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Part 4: Style in verbal art from Benin

Part 4: Style in Fongbe verbal art

In this part of the book, I will describe style in **hwènùxó**. Style depicts the poetic function that conveys the orientation of the utterance, or the performer's attitude towards what she or he is speaking about (Jakobson 1960: 356). The performance is a way of speaking that increases the freedom of the language use of the performer. I will start with the description of the grammatical choices that the performers make. These choices include the aspect and mood of the verbs, and the non-perfective verbal marker that highlights the topic of the story. Next, I will describe the individual choices that the performers make to colour their performance with a personal touch. Finally, I will discuss the stylistic devices that occur in the songs.

13. Grammatical choices

The grammatical choices in style often regard the function of the verb. Fongbe is an aspect rather than a tense language. The stories in the corpus have a number of verbal markers. Verbal markers indicate aspect or mood and prefix to the bare verb. I will describe the aspect and mood markers, and the non-perfective marker that marks the topic in all the stories. I will discuss the specific serial verb constructions and their use in the peak and in the pleonastic or idiomatic expressions that convey motion and position.

13.1. Aspect and Mood: action and comment

Performers use an aspect or mood marker to colour a verb phrase in the performance of storytelling. Aspect and mood are used at the level of the clause. Performers use aspect markers to change the meaning of a verb phrase. They use mood markers to show the beliefs and intentions of the central participant.

Aspect markers

The performers use four aspect markers that convey the nature of an action. These markers convey frequency, recurrence and rearrangement of the chain of events. The marker **nó** marks a habit. The performers use the marker **nó** to tell a routine action. The markers **lɛ** 'repeat' and **vɔ** 'reiterate' underline the repetition of an action. Performers often combine the two markers **lɛ vɔ** to indicate superabundant and

recurrent actions. The marker **ko** marks the rearrangement of the chain of events and underlines the out-of-sequence aspect.⁹⁰

The routine marker

The marker **nó** indicates the frequency of actions and conveys that these actions are a routine. The marker is translated as ‘always’. The following example shows the routine marker in the reported speech of an interior monologue:

mè ká nó wà éló nu mi tegbe tegbe aji [0.68]
 person but RM do DEM_N LOC 1SG alwaysalways QI
 ‘but who kept on to do this to me again and again?’ [AC 2: 68]

The example shows the routine marker, which is emphasized by the duplication of the Fongbe **tegbe** ‘again and again’.

The recurrence markers

Performers often use the markers **le** ‘reiterative’ and **vɔ** ‘repeat’ to highlight recurrent actions in successive paragraphs that repeat the violation of a taboo. The mother cat in one of the ‘Cat and leopard’-stories is convinced that her children must not eat their cousins. She refuses to serve the meat of the leopard’s cubs, but serves her children the **wɔ** porridge. She reheats the meat, and returns it to her stepsister the leopard. The following example shows her anger:

bó lé sɔ lan ɔ sɔ nyi jĩ tɔn [1.97]
 CJss RCM take meat DEF take throw LOGGEN
 ‘and she threw once more the meat on top of her **wɔ** porridge’ [AC 16:138]

Performers also use the recurrence markers both, as the following example from ‘The sadist co-wife’ shows:

bó lé klɔ zɛn ɔ [0.61]
 CJss RCM wash pot DEF
 ‘and she thoroughly washed the pot’

bó lé vɔ ɔa nùsúnnú dǽvo [0.39]
 CJss RCM RCM prepare sauce other
 ‘and once more she cooked a fresh sauce’

⁹⁰ I will discuss the use of the irrealis marker **na** and the reported irrealis marker **kó** in the section on mood, pp. 173f.

bó lé dũ [1.87]

CJss RCM eat

‘and once more she ate it’ [AC 2: 51 -53]

The out-of-sequence marker

Performers use the out-of-sequence marker **ko** to rearrange the chain of events by exchanging two events of the plot of the story.⁹¹ The way the performer conveys the story’s trajectory ‘plot’ differs from the ‘history’ of the story. The performer tells a chain of events that shows ‘ACBD’ instead of ‘ABCD’ (Givón 2001. I: 295).⁹²

Let us consider a passage from the Abomey-Calavi version of the ‘Cat and leopard’ stories, which is the longest one of the three editions (AC 16). The passage is a change of scene and chronology, and anticipates what the leopard will see, when she arrives at the cat’s house. The performer starts this story with a scoop, an exclusive news story that reports the wicked hiding in ambush of the powerful leopard who fails to murder the wise cat, her stepsister. In spite of this, she suggests to kill all the children since the price of maize went up. The cat reluctantly agrees. After the leopard killed four of her five children, the cat still has five children, for she serves her children the cub-meat, and returns the leftovers to the leopard.

The example begins with the leopard that wonders about the odd taste of the meat that the cat sent. She decides to visit the cat. The example shows the instantaneous switch of decor, from the house of the leopard over to the house of the cat. The performer reports what happened there earlier that morning, before the leopard planned to visit the cat.

é wá⁹³ [0.80]

CL₃ come.to

‘the leopard eventually said to herself, what is going on’

⁹¹ The tone of this marker is mid, though its position in the clause often entails a high tone.

⁹² **ko** is also used to convey an accomplished action in combination with the non-perfective marker (see p. 180).

⁹³ The performer meant to say: **é wá dũ àn** (Désiré Vigan 1976, personal communication).

ḍé lan é ḍù émí ḍé ɔ ḍò kpíkácá émí wè
 CP meat REL eat LOG AUX TOP_{CL} AUX suspect LOG pFOC
 ‘that the meat that she was eating, that she had her doubts’ [0.12]

émí ná ḍisa nyi kpón nafi émi kò le [1.20]
 LOG RIM walk throw check aunt LOG neck turn
 ‘that she would see what her stepsister was up to’

àn awíí kó fón zǎn-zǎn [0.24]
 MDM cat OSM wake-up morning-morning
 ‘God forbid! the cat had already woken up early’

bo kò dun sìn bo lè wù nú vǐ tòn atóón lé bí [0.72]
 CJss OSM draw water CJss bath body LOCchild GEN five PL QF
 ‘and had already drawn water and bathed all her five children’

‘The leopard eventually said to herself what is going on! That the meat she was eating had a strange taste. She said that she would see what her stepsister was up to. God forbid! The cat had already woken up early, and she had already drawn water from the well to bath all her five children.’ [AC 16: 154-158]

The first three utterances of the example take place in the leopard’s place. The fourth and fifth utterances of this example show the out-of-sequence markers **kó** and **kò**. The fourth utterance begins with the meta-discourse marker that expresses disapproval (see p. 192). The story takes a dramatic turn after this passage.

In storytelling, the marker **kò** is often translated into ‘already plus a pluperfect tense’ (Désiré Vigan 1976, personal communication). The marker occurs 59 times in the corpus. It is translated into the pluperfect tense in only three cases (AC 3, AC 4: 198, A 4: 77). In one case, it occurs in a negative clause with the negation **{kun...ó}** meaning ‘had not yet gone’ (AC 4: 218).

On the other hand, Lefebvre mentions that the interpretation of a sentence containing **kò** is ambiguous.⁹⁴ Hence, Lefebvre suggests that **kò** has two functions. It is either the marker of anteriority the ‘pluperfect tense’ or the equivalent of the adverb ‘already’. There can be two occurrences of **kò** within the same clause (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 89ff., 375ff.). The corpus does not show these two occurrences of the marker in the same clause. Therefore, I cannot verify whether the marker has two functions indeed.

⁹⁴ The performers of the corpus said **kò** or **kó**. It is puzzling why Lefebvre permanently notes **kò**.

Mood

Mood expresses the attitude of the speaker about what happens next in the story. Generally, the performers use three intentional markers in the story. The marker **ná** conveys intentional information about an event that may happen, but is, on the contrary, not realised. The marker expresses an irrealis.

The combination {**na + ko**} is a reported irrealis marker that conveys what might have happened if the central participant had not acted. The markers **ní** and **ma** convey an optative. They convey intentional information about an action that the speaker strongly desires or about a condition to make an action happen. Mood in the performance of storytelling reflects the attitude and opinions of the central participant.⁹⁵

The irrealis marker **ná**

Let us consider the mood marker **ná**. Performers use this marker also in storytelling. The marker **ná** is used to indicate the action as a potential happening: the mood of irrealis. The marker **ná** reflects the speaker's attitude towards a potential incident in the story. The central participant mentions that an action or event may happen in the future, or, when it is used in a conditional clause, that it might happen. The underlying style figure is omission. What happens next is that the central participant warns off doing something. The effect is rhetorical, for the suspense increases.

The next example is from one of the versions of 'The day to thresh the millet' (A 4). The example is a fragment that conveys the expectations of the central participant in reported speech. It shows a conditional clause in the second utterance that starts a new paragraph. The first utterance of the example is the last utterance of a paragraph. The example shows the verb 'say' and indirect speech in combination with the mood marker **ná** to indicate that he better should not marry her, for his wives would make fun of her (which did not happen):

b'é dḡ jī blǎ dḡ wù émitòn [1,97]
 CJds.CL₃ say CP defect be body LOG.GEN
 'and she said that her body was not perfect'

lé é dà émi ǎ
 CP 3SG marry LOG TOP_{CL}
 'that if he married her'

⁹⁵ The performers convey commands and inhibitions by using a negative verb phrase construction. This construction only occurs in songs (see pp. 200 f).

ø tɔn lé na zun ɖɔ nú émi
 ø GEN PL IRR insult say LOC LOG
 ‘his ones would insult her’

‘And she said that her body was not perfect. If he married her, his wives would insult her.’ (A 4: 14-16)

The story learns that ‘his ones’ meaning the other wives of the household will not insult the new wife, for only the eldest wife insults her. The other co-wives and sisters-in-law fall silent at the slandering of the first co-wife (A 4: 71-79).

The reported irrealis marker (RIM)

The combination of {ná + **ko** + **VP**} shows the mood that an action might have happened. This occurs sometimes in the ‘breaking news’ sequence after the denouement, as shows the following example, taken from the Abomey-Calavi version of ‘Cat and leopard’-story. The central participant, that is the youngest cat, reports his courageous action to his mother who arrived after the almost fatal attack from the leopard. Note the grammatical rapport between the clauses, which is beyond the bounds of the utterances:

o kɔ ná kó [0.38]
 oh leopard RIM
 ‘oh the leopard would have’

hù mɛ bĩ bó ko nù hun bĩ sín lan mɛ [0.29]
 kill person QF CJss RIM drink blood QF GEN meat LOC
 ‘killed everybody and would have sucked out all the blood from the meat’

‘Oh! The leopard would have killed all his brothers, and she would have sucked out all the blood from their corpses’ [AC 16: 338, 339]⁹⁶

⁹⁶ The short pauses indicate the staccato of the utterances (see ‘denouement’ p. 159). The tone of the verbal mood marker is dependent on the tone of the preceding element; the marker always shares the tone of the preceding pronoun subject, with the exception of the plural **mĩ**, ‘we’, and **yě**, ‘they’. In both cases, the tone is adapted: **mĩ kó** and **yě kó**.

The optative markers *nĩ* and *ma*

The verbal mood markers *nĩ* and *ma* require an action, for example a wish or a command. These optative markers have the nuances of either ‘please’ or ‘must’.

kpə wá ɖɔ nú awii ɖə nĩ [0.67]
 leopard come say LOC cat CP LOC.CL₃
 ‘the leopard said to the cat, saying to her’

lee nĩ e ka só vĩ-me-tən ɖokpó ɖokpó
 CP OPT CL₃ but take child-person-GEN one one

bo hu ɔ
 CJss kill TOP_{CL} [0.70]
 ‘that well, that one should take one’s children one by the other and kill it’

e ma ná dó nɔ ɖà wɔ vɔvɔ ná aji
 3SG OPT IRM put RM prepare porridge red LOC IQ

amiwɔ ná aji [1.36]
 red.porridge LOC IQ
 ‘one must cook red **wɔ** porridge at least with it, a red **wɔ** with it’ [laughter]

‘The leopard said to the cat, saying, that, well, that they must take their children, one after the other, and kill them; that they must cook a red **wɔ** porridge with it, a red **wɔ** porridge with it’ [AC 16: 55-57]⁹⁷

13.2. The non-perfective marker

The non-perfective marker refers to the topic of the story and the actions that depict the topic. The topic is the heart of the story. The non-perfective marker conveys qualitative information about the general conduct of the agents. The marker presents the topic to the audience as new information, for, pragmatically speaking, the topic refers to the content of the story that the performer will tell. This marker is used as a figure of speech that transforms the issue of the story to a fact of the past that continues in the present. Each reference to the topic throughout the story shows the use of this marker.

The start of the story conveys the topic of the story as an action that started in the past, even before the performer starts to perform the story: ‘My story took off to fly,

⁹⁷ Red porridge = ‘cornmeal and palm oil; Note the pun: **vɔvɔ** means ‘at least’; **vɔvɔ** means ‘red’, ‘scarlet’.

fast hovering around like a bird, and it landed upon the agents A and B. They fought'. However, the performer literally says 'They were fighting'. The topic of the story points to the existing status quo, which consists of the long-term motive of the continuous struggle or adversity between the pair of agents. The topic expresses an ongoing process that has the property of the progressive form.⁹⁸

The non-perfective marker has the following structure:

{**ye** + **dò** + **VP** + **wè**}
 {3 PL + AUX + VP + pFOC}

The formula shows the following aspects: the non-perfective marker focuses on the verbal phrase of the clause. The construction consists of two elements: the auxiliary verb **dò** 'to be' and the predicate focus marker **wè** 'it is'. The auxiliary verb precedes the verb phrase and the focus marker is at the end of the clause. Lefebvre mentions that the imperfective marker "is expressed by a periphrastic expression". However, the glosses differ from the glosses that I use (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 95ff.).

The following fragment is from the Abomey-Calavi edition of 'The sadist co-wife'. The example shows that the performer uses the non-perfective marker to convey the topic and then tells the consequences by adding the routine marker **nó**:

('My story took off to fly, fast hovering around like a bird, and it landed on two co-wives')

bò yě dò wù-hwán wè [1.08]
 CJds 3PL AUX body-spoil pFOC
 'and they were jealous'⁹⁹

ayĩ dè hón ó [0.22]
 earth INDF open TOP_{CL}
 'any day that rose'

hun-xo wè jén yè nó dè [0.89]
 blood-fight pFOC precisely 3PL RM AUX
 'they always fought, that is what they did'

⁹⁸ The properties of the Fongbe progressive form are synonymous to the properties that describe the English language (Givón 2001, I: 289).

⁹⁹ **hwan** 'to spoil' is also used when speaking of food: **nusunnu hwan**, 'the fermented sauce'.

bó nǎ [0.39]
 CJss RM
 ‘and they always’

dò jle-tɔ wɛ́ bó nǎ dò hun-xo wɛ́
AUX quarrel-say pFOC CJss RM AUX blood-fight pFOC
kákákákákákáká [1.01]
 long.time
 ‘argued and fought for a long time’

hun-xo wɛ́ jén yè nǎ dɛ́ [0.89]
 blood-fight pFOC precisely 3PL RM AUX
 ‘they fought continuously, that is what they always did’

‘And they were jealous; any day that rose, they always fought, that is what they did; and they always argued and fought for a long time; they fought continuously, that is what they always did.’ [AC 2: 3-7]

The example shows that the grammatical structure of the non-perfective marker is characterized by permutation.

Performers often refer to the topic by stressing the continuum of time and space, like for example in the following frequently uttered clause:

yě dò yiyi wɛ́ káká ɔ́
 3PL AUX go pFOC SPM TOP_{CL}
 ‘when they kept on going for a long time’ (AC 13: 17)

The example indicates an infinitely long journey that takes a lot of time.

The next example from ‘The sadist co-wife’ shows the occurrence of the non-perfective marker at the start of the denouement. The young co-wife put magical glue around the rim of the saucepot, which is the central participant. After the eldest co-wife relieved herself in the saucepot, she is stuck to the glued rim. She tried to free herself, she wanted to break it, but that was impossible:

é yí zé kpò
 CL₃ get take stick
 ‘she took a stick’

bó [0.26]
 CJss
 ‘and she’

gbá dó [0.27]

break LOC

‘smashed against’

nùsúnnú-zén **ś** **wu** **b̀** **nùsúnnú-zén** **ś** **ná** **m̀**
sauce-GEN.pot DEF GEN-body CJds sauce-GEN.pot DEF IRM find

ten **d̀** **gbá** **jén** **wɛ** [0.13]

place AUX break precisely pFOC

‘the saucepot’s body and the saucepot should really break in pieces’

é **gló** [0.17]

CL₃ be.impossible

‘it did not happen’

é **gbà** **ǎ** [0.49]

CL₃ break NEG

‘he did not break’

‘She took a stick, and she smashed it against the saucepot. It should have broken the saucepot into pieces, but nothing happened. The saucepot did not break.’ (AC 2: 145-150)

The non-perfective marker is also used at the denouement. The last example from ‘The sadist co-wife’ shows the utterances that convey the reactions of the audience, right after the song of the central participant:

[audience:]

nusunnu **gbá** **d̀** **xa** **d̀** **ná** **mi** **[ø]** [0]

sauce break AUX secret put LOC 1PL [ø (pFOC)]

‘the sauce revealed the secret to us’

[performer:]

nùsúnnú-zén **’ne** **d̀** **han** **d̀** [0.29]

sauce-GEN.pot DEM_R AUX sing put

‘that saucepot sung clinging to’

[performer together with the audience:]

o **yonu** **wɛ** **’né** [1.26]

IJ thigh pFOC DEM_R

‘wow! to those thighs’ [AC 2: 167 – 169]

In this example, the non-perfective marker is used twice to reveal the denouement. A close look at the example shows that the performer omitted the predicate focus marker **wɛ** in the first utterance of this example. This often happens in storytelling.

The non-perfective marker is part of the narrative perfective past, and transforms into a perfective past at the denouement. The grammatical construction of the non-perfective marker captures the aspect of an ongoing action, called ‘la forme progressive’ (Guillet 1973 a: 10ff.). Lefebvre described the aspect: “The imperfective aspect describes a situation that has already begun, but that has not been completed at the time of the moment of speech, or at the time of a reference point” (Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 95ff.). The description by Lefebvre provides us with the imperfective aspect, the continuity in the present, and the new information, for example, in ‘he is eating’.

Grammatical permutation within the paragraph

The non-perfective marker occurs in a number of successive clauses that show grammatical permutation and semantic recurrence. The non-perfective marker has the following structure:

{**ye** + **qò** + **VP** + **wɛ**}
 {3 PL + AUX + VP + pFOC}

The formula shows that the non-perfective marker focuses on the verbal phrase of the clause, and consists of the auxiliary verb **qò** ‘to be’ and the predicate focus marker **wɛ** ‘it is’ (see p. 179). The recurrent form of the non-perfective marker involves permutation: the word order is inversed, and leads to nominalization involving permutation. The permutation transforms the usual Fongbe clause order from SV into VS, as is shown in the following example:

{**VP** + **wɛ** + **yě** + **qè**}
 {VP + pFOC + 3PL + AUX}

The subject in both constructions is the personal pronoun **yě** ‘they’, meaning the pair of agents.

The permutation of the recurrent form of the non-perfective marker may add the habitual aspect.¹⁰⁰ In Fongbe, the non-perfective marker conveys the aspect of routine through the particle **nɔ** (see for example p.170, and Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002: 86, 95). The cited sequence shows the permuted form of the non-perfective marker in the second repetition:

¹⁰⁰ The impact of the habitual aspect is described for the English language (Givón 2001, II: 246-250).

{VP + wɛ + ye + nɔ́ + dʒè}

The fragment demonstrates that the focus marker highlights the imminent crisis, which is conveyed by the nominalized verb phrase. The topic becomes a statement due to the recurrence in the successive clauses of this paragraph.¹⁰¹

Other verbal markers also accompany the non-perfective marker. Performers in Abomey sometimes add the verbal aspect marker **ko** to start the story, that is the naming of the agents and the topic. It is used in combination with the emphasized form of the non-perfective marker, as the following example shows:

{wɛ + ko + dʒè + NP}

The Fongbe marker **ko** is used to indicate the aspect of an accomplished action. It has the meaning of ‘already’ when used together with the non-perfective marker.¹⁰² The following fragment shows the start of the Abomey version of ‘The sadist co-wife’ (A 5). The storyteller begins the story with the statement that the husband already had a first wife, but married a second one, as the following example shows:

∅ wɛ ko dʒ’-àsú tɔn’sí [1.19]
 ∅[=3SG] pFOC already be-husband GEN-LOC
 ‘actually, she was already her husband’s wife’

bɔ **àsú** **tɔn** **ká** **yí** **dà** **dʒěvo** [0.84]
 CJds husband GEN but get marry another
 ‘and now her husband got married to another woman’ [AC 5: 1,2]

The example enables us to observe that the performer has the choice of combining different grammatical aspects. The style element in this example is the omission of the subject at the beginning of the performance. The start of the story is elliptical, and it gives relevant information. The performer starts the story with mentioning that the first wife was non-existent. Therefore, she uses a verb phrase that focuses an ‘empty’ subject. The example shows that the performer emphasizes the meaning of ‘already’, and adds dramatically that the first wife’s marriage was over, which the audience understands right from the beginning.

13.3. The serial verb construction of the peak

Performers exclusively use a serial verb construction (SVC) to convey the peak, and all the successive references to the peak throughout the story. The SVC consists of

¹⁰¹ The non-perfective marker probably has also a mnemonic function for the performer and the audience.

¹⁰² Here the translation of the aspectual **ko** into ‘already plus a pluperfect tense’ is suspended.

distinct verbs that each conveys a part of the action within the utterance. The following example shows the peak of Abomey-Calavi 2:

bó nyè mǐ kón dó nùsúnnú ́ mè [2.54]
 CJss relieve excrement pour apply sauce DEF LOC
 ‘and she relieved herself in this very sauce’ [laughter]

bó nyè mǐ kón dó nùsúnnú-zén ’né ́ mè
 CJss relieve excrement pour apply sauce-GEN.pot DEM_R DEF LOC
 ‘and she relieved herself in that saucepot of hers’ [0.44]

bó lé sú dó [0.69]
 CJss RCM close put
 ‘and she put the cover back again’

‘and the first co-wife relieved herself in this very sauce, and she relieved herself in that saucepot of the second co-wife, and she put the cover back again’ [AC 2: 35-37]

The example shows that the performer repeats the clause that conveys the peak, in reaction to the laughter of the audience.

The first time that the second co-wife discovers the spoiled sauce, she cries out the following utterance:

[Ø] éló ká lé gó-sín bó wá jè [0.30]
 [Ø] DEM_N but repeat come-GEN CJss come.to fall
 ‘but what dirt did get again’

nùsúnnú-zén mé nú mǐ
 sauce-GEN.pot GEN.LOC LOC 1SG_O
 ‘in the saucepot in front of me’ [AC 2: 46, 47]

The young woman threw away the spoiled sauce:

é zé nùsúnnú ́ bó yí sǎ kón nyì gbě [0.74]
 CL₃ lift sauce DEF CJss get lift pour throw LOC
 ‘she lifted the sauce and she tossed it out’ [AC 2: 50]

The performers stop the practice of using SVC’s to refer to the peak at the denouement.

13.4. Discussion of and conclusions on the grammatical choices

In this chapter, I discussed the grammatical choices that the performers made. These choices often regard the function of the verb. Style in **hwènùxó** makes obvious that

specific parts of the story have a fixed grammatical form, like for example the use of the non-perfective marker to convey the topic.

The stories in the corpus show a number of verbal markers. Verbal markers that indicate aspect or mood prefix to the bare verb. The meaning of the majority of aspect markers in Fongbe unmistakably gets close to the meaning of tense. The performers use four aspect markers to convey the nature of an action. The routine marker conveys frequency, the two recurrence markers convey recurrence and the out-of-sequence marker conveys a change in the chain of events.

Mood conveys the attitude of the central participant about what happens next in the story. The mood markers allow the central participant to say what might happen or what could have happened, or what would be a desirable outcome. He has the freedom to comment on the agents or to warn them against a lesser fortune. In general, the performers use three intentional markers in storytelling.

The irrealis marker indicates the attitude of the central participant towards a potential happening in the story. The reported irrealis marker signals that an action might have happened. The two optative markers convey a wish or command.

The non-perfective marker is used to convey the topic of the stories. The non-perfective marker refers to a non-perfective aspect in the past that is continuing during the performance, and ends with the denouement.

Finally, I discussed the specific serial verb constructions and their use in the peak.