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## Functions of Head as Non-Verbal Communication in Yoruba Novels

**Dr. Adesanya, Ahmed Odunrinde**

Senior Lecturer, Department of African Languages, Literatures and Communication Arts,  
Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos Nigeria

### **Abstract:**

*Non-verbal communication is a very germane aspect of communication which uses other means other than the words of mouth. African scholars have not given enough attention to this important means of communication especially the use of human head in Yorùbá literary works which this research work aims to address. The theoretical framework on which this work is based is called semiotics- a theory of signification and/or communication while textual analysis is the methodology applied. Four Yorùbá novels were purposively selected because they possess the non-verbal cues needed for the analysis. They are: Àkùkọ̀ Gàgàrà, Àdìitú Olódùmaré, Kékeré Èkùn and Akèngbè Èmu. Findings revealed that the head was used to express affirmation and co-operation, submission and subjection to higher authority. It was also used to lay emphasis on speech acceptance, express authenticity and genuineness and to express rejection and bewilderment. The head as a non-verbal communicative code manifested in the selected novels in different ways for an understanding of the texts.*

**Keywords:** Head, Semiotics, Textual analysis, Code, Yorùbá novels

### **1. Introduction**

Non-verbal communication accounts for a greater percentage of messages in communication. This, is in accordance with Mehrabian and Ferris (1967: 250) who say "It is suggested that the combined effect of simultaneous verbal, vocal and facial attitude communications is a weighted sum of their independent effects – with coefficient of .07, .38 and .55 respectively". Mehrabian and Ferris (1967) recognize three levels of communication. These are words, tone of voice and body language. They find out in their investigation that words account for 7 per cent, tone of voice accounts for 38 per cent and body language takes 55 percent. The research shows that non-verbal communication takes precedence over verbal communication. Also, Argyle et al (1970) analyse the communication of submissive versus dominant attitude and find out that non-verbal cues have 4.3 times the effect of verbal cues. In other words, body posture communicates domineering status. This work is an examination of the functions of the human head as a form of non-verbal communication in Yorùbá novels.

### **2. Methodology**

The methodology adopted in this work is textual analysis. Every text which is produced can be seen to have a function in the environment in which it is created. Whenever a text producer (speaker or writer) uses language, whether verbal or non-verbal, he or she does so with particular communicative objectives in mind. In different contexts, human communication is a fundamentally willful endeavour, the primary role of which is to fulfil personal or social needs in some ways. According to Gavins (2007) a participant may use text as a form of creative expression to inform, question, deceive, argue, command, request or fulfil some other objective in a multifarious range of possibilities.

### **3. Literature Review**

The human head is one of the visible human physiological features used in non-verbal communication. The head may communicate affirmation or rejection depending on the position to which it is put. The head may be manipulated in so many ways to communicate various expressions. However, the head nod and the head shake are the most important communicative positions. Pease and Pease (2004) averred that the head nod is an inborn gesture of submission. According to them, its connotative meaning is related to the culture of the people. They explain:

In India, the head is rocked from side to side, called the Head Wobble, to signal "Yes". This is confusing for Westerners and Europeans, who use the gesture to communicate "Maybe yes-maybe no"... In Japan, head nodding doesn't necessarily mean "Yes, I agree"- it usually means "Yes, I hear you". In Arab countries, they use a single, upward movement which means no, while Bulgarians use the common no gesture to mean yes.  
(p.231)

In the above, culture plays a major factor in the behaviour of the people using their head in the expression of messages.

Pease and Pease(2004) further note that the head shake may also be an innate action as evolutionary biologists stated that it is the first form of nonverbal communication that humans learn. This theory explains that when the newborn baby has become satisfied with milk, it shakes its head from side to side to discontinue the mother's breast. The authors say that 'When Bill Clinton uttered his famous phrase, "I did not have sex with that woman" during Monica Lewinsky inquest, he did not use a Head Shake"

In this study, head is used as an emblem. According to Ekman and Friesen (1969:63), emblems are non-verbal communicative behaviours that substitute for words. Also, Pearson et al. (2003:109) conceive emblems as "movements that substitute for words and phrases."

#### 4. Theory

The theoretical framework upon which this work is grounded is semiotics. Abrams and Harpham (2009) point out that semiotics deals with the analysis of both verbal and non-verbal systems of communication. Lending credence to the lengthy nature of semiotics, Tobin (1990: 6) explains that semiotics includes visual and verbal as well as tactile and olfactory signs (all signs or signals which are accessible to and can be perceived by all our senses) as they form code systems which systematically communicate information or messages in literally every field of human behaviour and enterprise. There is almost no subject which is not open to (or has not already been the subject of) semiotic analysis. Indeed semioticians spend more time trying to define their discipline than linguists (or probably anyone else) seem to do. The elements of semiotics that will be explored in this study are: sign, signification and indexical signification.

##### 4.1. Sign

Sign has been defined by various authors, especially semioticians. For instance, Barthes (1964:1) in his definition of semiology states:

Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification.

Barthes explicates that semiology is concerned with every system of signs but maintains that non-verbal signs are conveyed in a linguistic message (p. 2). Also, Hawkes (1977:7) referring to Jakobson takes all message to be sign and semiotics as comprising all the principles through which the structure of the signs, their functions within messages, their systems, the various messages they exude through verbal and non-verbal are based.

Eco (1976:16) offers a definition of sign based on his reference to Morris (1938) with modification:

I propose to define as a sign everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else. In other terms I would like to accept the definition proposed by Morris (1938) according to which "something is a sign only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter... Semiotics, then, is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of objects, but with ordinary objects in so far (and only in so far) as they participate in semiosis".

Eco is of the opinion that sign is everything that stands for something else. However, he believes that there must have been an earlier established social rule to validate something that stands for something else. In his modification of Morris's definition, he says "the interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood as the possible interpretation by a possible interpreter" (p.16). What Eco is trying to put forward is that sign must be socially acceptable as sign in the communal environment where it is regarded as a sign.

Eco (1976:16-19) further sub-classifies sign into two. These are natural signs and non-intentional signs. Natural signs are further classified into two: they are physical events coming from a natural source and human behaviour that are not deliberately carried out by its senders. Under the category of physical events coming from a natural source, Eco exemplifies inferences from smoke the presence of fire, from a wet spot the presence of a raindrop and from a track on the sand the passage of a particular animal. Eco (1976:17) undermines the examples above as semiotic acts. To him:

All these are cases of inference and our everyday life is filled with a lot of these inferential acts. It is incorrect to say that every act of inference is a 'semiotic' act – even though Peirce did so – and it is probably too rash a statement to assert that every semiotic process implies an act of inference, but it can be maintained that there exist acts of inference which must be recognized as semiotic acts.

Eco (1976: 15) quotes Peirce in defining semiosis as "an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in anyway resolvable into actions between pairs". Eco's invalidation of the examples of inferences provided above as semiotic acts, considering Peirce's meaning of semiosis is questionable as shall be seen at present. Equally, Eco's statement is contradictory because, later, he makes a u-turn from an outright nullity of inferences as semiotic acts to "some acts of inference which must be recognized as semiotic acts". (p.15)

Inference and especially a track on the sand showing the passage of a given animal has actually been demonstrated as an act of semiosis, contrary to Eco's assertion. According to Johansen and Larsen (2002:24-25) in

Voltaire's tale *Zadig or Destiny* (1747), the queen's eunuchs are in trouble after realizing that her dog is missing. They ask Zadig to help them search for the dog. The vivid description of the dog which Zadig gives having told them he hasn't seen the dog makes them believe that Zadig is a thief and a liar. The court sentences him to be flogged and banished from the kingdom and later, the dog is found. Zadig explains how he was able to give an accurate description of the dog without ever having seen it:

I saw an animal's tracks on the sand and I judged without difficulty they were the tracks of a small dog. The long shallow furrows printed on the little ridges of sand between the tracks of the paws informed me that the animal was a bitch with pendant dugs, which hence had had puppies recently. Other tracks in a different direction, which seemed all the time to have scraped the surface of the sand beside the fore-paws, gave me the idea that the bitch had very long ears; and as I remarked that the sand was always less hollowed by one paw than by the three others, I concluded that our august queen's bitch was somewhat lame, if I dare say so. (p 24)

In the observation of *Zadig* above, Johansen and Larsen point out that two essential properties of a sign are revealed. The first one is taken from Peirce's definition of sign, "something by knowing which we know something more" (p. 25). This indicates that we learn something more by comprehending a sign, because it stands for something else. The second property is the ability to use a sign for inference and formation of hypotheses about something else, which is what the sign stands for. Aside from these two properties, the above establishes that tracks on the sand through which a particular animal passed is a 'semiotic act' contrary to Eco (1976). The furrows in the sand are the sign (representamen); the dog is what is represented (object) while *Zadig's* interpretation and translation of the furrow's meaning is the sense made of the sign (interpretant)

#### 4.2. Signification

Signification according to Saussure (1974:114) is the relationship between the two parts of the sign, which is the signifier and the signified. Barthes (1964:33) also agrees with Saussure that signification is not the 'thing', but the mental representation of the 'thing', which is the concept. He maintains that signification is the association of the signifier with the signified but points out that the association is arbitrary. Eco (1976:8) explains that "a signification system is an autonomous semiotic construct that has an abstract mode of existence independent of any possible communicative act it makes possible". A synthesis of the author's views above on signification shows that it is the outcome of the relationship between the signifier and the signified but it will be too hasty to jump to a conclusion that such a relationship is arbitrary as noted by Barthes. An examination of the three modes of the signification as postulated by Peirce and most commonly employed within a broadly Saussurean framework will shed more light on the relationship. They are symbol/symbolic, icon/iconic and index/indexical.

#### 4.3. Indexical Signification

Chandler (2006:49) describes indexical sign as a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified – this link can be observed or inferred: e.g. 'natural signs' (smoke, thunder, footprints, echoes, non-synthetic odours and flavours), medical symptoms (pain, a rash, pulse rate), measuring instruments (weather clock, thermometer, clock, spirit-level), 'signals' (a knock on a door, a phone ringing), pointers (a pointing 'index' finger, a directional signpost), recordings (a photograph, a film, video or television shot, an audio-recorded voice), personal 'trademarks' (handwriting, catchphrase) and indexical words ('that', 'this', 'here', 'there').

In his own view of indexical sign, Danesi (2004: 31) states:

Indexicality manifests itself in all kinds of representational behaviours. Its most typical manifestation can be seen in the pointing index finger, which humans over the world use instinctively to point out and locate things, people, and events in the world... Indexicality is evidence that human consciousness is not only attentive to patterns of colour, shape, etc., resulting in iconic signs, but also to the recurrent relational and cause and effect patterns that are contingent on time and space.

Expressing their own viewpoint, William et. al (2004:93) maintain that index fulfils its function by 'pointing out' its referent, typically by being a partial or representative sample of it. According to the scholars, indexes are not arbitrary, since their presence has in some sense been caused by their referent. For this reason it is sometimes said that there is a causal link between an indexical sign and its referent. The track of an animal, for example, points to the existence of the animal by representing part of it. The presence of smoke is an index of fire. A very important kind of indexical sign, referred to as symptomatic sign is mentioned by Lyons (1977:108) and William et. al (2004:93-94). According to William et. al (2004), symptomatic signs spontaneously convey the internal state or emotions of the sender and thus represent the sender in an indexical manner. For example, the fact that our body temperature rises when we are ill is a spontaneous reflection of our internal state. Equally, when someone steps on our foot and we cry out, the cry is a spontaneous reflection of our internal state (surprise and pain) and thus constitutes a symptomatic sign. The authors express that since symptomatic signs are spontaneous, they may be considered to be deliberately selected by the sender for purposes of communication. They note that people do not choose to cry out in pain in the same way as they might, for example, decide to name their dwelling place a house, home, dwelling, or residence in the appropriate circumstances (William, et.al 2004).

In their exploration of indexical sign, Johansen and Larsen (2002:32) provide a vivid example that since the wind affects the trees by bending them in the same direction, the slant of the trees can function as a sign of the dominant wind

direction. This is regarded as a causal relationship whereby the dynamical object influences the sign; and without the bending force of the wind, functioning as the dynamical object, the trees would not function as a sign.

## 5. Analyses

In Akùkò Gàgàrà, in a meeting of the chieftaincy council, the head nod was employed by the president after the speech of a northern king:

Ọba yíì dídè láti sòrò... ó sì sòrò lórí èkúnwó àwọn òsìsẹ́. Ó rọ olórí ijọba pé kí ó má gbàgbé ti àwọn lóbalóba. Ó pòwè pé odíderé ẹyẹ ilókun, àlùkò ẹyẹ ilú òsà, bó bá jojú gbé, kó má johùn gbé o. Bójú bá yẹjú kóhùn má yẹhùn. Ààrẹ mi orí rẹ pé òun gbó ọrọ rẹ yékéyéké. (p.37)

This king stood up to speak... he then spoke on the pay rise for workers. He pleaded with the head of government not to forget to do same for the oba-in-council. He rendered a proverb that should you forget my facial expression, do not forget our agreement. The president nodded his head that he understood him very well.

According to Pease and Pease (2004:231), head nod is a non-verbal communication sign of positive or affirmative feeling. They maintain that nodding the head is an excellent tool for creating rapport, getting agreement and cooperation. In the text above, head nod is employed by the president as an indexical signification of affirmation and cooperation with the speech of the king.

The head is also used to express submission and subjection to higher authority. (Pease and Pease, 2004:230). This is displayed in Ayòmidé in an interaction between Jàndùkú and Ológbìn-ín:

Jàndùkú jó lọ sí ibi tí Ológbìn-ín tí í ẹ ọba orílẹ̀ Ọgbín jókòó sí. Ó foríbalẹ̀ fún kábíyèsí. Onítòhún ju ìrùkèrẹ̀ sí i, ó sì dídè, ó n bá eégún jó lọ sí ibi tí ètùtù yòò ti wáyé. Onílù kò dáké bẹ̀ẹ̀ ni kò pa ohùn ilù dà. (p.4)

Jàndùkú danced to where Ológbìn-ín who is the king of Ọgbín nation sat. He bowed his head before the king who reciprocated by waving his horse-tail to him; he then got up and danced along with the masquerade to where the ritual would take place. The drummer did not stop; neither did he change the tone of the drum.

The behaviour of Jàndùkú – ó foríbalẹ̀ fún kábíyèsí (He bowed his head before the king) is submissive. This behaviour is an indexical signification of homage in a cultural context to the king who is higher in rank than everyone present at that venue.

Also, the head functions as illustrators. Illustrators are movements which are directly connected to speech, serving to illustrate what is being said verbally. (Ekman and Friesen, 1969:68). One of the subcategories of illustrators is batons. Batons emphasize a particular word or phrase as expressed in ÀdìitúOlódùmarè, during a conversation between Àdìitú and Adémètò:

Inú n bí Adémètò ní isàlẹ̀ ọkàn rẹ̀, ó fi ohun gbogbo sínú. Ìgbà tí Àdìitú tilẹ̀ pè é tí ó ní, “şé iwà tí àbùrò rẹ̀ n hù yí dára?” Şe lo mi orí tí ó ní, “Má sòrò rára, fi gbogbo jà fún mi jà” (p.75)

Adémètò is getting angry in the depth of his heart but he is controlling his temper. Even when Àdìitú called him and asked: ‘Is the attitude your younger sister portraying good?’ He shook his head and said, “Do not speak at all, leave all the issue for me to tackle”.

In the excerpt, the shaking of head by Adémètò is the baton used to emphasize his speech – má sòrò rára, fi gbogbo jà fún mi jà (do not speak at all; leave all the issue for me to tackle). The shaking, in a nutshell is an indexical signification of Adémètò’s readiness to confront and fight his younger sister, Iyúnadé, Àdìitú’s fiancée.

The head functions as regulators. Regulators are communicative behaviours which maintain the back-and-forth nature of speaking and listening between two or more interactants (Ekman and Friesen, 1969:82). One of the subdivisions of regulators is points. Points is used in explaining, interrupting and listening. In Kékeré Èkùn, Ràimí makes use of points in listening to Àlàbí’s reading of his letter and explaining to him that he now accepts the content of the letter:

Bí Àlàbí ti nka létà yí ni Ràimí ními orí gégé bí àmì pé ó ti ẹ işẹ̀ gidì ní aşeyanjú. Bí ó sì ti níparí rẹ̀, ó di ẹşẹ̀ méjèjè, ó gbá Àlàbí... ó ní “Hàhẹ̀n, o şẹşẹ̀ mọ létà kọ ni. Níbo lo fẹ̀yí sí tẹ̀lẹ̀?” (p.75)

As Àlàbí reads the letter, Ràimí nods his head as a sign that he has successfully completed an important task. As he finishes it, he hits Alabi with his clenched fists... he says “Oh yes, you have just known how to write a letter well. Why have you not demonstrated such expertise before now?”

Àlàbí, a literate, has just written a letter for Ràimí, an illiterate. The latter had adjudged the letter to have been badly written, Àlàbí, having read it to him. Àlàbí has to re-write it a second time. In the process of reading the letter, Ràimí makes use of the points to indexically signify the acceptance of the content of the letter – ními orí (continues to shake his head).

The head is used to testify to utterances among interactants. This takes place in Akèngbè Èmu through the nodding of the head by Chief Bóbagbègà.

Arábinrin Ìyábòdé jẹrì sí ọrọ̀ Bádéjọ̀ yíì, ó ní, “Òótọ̀ lórò̀ yín. Bí ọlọpáá kan bá kọ ọta mẹwáá sínú ìbọ̀n rẹ̀ lọ sí ìta, nígbà tí ó bá dé, tí ó jẹ ọta méjọ̀ péré ni ó kó wálé, yóò şàlàyé ibi tí ọta ìbọ̀n méjì tó kù wà, àlàyé rẹ̀ gbọ̀dọ̀ múná dọko. Şùgbọ̀n tí ó bá jẹ pé àlàyé rẹ̀ kò

bójúmu tó. Àtìmólé ni yóò máa gbé. Mo rò pé èyí ní ba àwọn náà lẹrù láti yín ìbọn wọn ní ìyìn-kú-yìn". Bí Ìyábòdé ti ní sọrọ bẹẹ ni mo ní fi orí jẹrírí sí ọrọ rẹ. (p.56)

The woman, Ìyábòdé confirmed Bádéjọ's speech. She said, "Your speech is true. If a policeman puts ten bullets in his gun while going out, and at his return has only eight bullets left, he will explain the whereabouts of the two remaining bullets and if his explanation is not acceptable, he will remain in detention. I think this instills fear in them which cautions them from indiscriminate shooting". As Ìyábòdé speaks so do I testify to her speech with my head.

Chief Bọbagbẹgà testifies to Ìyábòdé's speech by using non-verbal behaviour – Bí Ìyábòdé ti ní sọrọ bẹẹ ni mo ní fi orí jẹrírí sí ọrọ rẹ (As Ìyábòdé speaks so do I testify to her speech with my head). The nodding of the head by Chief Bọbagbẹgà indexically signified the authenticity and genuineness of Ìyábòdé's speech.

On the other hand, the head is used to express disagreement in conversation among interactants. The head shake gesture, according to Pease and Pease (2004:232) connotes a negative attitude, usually used to indicate rejection. In Àdìtú Olódumàrè, Adémètọ exhibits head shake to disagree with his sister, Iyùnádé:

Adémètọ ní, "Àdìtú ni mo mọ ní ọrẹ mi pàtàkì ní ilẹ̀ yí". Àfi ìgbà tí Iyùnádé ké tí ó ní, "Hén, on náà ni ògòngò ọrùn, bẹ̀ lẹ̀mi ní pẹ̀ é ní tẹ̀mi, ẹ̀ kò rí bí ọrùn rẹ̀ ti gùn bí ògòngò ní?" Adémètọ mi orí, pẹ̀lú iyanu. Ó gbin, ó sọ orí sésésé ó tún wo Iyùnádé lẹ̀kẹ̀kẹ̀ sí i ó ní, Iyùnádé! Iyùnádé! Iyùnádé! Hepà rẹ. A ó ma wo ọkọ tí o ma fẹ́ kí o ma bú gbogbo ọkùnrin sà". (p.60)

Adémètọ says "Àdìtú is the one I know as my important friend in this land." Then Iyùnádé shouts and says, "Yes; he is the ostrich-neck. That is how I call him. Don't you see how long his neck is like that of the ostrich?" Adémètọ shakes his head in bewilderment; he grunts; pushes his head left and right and looks at Iyùnádé once again and says "Iyùnádé! Iyùnádé! Iyùnádé! I am afraid. We await the kind of husband that you will marry, considering your attitude of always insulting all men."

Adémètọ indexically signified disagreement with his younger sister, Iyùnádé, by headshake. The non-verbal sign shows rejection and bewilderment of Iyùnádé's allegation that Àdìtú's neck is long like that of the ostrich.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, the non-verbal communicative use of the head has been analysed. The head nod and the head shake are employed as substitutes for words and phrases. The two signs are contextually situated to connote their respective codes. In this study, for instance, head shake communicates both negative and positive behaviours among the characters in the texts; this invalidates Pease and Pease (2004: 232) assertion that head shake can only be employed to signify a negative attitude. It has also been shown here that one sign may connote more than one code depending on its context. The head nod is employed as illustrators to indexically signify emphasis on a particular word or phrase, as regulators in explaining and listening among interactants. It also indexicalises testimony to utterances in interpersonal communication. On the other hand, the head shake indexically signifies disagreement and could be used in a negative attitude especially in rejection among interactants although it is rarely employed to show agreement.

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