

# Standard Language Theory and Its Analytical Application on New Idioms and Idiomatic Expressions in Yorùbá

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**Abstract:** Theories are organizing principles by which thought processes are clearly set out in such a way that enable various studies to explain issues relating to them explicitly. Over the years, linguists have provided theories that have been used to capture some aspects of language descriptions and analysis. This is owing to the fact that no single theory has been found to capture all of the aspects of language(s) explicitly all of the time. Practitioners of theories have taken them to heights that even the original exponents have never thought of. One of these theories is the theory of Standard Language, the subject matter of this paper. This paper sets out to examine the origin of the theory of standard language, its principles and application on new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yorùbá with a view to establishing its analytical strength and appropriateness.

**Keywords:** theory, linguistics, standard language, application, new idioms.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is focused mainly on the use of theories and their application on language related issues especially, the analytical application of the standard language theory on new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yorùbá. As Adéyemí (2001) rightly put it, theories are organizing principles by which thought processes are clearly set out. In other words, theories which are also the scientific approaches of investigating research works have enabled linguists to explain language in explicit ways. More often than none, linguists have propounded theories that have been used to capture some aspects of language descriptions and analysis. This has to do with the fact that no single language theory has been found to explicitly captured all of the aspects of language or languages all of the times.

In Yorùbá studies, many scholars have applied different linguistic models to discourse analysis. For instance, Olábòdè (1981) employs structuralism in his study of “metaphor and its allied tropes”; Fámákinwá (1983), applies formalism to Yorùbá poetry; Owólabí (1992) also applies TGG to the analysis of some selected Yorùbá poetic texts. Bámisilè (1992) and Àjàyí (1995) also applied the integrated theory of Text-Linguistics. Also in Yorùbá studies, Olátéjú (1998) made the first attempt at applying TGG tools/principles and concepts to Yorùbá literature across the genres of the novel, play and drama.

In this paper, the theory of standard language developed by Jan Mukarousky (1970) is our preoccupation and the objective is to see how appropriate and useful is its application on the new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yorùbá.

## 2. NEW IDIOMS AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN YORÙBÁ

The Yorùbá language, which Greenberg (1976) has described as ‘Kwa’ and which belongs to the Niger-Kordofanian family of languages is rich in idioms and idiomatic expressions of languages, which is a legacy passed from one generation to another. Today, this legacy transcends those who left it as we now have ‘new idioms and idiomatic expressions’ similar and completely different from the traditional idioms and idiomatic expressions in so many ways.

New idioms and idiomatic expressions constitute another distinctive and vital aspect of language use. The term new idioms is a modern stock expression, formed in response to the needs of the moment arising as a result of the linguistic constraints of the users which consequently necessitates creation of new words and expressions.

New idioms and idiomatic expressions are so called not only because of their complexity which necessitates the overlapping tendencies of their semantic realizations, but also because of their distinctive difference from old, traditional idioms. As a matter of fact, they straddle metaphor and euphemism and also serve as replication of the established Yorùbá idioms both in form and meaning. They are in spoken and written forms and mainly operate at the lexical and phrasal levels. They are also multi-functional because of their semantic unity.

New idioms and idiomatic expressions are created by members of the society or language community either through coining, (creating and recreating of new words and expressions) or by investing old words and expressions with new meanings. New idioms are new, strange, fresh and creative by nature. They are not vague expressions and their origins are also known to the users who are always dazzled whenever they come across them in any context. The following are the lists of some of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions collected and which constitute some of the data for this article:

New Idioms	Literal meaning	Idiomatic meaning
Jeun sókè	Eat into the upper stomach	Move on/wax stronger
Oṣòdì òkè	A prominent bus stop in Lagos	Busty lady
Àtíkè Ọlà	Powder of wealth	Cocaine/heroin
Làkàsórò	Corrupt coinage of the name 'lacasera', name of a soft drink	No story/end of discussion
Irin tútù	Cold iron	Gun

### 3. APPLICATION OF THE THEORY ON NEW IDIOMS AND IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN YORÙBÁ

The theory of Standard Language (SL) was formulated by Jan Mukarovsky, a linguist and critic who was very prominent in the 1930's. The theory was formulated to solve the problem of relationship between Standard Language (SL) and Literary/Poetic Language (L/PL). In other words, the theory is about the norms violation. Mukarovsky considered this from this standpoint. First, he wanted to know if the poet is bound by the norm of the standard language and how the norm asserts itself in poetry. For the standard language, on the other hand, he sought to know the extent to which a work of art can be used as data for ascertaining the norm of the standard language. This means that the theory of poetic language is primarily interested in the differences between the standard and poetic language; whereas, the theory of the standard language is mainly interested in the similarities between them. He did not see any conflict in the two directions of research apart from a mere difference in the point of view and in the illumination of the problem. Eventually, he approached the problem from the vantage point of 'poetic language'.

The first problem raises the following questions: what is the relationship between the poetic language and the standard language as well as the place of each in the total or whole system of language? Is poetic language a special brand of the standard, or is it an independent formation? In order to appreciate Mukarovsky's response to those questions and their relevance to this paper, analytical application of this theory on new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba with a clear distinction between the standard and literary language is necessary.

### 4. STANDARD LANGUAGE

According to Mukarovsky (1970), Standard Language (SL) is the language of everyday conversation. Its purpose is the understanding between the speaker and the audience with the aim of enhancing effective communication (Crystal, 1997:68). In standard language, certain linguistic norms must be adhered to for a meaningful communication. In Yorùbá language for example, like most other languages of the world, a normal sentence in Yorùbá has the structural pattern of:

S	-	V	-	O
Subject	-	Verb	-	Object

As in

Ọlọpàá'	gba	ègúnjẹ (The police collected bribe)
police	collected	bribe

In the example, the subject is 'Ọlọpàá' (the police), the verb is 'gba' (collected), while the object is 'ègúnjẹ' (bribe). 'Ọlọpàá' (the police), is the doer of the action expressed by the verb 'gba'. The object, 'ègúnjẹ' (bribe), suffered the

action of the verb. Thus, any attempt to shift any of the constituent elements in the S.V.O. sentence structure of the Yorùbá language will lead to ungrammaticality, and meaning may be destroyed.

Language of ordinary discourse is casual and devoid of ornamentation. It is unexamined and uncritical. It does not draw attention to itself or open up provocative questions to the nature of its coding. It is often used in schools, on radio, during political campaigns and preaching. The point to note here is that, as far as standard language is concerned, effective communication is its priority which calls for employment of words and phrases that can be fully comprehended. Therefore, to enhance undistorted communication in Standard Language, language must be properly used and in conformity with the entire linguistic norms. When this is fairly done, meaning will not be hidden to listeners because of the regularity of its usage. In other words, standard language (SL) automatizes or conventionalizes in a way that the communicative values of the language are enhanced. In standard language, foregrounding is logically prohibited but this is not to say that foregrounding is not visible in SL as Mukarovsky indicates its possibility in journalistic language where it can be used as subordinate to communication in order to draw the readers' attention more closely to the issue at hand or the item of information articulated. Therefore, when a new expression is used in ordinary discourses, it is instantaneously automatized by the exact description of its meaning. For a clearer understanding of the theory of standard language, it is therefore pertinent at this juncture to discuss some of the basic concepts crucial to the theory of standard language (SL) in order to examine how applicable are these concepts in the analysis of new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba. These include: backgrounding and automatization.

## 5. BACKGROUNDING

The term 'backgrounding' is what Mukarovsky (1970) called 'unmarked form', which simply means the form of the surrounding is relatively unnoticed because it is not everyday communication. Mukarovsky stressed further that the language of everyday serves as the background for literary language. In other words, Standard Language can be referred to as the linguistic pool from which the literary artists draws his resources. As a matter of fact, backgrounding does not use ornament so that understanding may not be impaired between the speaker and the audience. The excerpts below (new idiom) from the utterance of a conductor at a particular bus stop in Lagos, a line from one of the recorded musical video tapes of King Sunny and another common expression by the users of the new idioms vividly exemplified a concept of backgrounding:

(i) Oṣòdì Òkè!

Oṣòdì Òkè lo' n' lọ!

Oṣòdì Òkè rè e!

Oṣòdì Òkè

It is going to Oṣòdì on the bridge!

Here is Oṣòdì Òkè bus!

(ii) -----

Oṣòdì Òkè tí n' m̀ì jòlójòlò'

Oṣòdì Òkè that dangles admiringly

(iii) Àgbàlàgbì to' ju àgbàlàgbà lọ

(A more superior elderly person)

Looking at the content of (i), which is a shout out of a particular popular bus stop/location in Lagos - 'Oṣòdì Òkè', it is clear that no single element needs further explanation as regards meaning. because the expression is in standard Yorùbá. Whereas, Oṣòdì Òkè in (ii) has been de-automatized to have a new meaning (a busty lady), different from its original meaning in (i) which is 'a particular popular location in Lagos'. It is important to note that without (i) there can never be (ii) because 'Oṣòdì Òkè' in (i) serves as the background to (ii).

However, in (iii), the expression '*àgbàlágbi*' does not exist in the Yorùbá lexicon but '*àgbàlágba*' meaning 'the elderly'; but apart from the fact that '*àgbàlágbi*' is a foregrounded form of '*àgbàlágba*', it is used here as an idiom for which *àgbàlágba* is the background. In other word, '*àgbàlágba*' serves as the background for '*àgbàlágbi*' which means 'a more elderly person'. The expression is used to praise and sometimes to request for favour from somebody who may not necessarily be an elder in the real sense of it but possesses all the attributes of an elderly person which include - experience, maturity, wisdom, knowledge and material goods respectively.

#### Automatization:

Mukarovsky (1970: 19) described Automatization as one of the principles of Standard Language where the linguistic elements are automatized. According to him, the linguistic elements are de-automatized and so do not attract attention. Objectively speaking, automatization schematizes an event. They simply communicate. Also, in Automatization, language is not aesthetically explored; rather, the norms of the language are strictly adhered to. It is indeed precise and methodical; and also not critical about the linguistic coding like the type of expression used in the language of everyday discourse. For instance, below are examples of the automatized expressions in Yorùbá from the advert of a non-alcoholic soft drink called 'Lacaserá' on Ray Power radio station in Lagos and excerpt from one of the musical records of Wàsìù Àlábí Pàsómá

- (i) ... Lákàsèrà tí'a fì èso Apù se dàra fún iwọ àti ẹbí rẹ.  
 Ẹ maá mú' u.  
 (...Lacaserá that is made from the apple fruit is good for you  
 and your family. Endeavour to drink it)
- (ii) ... Ẹ jẹ' kan maá bú' mi  
 'Lákàsòfò' fáwọn tó' n' bà mí' í' jẹ' ẹ ẹ.  
 Kán maá bú' mi, kò sọrò fáwọn tí' n' bà mí' jẹ' o o.  
 (Allow them to abuse me.  
 There is no response for my detractors  
 Let them abuse me, no response for my detractors)

In the above, especially (i), there is no linguistic element that is violated; the expression is precise and systematic. It is clearly understood like the language of day-to-day conversation because the structural pattern conforms to the norms of the Standard Language and the meaning is not distorted. However, as Mukarovsky rightly pointed out that foregrounding may occur not only in poetic language but also in everyday language where it is sporadic and lacks systemic design, the example of new idiom in (ii) has been deliberately de-automatized to have other deeper meaning different from (i) for stylistic effect. While 'Lacaserá' in (i) is a soft drink, the one in (ii) is interpreted as '*no response/no reply/end of discussion*' respectively.

By and large, in the course of language use, examples abound where idioms and idiomatic expressions, whether old or new are used, especially in literature. In a situation where this happens, the kind of language produced is literary language (LL).

## 6. LITERARY LANGUAGE

Literary language (LL) is simply called the language of literature. It is also sometimes referred to as poetic language because of its special nature; it is remarkably different from the Standard Language (SL). Literary language cannot be called a brand of the standard because it has at its disposal, from the standpoint of lexicon, syntax, etc. all the forms of the given language but rather, 'a stylistic variation of standard language as confirmed by Olatéju' (1998). However, the fact that poetic language is a stylistic variation of the standard is not to deny the close connection between the two, which consists in the fact that for poetry, the standard language is the background against which is reflected the aesthetically intentional distortion of the linguistic components of the work. In other words, the intentional violation of the norms of the standard language is what makes possible the poetic utilization of language and that without this possibility, there

would be no poetry. The more the norm of the standard is stabilized in a given language, the more varied can be its violation, and therefore the more possibilities for poetry in that language. On the other hand, the weaker the awareness of this norm, the fewer possibilities of violation, and hence the fewer possibilities for poetry.

Based on the foregoing, the users of new idioms and idiomatic expressions may not necessarily be literary artists such as poets, playwrights or novelists, they may however, be given credit for using language creatively in their different professions. This assertion is corroborated by Crystal (1997:72) thus:

*Poets are not the only ones who push language beyond its normal limits. All who engage in literary or quasi-literary activity, from novelists and dramatists to journalists and commentators, face similar problems.*

Crystal's view illuminates the curious stance of some people over the use of new idioms and idiomatic expressions even for news reportage on radio and television by the contemporary reporters who are also conscious of the fact that their professional responsibilities go beyond a mere reporting but also entertainment. In doing this, they need to use new idioms to draw people closer to them. However, for a better understanding of this aspect of the theory, it is also important to discuss some of the vital principles of the literary language (LL) and how appropriate they are for analysis of new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba. These principles include - Foregrounding, de-automatization and deviation.

## 7. FOREGROUNDING

Mukarovsky defines 'foregrounding' as a technique for 'making strange' in language, or to extrapolate a method of 'defamiliarisation' in textual composition. It is a form of textual patterning which is motivated specifically for literary aesthetic purposes. Foregrounding typically involves a stylistic distortion of some sort, either through an aspect of the text which deviates from a linguistic norm or, alternatively, where an aspect of the text is brought to the fore through repetition. To him, the function of poetic language consists in the maximum foregrounding of the utterance. Foregrounding is the opposite of backgrounding and is synonymous to de-automatization. The more an act is automatized, the less conscious it becomes for that act to be interpreted; the more it is foregrounded, the more completely conscious does it become for that act to be executed or interpreted.

Fabb (1997:13) refers to foregrounding as 'a marked form'. That is, a form which is distinctive, standing out from its surroundings, and drawing attention to itself. It has its root in the word '*actualisace*' which in Zech language means the use of certain devices with which an act of expression is pushed to the foreground such that language draws attention to itself. Foregrounding is also a very common feature of artistic communication where a work of art deviates from the rules of a language which users have adopted in the medium and that anyone who wishes to carry out research on its value as a work of art must focus on the aspect of curiosity and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern (Leech, 1968:57). This obviously invokes the resemblance of a picture seen against a backgrounding.

Mukarovsky stresses further that in literary language (poetic), foregrounding achieves maximum intensity to the extent of pushing communication to the background as the object of expression and of being used for its own sake; it is not used in the service of communication but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. In his contribution to the issue of foregrounding, Crystal (1997) is also of the opinion that foregrounding is an art that results in 'defamiliarization' which is also synonymous to 'enstrangement' whose fundamental function as an art is to make people see the world in a new way. In other words, defamiliarization means 'making strange'. This implies that the way to make the world strange through the text is by foregrounding certain aspects or features of the work. In simple terms, LL emphasizes the interest and surprise a work of art brings rather than the exhibition of the automatic pattern.

If this assertion is true of LL, then foregrounding is nothing but 'bringing to the fore' or 'bringing to attention' or 'making new' as highlighted in the new idioms and idiomatic expressions below:

- (a) - *jẹun sikhùn* (eat into the stomach)
- (i) - *jẹun sápo* (eat into the pocket)
- (ii) - *jẹun sókè* (eat into the upper stomach)

From the above, (a) *jẹun sikhùn* is the SL that has been foregrounded as (ai) *jẹun sápo* and (aai) *jẹun sókè*. In other words, (ai) and (aai) are the artistic forms of (a) *jẹun sikhùn*. There is no expression like *jẹun sápo* and *jẹun sókè* but *jẹun*

*sikùn* in the Yorùbá language. '*Jẹun sikùn*' is automatized and serves as the background from which '*jẹun sáṣò*' and '*jẹun sókè*' are derived respectively to create a foregrounding effect. '*Jẹun sáṣò*' and '*jẹun sókè*' are made new and thus becoming elements of surprise. New idioms of this nature are created for entertainment and communicative effects. While '*jẹun sikùn*' means 'eat into the stomach', '*jẹun sáṣò*' and '*jẹun sókè*' mean "collect bribe" and "move on/go on" respectively.

It should be noted here that today, the expressions such as '*jẹun sáṣò*' and '*jẹun sókè*' have become very popular among the people to the extent that they are fast becoming a language of everyday usage among the Yorùbá. This is not out of place as Mukarovsky himself is of the belief that foregrounding is common even in the Standard Language, especially in journalistic style and, even more, in essay writings.

## 8. DE-AUTOMATIZATION

De-automatization, according to Mukarovsky (1970) is the use of devices of language in such a way that it attracts attention. De-automatization is the opposite of "automatization". Automatization schematizes an event while de-automatization violates the scheme. Here, the linguistic elements are foregrounded in a way that they instantly call attention to themselves and as a result of this the rules and conventions of the Standard Language are violated. The violation is deliberate in a curious attempt to achieve both stylistic and semantic effects (Ọpẹfẹyìntímí, 1997:68). The essence of the violation is to dazzle the listeners with fresh awareness and also create elements of surprise. Consider the new idioms below:

- (i) Kín ni *ṣòò* ẹ? (What is your show?)
- (ii) Kín ni *lẹfù* ẹ? (What is your level?)
- (iii) Kín ni *lógò* ẹ? (What is your logo?)
- (iv) Má fa *sùrùtù* (Don't cause trouble)
- (v) Má da *gòòbe* sílẹ (Don't cause trouble)

In the above, the italicized words in (i) - (iii) , (*ṣòò*, *lẹfù*, and *lógò*) are loaned from the English language 'show', 'level' and 'logo' respectively. The words, despite having other Yorùbá equivalents are deliberately and creatively loaned for communicative and aesthetic effects. If their Yorùbá equivalents were used, nothing would have appeared new and there would not have been any surprise. The use of this English loan forms or equivalents constitutes 'de-automatization' which is a feature of 'LL'. The automatized or standard language version of the new idioms (i) - (iii) would have been -

- (i) Báwo ni? (How is it?)
- (ii) *Şe'o wà?* (Are you all right?)
- (iii) Kín ni *orúkọ* ẹ? (What is your name?)

All these are compliments or greetings forms in the Yoruba language. But for the de-automatized versions, the greetings forms have been foregrounded or de-automatized to create stylistic and communicative effects.

The word *sùrùtù* is loaned from the Hausa language and creatively used as lexical foregrounding also for communicative and aesthetic effect. If the word '*ìjàngbòn*', (trouble/chaos) its SL or automatized equivalent were used, nothing would have attracted attention. In the last example, the word *gòòbe* was first noticed in 2008 in an album entitled '*Lórilẹ*' by one of the Nigerian Hip - hop artists called '*X Project*'. Since then '*gòòbe*' has been creatively used in different contexts by the Nigerian youths to mean '*trouble*', '*crisis*' and '*chaos*'.

## 9. INFERENCE

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yoruba are contemporaneous and part of modern communication employed to instruct, persuade, abuse, extol and entertain in all areas of life of the Yorùbá, even inspite of their sharp departure from the norms of the language which eventually make the application of standard language for their analysis inevitable.

The application of the standard language theory also revealed its suitability and appropriateness as a theory that is capable to explain and interpret the deviant and inventive nature of new idioms and idiomatic expressions which the users have created to achieve aesthetics and communicative effects.

Finally, in this paper, it is revealed that the model has capacity to explain differences between the language of ordinary usage (everyday language) and literary expressions as users of the new idioms and idiomatic expressions may not necessarily be literary artists such as poets, playwrights or novelists. They may however, be given credit for using language creatively in their different professions.

## 10. CONCLUSION

In this paper, attention was focused on the analytical application of Standard Language theory on new idioms and idiomatic expressions in Yorùbá with a view to ascertaining its appropriateness as a theory that is capable of capturing an aspect of language description and analysis carried out in this paper. As deduced from the inference, its appropriateness lies not only in the fact that it has capacity to explain deviant and inventive nature of new idioms and idiomatic expressions but also in giving explicit explanation on the *differencia specifica* between the language of ordinary discourse and language of literary discourse. This invariably helped to realize that most of the new idioms used were far from being the language of ordinary discourse (standard language), they were foregrounded in such a way that they called attention to themselves. Also in this paper, inspite of the foregrounding attribute of new idioms and idiomatic expressions, it was established by the proponent of the theory that foregrounded expressions are not totally absent in the Standard Language, especially in journalistic style hence, the pervasiveness of new idioms in every aspect of life of the contemporary Yorùbá youths.

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