actions that followed each other in succession were combined together, "Old Rodger stood up and (he) gave her a knock" to familiarize children with how to combine two independent actions or thoughts in English language.

The complex sentences in the data above are mostly made up of a subordinate and main clauses. While the main clauses give a statement

of fact, the subordinate clauses are either showing the conditions that need to be met for the main clauses to be valid or creating a setting for the sentence. Thus, the subordinate clauses are mostly adverbials. In Datum 14 for instance, we see the composer of the song consistently deploying complex sentences all through the song, and they follow a consistent pattern of combination of subordinate adverbial clauses and main clauses that are nominal. With this, the children were introduced to conditional sentences to make them know that the validity of some simple sentences can be dependent on some conditions.

There are other adverbials that are not conditional adverbs but adverbs of reason, time, and place. Clauses containing adverbs of reason are usually introduced to children when there is a need to teach them basic morals. This is what some of the lines in Datum 15 also reinforce. For instance, in lines 1 and 2, we have:

Be hardworking my friend

So that you will not be poor

The second line reinforces the reason for children to be hardworking, which is for them not to be poor. The clauses containing adverbs of time and places are usually deployed more often in children stories where it is used to create the setting of whatever story is being told in the mind of the children. Such adverbials are used to create imagery - the mental image of what is being told as a story.

In Datum 17, from the sentence “For the first time, Scot was seen shedding tears at the back seat where he was seated”, the adverbial clause “where he was seated” creates mental imagery of where Scot was in the car, and the adverbial clause “until his father looked at the inner mirror and saw Scot sobbing silently” portrays time. Both serve to add a vivid description of the

setting. It should also be noted that adverbial phrases like “Long time ago in the land of White People” (in Datum 16), “for another place”, “for a long time”, and “for the first time” (in Datum 17) are also used to give a vivid description of the story being told. Therefore, it can be said that children are introduced to complex sentences to familiarize them with adverbial phrases and clauses that will enhance their thinking and imagination.

As earlier pointed out, the verbs deployed in most children’s literature are performatives. In the data presented above, we have instances of performative verbs like “buried”, “planted” “grew”, “came”, “gave” etc. (Datum 13) that were combined with various subjects to create an imaginary account that is dramatic. It makes the whole essence of the literature look dramatic so that it will seem interesting to young children and enhance their curiosity to learn the poem or story.

4. Findings and Recommendations

The first finding is that the morpho-graphological analysis of the data reveals that words were broken down into different morpho-graphological units in young children’s literature to familiarize them with the syllabic structure of the target language and develop their spelling skills. The requirement for the accomplishment of this finding lies in the repetitions appearing in songs and rhymes. The repetition of keywords or rhyming words, phrases, sentences, even paragraphs, can lead to the enhancement of children’s reading and spelling skills (Douville, 2001).

The second finding is that the phonological analysis of the data shows that the composers of children’s songs and rhymes aim at using them to

teach the melodic features of the target language like rhyme, stress, phonemes and allophones, differences in sounds, and pronunciation of words. The import of this finding is that deliberate selection of familiar themes in children's songs, poems and stories makes them more comprehensible. The themes in most children's songs and rhymes are relatively close to a learner's real-life experience and they are also made to focus on young learners' background knowledge, such as family, animals, food, friendship, etc. (Richard-Amato, 2003; Richards, 1969). Thus, songs, rhymes and stories soak learners in an accessible language environment when the themes they discuss are familiar to the learners.

The third finding indicates that the lexical choices in children's literature are typically simple in structure to make the words pronounceable and retentive and that they are mostly encoded to teach children what basic terms around them are called in the target language. This finding implies that the vocabulary deployed in children's songs and rhymes are words of comparatively low level. It was observed that "when examining songs and rhymes, the lyrics designated are usually found to be relatively simple" (Tuan & An, 2010).

And the last finding reveals that the syntactic structure of children's literature is usually stylistically encoded to pedagogically expose children to various sentence types and make them descriptive with the way they are structurally arranged. It can be averred from this result that the language structure - length and types of sentences - is a peculiar feature in stories. Concerning the length of a sentence, "the longer the sentence the more ideas and details are cumulated within it" (Bečka, 1949). Talking about sentence types used in children's stories, there is a set of standard measures proposed, based on analysis of the types of sentences

(Ševečková, 1985). One of the sentence types is the simple sentence, which expresses a single idea.

Based on the above findings, the study recommends that:

1. Primary school teachers should use songs, rhymes and stories to complement their teaching to motivate the learners and help them to learn fast.
2. Government should give room for the incorporation of oral literature into primary school education schemes of work and syllabus to develop and enhance children's language repertoires.
3. Nursery and primary school language teachers should be trained to be creative oral literature composers and performers to enhance their effectiveness in teaching.

5. Conclusion

Songs, rhymes, and stories have been widely used as a carrier of messages and cultures from generation to generation. This study portends the usefulness of these three interrelated devices in oral literature as the avenue and repertoire for learners to practice grammar, speaking, reading and writing skills. Therefore, songs, rhymes, and stories are versatile linguistic tools in-built with activity for language acquisition and learning in a very enjoyable, pedagogical and natural manner.

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