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A synchronic study of semantics in selected Akan choral compositions in Ghana

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In the performance traditions of choral music in Ghanaian community, understanding the text of the music is but one facet of extremely important aspects in performance. Unfortunately, some of the texts of some recent choral music compositions lack linguistic semantic representations. Performers are only mindful of the rhythm, melody and its associated harmony without even if the meaning of the song is not clear to them. Some of these songs lack meaning at the levels of sentential cohesion as well as the larger units of the text juxtaposed with the music. Through linguistic pragmatic theory, the authors attempt to unearth exegetically semantic illusions of five purposively sampled Akan¹ choral music compositions by some Ghanaian composers and analyzed for their sensitivity to linguistic semantics. The paper concludes that linguistic semantics in choral music compositions is very important and deserves conscious and systematic considerations. It could be oblivious on the part of the composers but it is envisaged that the nature of this style of setting text to music is reduced significantly.

Key words: Choral music, linguistic pragmatics, Akan, texts, composition, semantics.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally noted that the music performed in Ghana is predominantly vocal. Amuah supports this notion when he says:

Choral music performance in Ghana has been exuberant and ubiquitous, particularly in Southern Ghana. From the rural communities through the districts, regions and the capital cities, churches and schools, work places and the radio stations, Ghana is full of choral music performances. There are as many church choirs as well as youth,

institutional and industrial choirs who are engaged in the performance of the choral musical genre (Amuah, 2014, p.58).

This is seen in the popular, traditional and art musical forms where the meaning of the texts provide not only the social and cultural well-being of the performers but also the spiritual and the emotional satisfaction of the meaning of the text assigned to the musical sound. We are using the word “performers” to refer to the actual performers of

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the song as well as the audience who consequently join in the performance of choral music, be it art, popular or traditional. As Euba (2001, p.15) concedes, “an audience in the strict sense seldom exists since all people congregating at a performance are potential performers and if they are completely prevented from joining the performance, it is usually because of lack of knowledge of the repertoire. Although Euba refers this to the audience of traditional music, the same characteristics endue that of the choral music performance in Ghana.

When the performers understand the meaning of the text of the song, it enhances gratification because the efficacy of the impact of the song greatly lies in the meaning of the text used.

Nketiah (1974) has indicated that song texts are inspired by the importance of the song as an avenue for verbal communication, a medium for creative verbal expressions which can reflect both personal and social experiences. This is why most current composers in Ghana write their choral music mostly in language they are comfortable with, in order not to lose the semantic considerations of the text used.

It is worth stating that, some of the Akan choral compositions have been identified to have problems with the meaning of the text in terms of sentence cohesion, wrong usages of song personas and the context in which the narrative of the song is put.

Feld and Fox (1994) note that issues about music and language has received broad area of research by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists (Feld, 1974; Nattiez, 1990). Substantial musical linguistic and literally dissertations (Henrotte, 1988; Houghton, 1984; Oliva, 1977) indicate how this vast interdisciplinary literature links research in musicology, acoustics, linguistics, literary studies, philosophy, psychology and anthropology.

Feld and Fox point out that:

Ethnomusicological perspectives are increasing social, linking the structure and practice of musical performances and styles with music deep embeddedness in local and translocal forms of social imagination, activity and experience. These shifts parallel similar movements in linguistic anthropology that emphasize the social, pragmatic and emotional constitution of linguistic structures emerging in discourse, performance, textuality and poetics (Feld and Fox, 1994, p.25).

It is worth noting that interpretation of text used in choral music composition has not caught the attention of scholars in the field of theory and composition. This paper analyses and divulges some semantic illusions of five purposively selected choral compositions in the Akan language of Ghana. The paper proceeds as follows: A brief review of semantics and perspectives on meaning, the pragmatic theory, choral music and text, English translations of the selected works and their analysis of linguistic semantic illusions from Newlove Annan's *Nya mmre ma wo Nyame* (Get time for your God), and *εye*

Onyame (It is the Lord), Daniel Ocran's *Dzin no osom me bo* (The name is precious to me), *Oye* (It is good) and *Ayeyi Wura* (Owner of praise) by James Varrick Armaah as well as *Adom bi a m'anya* (A grace I have ever had) by Kras Arthur. The final section presents conclusion and recommendation.

Semantics

Jackendoff (1990) and Ndimiele (1997) define semantics as the subfield that is devoted to the study of meaning, as inherent at the levels of words, phrases, sentences, and larger units of discourse (termed *texts*, or *narratives*). Ndimiele states that the word semantics (from French *semantique*) was “invented” by Michel Bréal in the 19th century. Linguistic semantics is the study of meaning that is used for understanding human expression through language.

According to Chukwuma (2012), scholars from different disciplines like philosophy, logic, anthropology, psychology and linguistics are interested in exploring the nature of meaning. He says that linguistics is different from these disciplines since it investigates meaning in a systematic and objective pattern. In the field of choral music as an art form, exploring the meaning of the text has not been very popular. As people's experiences and world view change, so do the meanings they associate to word change. We agree with Chukwuma (2012) that meaning is a concept usually influenced by different factors. An utterance can be interpreted in diverse ways depending on the emotional disposition of the speaker at the time of making the utterance. As a result of this, the intended meaning of an utterance may be different from the meaning perceived by the receiver of the message. Text used in music is therefore very important to be studied to see the extent of flow of the language used and how well it is communicated to the performers. Jackendoff gives three perspectives on meaning as follows:

The first is Lexical Semantics, which discusses at the meanings of individual words. The second is Formal Semantics (or Compositional Semantics or Sentential Semantics). How those meanings combine to make meanings for individual sentences or utterances. The third is Discourse or Pragmatics where those meanings combine with each other and with other facts about various kinds of context to make meanings for a text or discourse. The argument is made based on these perspectives.

The Linguistic Pragmatic Theory

Mey (1993) perceives pragmatics as subfield of linguistics which studies the ways in which context contributes to

meaning. Pragmatics encompasses speech act theory, conversational implicature, talk in- interaction and other approaches to language behavior in philosophy, sociology, linguistics and anthropology. Daejin (2002) explains Pragmatics to include studies on how the transmission of meaning depends not only on structural and linguistic knowledge (e.g., grammar, lexicon, etc.) of the speaker and listener, but also on the context of the utterance, any pre-existing knowledge about those involved.

Grimshaw (1990) and Williams (1981) are of the view that recent work in linguistic theory has stressed the important role that structured lexical representations can play in natural language while Bresnan (1982) examines the importance of semantic representations. The significance of lexical conceptual structure (LCS) has also been expounded by Jackendoff (1983) and Jackendoff and Levin (1988). Their ideas apply to the text of choral music because the inferred intent of the composer and the context involved in the composition are very crucial. Text juxtaposing the notes of choral music composition should therefore be meaningful and concern the relationship of sentences to the environment in which they occur.

Choral Music and Text

According to Randel (1986), choral is music written to be sung by chorus or choir with or without accompaniment. Choir or chorus represents body of singers who perform together either in unison or in parts, usually with more than one singer on a part. A body of church singers is a choir, a term also sometimes used for a secular chorus. Amuah (2012, p.69) also asserts that “choral music as we know it today is here to stay by virtue of the exertions of the missionaries with the support of our pioneer musicians in Ghana. Before the arrival of the missionaries whose contributions contained premises of choral music in Ghana, there were traditional choral musical styles such as *Avihawo* and *Nnwonkorɔ*”. Choral music therefore involves text that serves as communication to the

Akan Text

*Sɛ wo sɔre anɔpa a
Nya mmɛ ma wo Nyame
Na kɔ wo nkotodwe anim
Na kase Agya, hwɛ me so nne
Sɛ wo didi awia
Nya mmɛ ma wo Nyame
Kakyerɛ no sɛ, meda so wo ha
Nti hwɛ me so daa
Sɛ wo beda anadwo a
Nya mmɛ ma no, na ka sɛ
Agyai!, Nea wode me abedu ni a
Aseda sɛ wo daa.
Aseda sɛ wo daa, ayeyi sɛ wo daa, ntonton sɛ wo daa*

performers and listeners.

According to Wade (1993), Ashok Ranade defines text as “a purposeful putting together of linguistic units with a view to narrate [sic] a story, state an idea or express an emotion”. He has the opinion that ‘texts’ are the words of genres of vocal music (Wade 1993, p.2). It is therefore important that the entire discourse in terms of the text of choral music composition is considered.

The texts used in choral music are very essential to every aspect and interaction in our everyday lives. We use it to inform the people around us of what we feel, what we desire, and even question or understand the world around us. We communicate effectively with the texts juxtaposing the sound in a multitude of situation.

Choral music can be considered as a language form because the text expresses the inner feeling, historical commentaries and perceptions towards the audience and then affects reality and delineates the expressive culture of a community, thus expression of oneself has always been influenced by the text (Sutherland-Addy, 1998; Sadoh, 2004).

METHODOLOGY

The study made use of analysis which aims at giving personal understanding and views of the text used in choral compositions selected for the study. Five works of renowned Ghanaian composers were purposively selected and analyzed. Before the analysis, the texts in Akan language were translated to English. The main purpose was to examine some semantic illusions associated with them and how they can be reduced drastically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Texts of selected Akan choral compositions and their English translations

Nya mmɛ ma wo Nyame (Get time for your God) by Newlove Annan

English Translation

When you wake up in the morning
Get time for your God
And be on your knees
And say, Father, take care of me today.
If you eat in the afternoon
Get time for your God
Tell Him that I am still here
So take care of me
If you are coming to sleep in the evening
Get time for Him and say that
Father! for how far you have brought me
You forever deserve thanks.
You forever deserve thanks, praises and extolment

*Nea w'aye so, ɔkyeso Nyame
Aseda se wo daa, ayei se wo daa, ntonton se wo daa
Nti kase, Agya nea wode me abedu ni a,
Aseda se wo daa
Kɔnkɔn, kɔnkɔn, kɔnkɔn
Dom Aw'rade Nyankopon
W'enyimnyam ahye asaase ma
Agya nea wode me abedu ni a,
Aseda se wo daa*

The lyrics of this song are a consistent narrative to appreciate the Lord who has been, and is responsible for the well-being of humanity. It is a direct expression that places the narrator into the song world as the central subject telling the audience to express gratitude to God for he deserves it. Like Bailey Shea (2014) puts it “direct address is by far the most lyrical perspective [...] but usually involves a hidden narrator, possibly in the mind of the song’s narrative subject, rather than a real, physical interlocutor”. The first section (lines 1-12) makes a complete sense in terms of sentential cohesion and the general meaning of the text. The composer was conscious with the semantic implication of the song, however, from line 13 -17 as indicated below has a sentential cohesion problem:

You forever deserve thanks, praises and extolment

What you have done is great, benevolent God
You forever deserve thanks, praises and extolment
So say that, Father, how far you have brought me,
You forever deserve thanks
Holy, holy, holy
Lord God of hosts
Thy glory has fully shone on the earth
Father, how far you have brought me,
You forever deserve thanks

*What you have done is great, benevolent God
You forever deserve thanks, praises and extolment
So say that, Father, how far you have brought me”
You forever deserve thanks.*

The ending offers a clear contrast with the opening of the central theme, “Get time for your God”. The direct narrative *so say that* (line 4 above) has no bearing with the continuation of the text used. As already stated, it could be oblivious on the part of the composer, or the composer just thought of juxtaposing the text with the music written without the semantic implication of the text used. The expression *so say that* is out of place in terms of the linkage to the sentence following it because it makes the ending questionable as the links at the sentential level do not match.

Dzin no ɔsom me bo (The name is precious to me) by D.S Ocran

Akan Text

*Dzin no ɔsom me bo
Nyamedzin no ɔsom me bo
M'akoma dzi ehurusi, wo Nyame mu
Adom Nyame
Ma yemfaw'asem nye hen asem
Onnyibi Egyei, Okamafoe
Odzimafo e
Nyame ye ɔsahen*

English Translation

The name is precious to me
God's name is precious to me
My heart, rejoice in the Lord
Gracious God,
let's take thy words as our words
Father of the needy, our spokesman
Our intervener
God is king of war

The central theme of this choral piece is *precious name* stated clearly in the first two lines. The narrative indicates how precious God's name is. The 3rd and 4th lines express an instruction to the persona's heart, the 5th line shifts focus with the addressee missing in that context. The last three lines give some attributes of God. In this song, the semantic problem is found in the following lines:

Let's take thy words as our words,

*Father of the needy Our intervener
God is king of war*

The sentence makes the actual meaning of the song lost from the opening statement to the final even if one is asked to give the overall meaning of the song. Most of the sentences fall apart and stand independently with the entire meaning of the song.

Oye (He is good) by James Varrick Armaah

Akan Text

*Asem papa bi a maatse
Oye, Oye
Asem papa bi a m'atse ne se Yesu ye ɔdb*

English Translation

Some good news I have heard
It is good, It is good
The good news I have heard is that, Jesus is love.

Oye, Oye,
 Oye, Oye,
 Me kra sɔre na tow ndwom sɛ oye
 Oye, Oye
 Hwe nea w'aye me yi, oye
 Bra na ɔbegye wo so
 Me ampa na me nie
 ɔye ɔbaatan papa, oye
 Meka, meka meka, oye

He is good, he is good;
 He is good, he is good
 My soul, arise and sing that it is good
 He is good, he is good
 Look at what he has done for me, it is good
 Come! for he will save you as well
 How could I be like this? He is good.
 He is a good provider. He is good
 I will always say that, it is good

This choral piece is very popular in Ghana. One may ask, why is this song so popular with full participation and gratification of the performers? Like Nketiah (1974, p.32) puts it “the audience may shout in appreciation when something in the music strikes them”. It is the rhythmic interest of the word Oye that strikes the audience. Very simple and memorable that calls for participation.

However Oye can be explained as referring to God (He is good) but in terms of the meaning, the use of Oye in the first line of the song does not pull out the understanding clearly. However, one can understand the term properly from the second line where the name, *Yesu* (Jesus) is mentioned.

Ayeyi Wura (Owner of praise) by James Varrick Armaah

Akan Text

*W'ama menyɛ agye
 W'ama me ho atɔm'
 Minnhu nea menyɛ
 Minnhu nea menka
 Me a anka mense bi
 W'ama mase bi
 Ayeyi, Wurɛ
 Yeyiw'ayew, Na ye ma wo so*

English Translation

You have made me happy
 You have relieved me
 I don't know what to do
 I don't know what to say
 Me, an outcast (without substance)
 You have made me a substance
 Owner of praise
 We praise you and uphold you

The song begins with a direct soliloquy. The words are addressed to a single song persona's gratitude. In the same section, for the eighth line, the persona becomes plural. The lyrics shift into a plural persona *Yeyi w'aye* (We praise you) as indicated below:

*Me, with no substance You have made me important
 Owner of praise We praise you and uphold you*

The effect is of an unmistakable retraction in terms of the general meaning of the song but in terms of a soloist performance, the shift in the song persona makes it rather less gratified as the subject changes, a sense of movement away from the first-person singular to first person plural. Similar examples may abound in some choral compositions of other languages in Ghana.

Adom bi a m'anya (A grace I have ever had) by Kras Arthur

Akan Text

*Adom bi a manya
 Yesu na ɔde akyɛ me o
 Adom bi a m'anya
 Me nsa aka nso mente ase o
 ebaa no sɛn ni?
 Yesue, ebaa no sɛnni?
 Debɔnyɛni tɛsɛ me
 Krɔnkronnie, wo huu me sɛn ni?
 Mede meho nyina maw'
 Merensan m'akyi bio
 Gye me, Aw'rade gye me
 Fa me ye wo de daa*

English Translation

A grace I have ever had
 It is Jesus who has given to me
 A grace I have ever had
 I have had it but do not understand
 How come?
 Jesus, how come?
 A sinner like me
 The holy one, how did you see me?
 I give my all to you
 I will not look back again
 Save me, Lord save me
 Take me as yours for ever

The song persona soliloquies a grace he/she has had. That kind of grace is not stated in the song. The persona continues to admit that he/she is a sinner, how come he/she has been considered. The kind of consideration was not stated in the song. Upon all the grace, the persona states “save me, Lord save me” indicating a contrast of the grace bestowed on the persona. The general meaning of the song is not clear indicating a serious semantic illusion.

It is worth stating that the composers whose works were selected for the study are very prolific having quite a number of choral compositions to their credit. In most of their compositions, they were very careful in terms of the meaning of the language used, however, it is the current study of linguistic semantic implications of choral music that are bringing to light these illusions. Good examples of their choral music with semantic considerations abound. The following are two specific examples.

eye Onyame (It is the Lord) by Newlove Annan

Akan Text

eye Onyame na w'aye me se yie
Metee ase a, me wo nkwa a,
Mewo ahoto na me wo anigyee a
eye Onyame na w'aye me se yie, meda N'ase o
M'a setena mu nsem nyina,
m'adwuma mu nsem nyina
Abusua mu nsem nyina,
Nyame na ohwe nti mennsuro
Metee ase a, mewo nkwa,
mewo ahoto na mewo anigye a
eye Onyame na w'aye me se yie, meda N'ase o

English Translation

It is God who has brought me thus far
 If I am living, I have life,
 I have freedom and happiness,
 It is God who has brought me thus far; I thank Him
 All the problems in my life,
 All the problems in my profession
 All the problems in my family,
 God takes care of them so, I'm not afraid
 If I am living, I have life,
 I have freedom and have happiness
 It is God who has brought me thus far; I thank Him

The above text is a model of perfect consideration of semantic representation. The persona, with a direct narrative expresses gratitude to God, telling Him that he has brought him/her that far. He explains that God takes care of all his/her problems of his/her life. God has given him/her life, freedom and happiness, and for that reason he/she thanks him. The central theme of the song, “it is

God who has brought me this far” is beautifully treated with the proceeding text bringing out the meaning of the song clearly. The position of the persona does not change to create any ambiguity. The text woven at the sentential level has perfect links and the context makes meaning for the entire discourse.

orekyeye (He is sharing) by James Varrick Armaah

Akan Text

orekyeye N'adom nhyira nsu no
orekyeye N'adom nhyira nsu no a
oma nkwan',
orekyeye N'adom nhyira nsu no a
oma ahoton'.
Ao, m'egyae!
Ma bi nsoso mo do
M'agyenkwa pa e
Ma bi nsoso mo do

English Translation

He is sharing his blessings of graceful water
 He is sharing his blessings of blissful water
 That gives the life
 He is sharing his blessings of the blissful water
 That gives the freedom
 O, my father!
 Let some drops fall on me
 My good saviour
 Let some drops fall on me

The linguistic representation of the above text is quite good. The theme of the song, “He is sharing” is well treated and comes out clearly. The narrative indicates a third person singular who has in stock some blessings of blissful water. The narration explains that this blissful water gives life and freedom. The environment treats the theme very well. We get to know that the third person singular is the father of the narrator. The persona then becomes a first person singular who also requests for some drops of the blissful water to fall on him/her. This

song text is also a perfect example of sensitivity to semantic considerations.

Conclusion

Linguistic semantics in choral music compositions is very important and deserves scholarly attention. Manifestations of the patterns vary. In some cases, it is a sentential cohesion problem while in others; it is an aspect of the

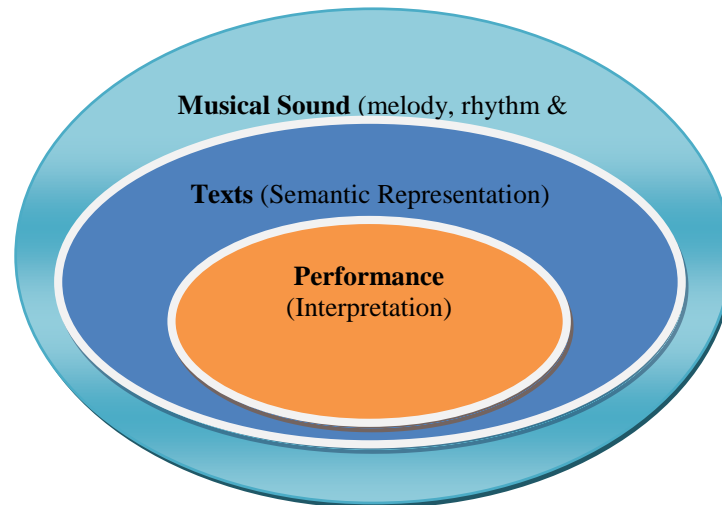


Figure 1. Compositional model for choral music.

lyrics alone and then the position of the song persona. It can be argued that the ordering of the lyrics would not matter much in terms of the overall meaning of the song but it is important that composers themselves understand the language structures of the lyrics they use in their compositions.

Our focus thus far has been primarily with the semantic implication of the text used in choral music composition by some composers in Ghana and their sensitivity to it. An in-depth study of this exegesis would help provide a foundation for similar research on other genres, including popular music and other art forms in other Ghanaian languages. Like Frith (1996: 168) argues “the use of language in pop songs has much to do with establishing the communicative situation as with communicating. It is believed that this will offer a new approach to not only choral music compositions but other vocal forms of music.

In conclusion, the inherent semantic problems in the songs make it difficult to provide any clear, objective data about how many songs have problems with the positioning of song personas or clarifications with regard to the context of the composition and the perspective of sentential cohesion. It is envisaged that corpus studies on this topic would help form a necessary backdrop against which we could understand the particulars of any given song. In that case, patterns and characteristics of particular composer and his compositions can be noted. If there are discernible trends across the choral music of today, it can be established and then models of choral music composition can be developed. It is recommended that the texts of choral music should be logical in relation to other sentence structures within the context of the composition. The following model of choral music composition is just a guide to remind a composer who sits down to create a choral work for performance. The

text is his means of ensuring full participation of his creation.

The first level is the music itself with it associated melody, rhythm and harmony (Figure 1). The second level is the text where semantic considerations should be systematically adhered to. The third level is how the music should be interpreted in terms of intensity of sound and speed. These are very important to consider in choral music composition.

Conflict of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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ⁱ An Ethnic group in Ghana