

# DISCOURSE PEAK AND POETIC CLOSURE IN THE FINAL STANZA OF A TALKING DRUM PERFORMANCE

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A catechist in Cameroon has been performing a drummed church summons twice-weekly for over forty years. Each performance can be considered a variant of a single drum poem. The body of each performance is assembled in a paratactic manner and varies in the details of structure and content, but the final stanza is always the same in each performance. Criteria for determining discourse peak and poetic closure are applied to this particular stanza of the speech surrogate poem. The application of these criteria shows that the concluding stanza of the drum poem clearly contains the discourse peak, and that terminal features which mark 'how poems end' in written Western poetry also mark the close of the drummed Ewondo church summons.

Depuis quarante ans un certain catéchiste au Cameroun lance deux fois par semaine un appel tambouriné aux fidèles. On peut considérer chaque interprétation comme variante d'un seul poème tambouriné. Les éléments de chaque exécution sont assemblés de manière paratactique, et les détails de structure et du contenu varient, mais la dernière strophe reste toujours pareille dans chaque interprétation. Nous appliquons ici à cette dernière strophe du succédané pour un poème oral certains critères pour déterminer le point culminant du discours et la clôture poétique. Cette étude révèle que la strophe finale du poème en contient manifestement le point culminant, et que les traits de clôture qui dans la poésie occidentale écrite indiquent 'comment se termine un poème' ont leurs homologues dans la clôture de l'appel tambouriné à cette église éwondo.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Twice a week for more than forty years, Mr. Antoine Owono, the catechist of the Roman Catholic church in Mekomba, Cameroon, has gathered his congregation for doctrine class by means of the *nkul*, or 'talking drum' of the Ewondo people. The *nkul* is a log a few feet long hollowed out through a slit on the top. Each side of the slit gives a different pitch when struck with a thick wooden stick, and thereby the tones and rhythms of speech can be replicated on the drum and heard for several kilometers.


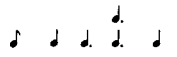
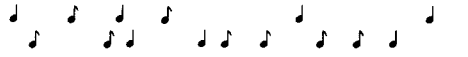




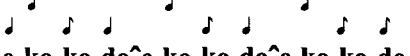



Much has been written about speech surrogates,<sup>1</sup> but little about discourse features of extended performances. Each of Mr. Owono's performances lasts nearly three minutes, and each one is different in the details from all of the other 4000 or so church summons he has drummed. Each performance can be considered as a variant on one drummed poem, though all variants performed by the catechist are equally valid and there is no concept of a single 'correct' way to drum this church summons. Mr. Owono has a stock of about a hundred memorized formulaic drum phrases, which are assembled, repeated, or omitted in differing combinations each time he picks up his drumsticks. An adequate analysis, therefore, must cover not only one performance, but give insight into the full paradigm of approximately 4000 related performances drummed in Mekomba over the last four decades.

The bulk of each discourse is composed through a 'mix-and-match' process of combining preformed drum phrases into variable stanzas, while the ending stanza, containing the discourse peak, may be considered a well-formed, fixed appendage which can be tacked on after various penultimate sections.

<sup>1</sup> The majority of articles and books dealing with speech surrogates printed before 1976 can be found in the following annotated bibliography, and are reprinted in the later two-volume collection:

Umiker, Donna Jean. 1974. *Speech surrogates: Drum and whistle systems*. In Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.), *Current Trends in Linguistics* 12:497-536. The Hague: Mouton.  
Sebeok, Thomas A. and Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok, eds. 1976. *Speech surrogates: Drum and whistle systems. Approaches to Semiotics* 23.1-2. The Hague: Mouton.

Approximately sixty more articles, books, and dissertations printed after 1976, or not mentioned in the above reference sources, are listed in the updated bibliography on speech surrogates, printed as Appendix 5 in Neeley1994.

- (1)   
**a mvo-go ta-ra ngo-go**  
**mvog**  
 To descendants of my father,
-   
**mo-tə te bo na**  
**mot**  
 no one should do this:
-   
**a-bo-go a-ye ke a-wu-lu a su-ga be-kon**  
**abog**  
 When he will go, he walks, to the end of the dead
-   
**an-ga ka-tə-ka-tə N-ton-do-be o-fo-foe na--**  
**kat kat**  
 he tells God, whispering over and over, that
-   
**bi-bu-gi bi do-a-te-ne bi-ne-ə ma ko-koa a mo**  
**bibug doaten bine**  
 “words of doctrine, they are not in my hands.”
-   
**mvo-go ta-ra ngo-go**  
**mvog**  
 Descendants of my father,
-   
**ko-do-gan a-si**  
 [all of you] leave the bed.
-   
**e-ko-ko-do^e-ko-ko-do^e-ko-ko-do**  
 Leave [forever, carelessly, all at once],
-   
**mi zu wo-go do-a-te-ne te--**  
**wog doten**  
 you come hear this doctrine.
-   
**a-ke di a-ke a n-da**  
 Now it goes in the house [church].
-   
**mi-nin-ga ba-re-ə fe-ge ma dzo^a-ya**  
**minga bar fe**  
 You will say to me what else [excuses]?

(TRANSCRIPTION KEY: Each aural line is transcribed on a separate line. Vowel elision is indicated with the symbol ^ . The two pitches of the drum are indicated on two levels. The durations of the drumstrokes are indicated with standard musical notation. On occasion, the drum inserts 'extra' syllables. The top line indicates the precise correlation between drumstrokes and an oral back-translation; the usual spelling of words so modified appears on the middle line of text.)

Mr. Owono calls the church with his drum. This section is the final stanza as shown in (1). Elsewhere a full discourse analysis of Mr. Owono's drummed discourses is presented.<sup>2</sup> In this article the focus is on the only part that does *not* change each time

### 1. FINAL STANZA OF PERFORMANCE AS DISCOURSE PEAK

It should first be noted that the community of Mekomba does not hear these actual words, but a rapid series of short/long and high/low drumstrokes. The drum sound itself offers no indication as to the discourse peak—someone who does not understand the drum language is given no clue by the sequence of sounds perceived. Any sense of discourse peak and poetic closure must be gained by examining the words iconically represented by the drumstrokes. Therefore the remainder of this article will focus on the underlying words of the drum, and not on the sound of the drum actually perceived by the audience.

How does one do a discourse analysis when the discourse is a moving target and changes every time? Perhaps by seeing if any part remains stationary. This concluding stanza appears with minor variations at the end of all ten performances I recorded by Mr. Owono. It is one of few sections that is obligatory in every performance; it is the only section that is consistent in coming at the same place in each performance, and it is the longest stanza (eleven phrases) of any that is obligatory every time.

These structural features alone are enough to mark it as the discourse peak. Everything else may vary, but this closing stanza will be basically unchanged in every performance.

This final stanza includes the emotional peak of the discourse, and this three-phrase peak is the only section that cannot have anaphoric or cataphoric reference, i.e., it must appear only once and only in this place as in (2).

- (2) **abog aye ke a wulu a suga bekon**  
 When he will go, he walks, to the end of the dead
- a nga kat kat Ntondobe ofofoe ne**  
 he tells God, whispering over and over, that
- bibug bi doten bine ma kokoa a mo**  
 words of doctrine, they are not in my hands

Every other phrase in this final stanza may have appeared previously. 'To descendants of my father' can potentially appear up to eight times earlier in a single performance. In stark contrast, these three peak phrases are never repeated in exactly this form; they are never drummed in a redundant manner to ensure comprehension. They are if anything more ephemeral than the rest of the aural discourse. They must be caught by the audience as quickly as they are drummed.

Peak may be marked in a discourse through various linguistic devices. Longacre (1983:39) suggests that the most frequent device used for marking surface structure peak in hortatory discourse is RHETORICAL UNDERLINING. Rhetorical underlining uses such devices as paraphrase and repetition to make the text go more slowly. Mr. Owono's hortatory discourse peak is strikingly *not* underlined in this manner—the rest

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 10 of Neeley 1994 which contains full transcriptions, translations, analyses, and is accompanied by two hour-long cassettes of the Ewondo drumming under study.

of the discourse could be said to be one long paraphrase and repetition of a single theme, and the information load progresses very slowly from the audience's perception. In contrast, the three peak phrases of the final stanza are never paraphrased or repeated and pass very quickly. Part of the peak's power comes from this structural change, and part comes from the gravity of its theme: standing in the judgement, unprepared before an awesome God, and whispering lame excuses into eternity. Both structural and thematic evidence point to the discourse's final stanza as containing the discourse peak.

## 2. FINAL STANZA OF PERFORMANCE AS POETIC CLOSURE

The body of this drum poem is generated based on a paratactic principle, i.e., many parts can be omitted, repeated, and changed without loss of meaning or impact. However, a generating principle that produces a paratactic structure cannot in itself determine a concluding point. Consequently, the reader [hearer] will have no idea from the poem's structure how or when it will conclude" (Smith 1968:100). Since Mekomba residents have been hearing this drum poem for forty years, they have a very good idea how it will end, and probably have some subjective time sense of when it will end. However, the statement stands that the temporal placement of the poem's end cannot be predicted exactly from the body of the poem. The paratactic structural principle cannot generate an ending stanza with an adequate sense of poetic closure; it can only produce more unclosed stanzas. A paratactic structure in poetry can be closed in various ways, but it cannot close itself (Smith 1968:102). Mr. Owono's penultimate stanza varies in each performance, with no clear, consistent indication that 'the end is near'.

A sense of closure "is a function of the perception of structure" (Smith 1968:4). When the poem's structure changes with each performance, closure cannot be perceived until the cue is given: the formula *mot te bo na* 'no one should do this' almost always signals the beginning of the end.

Though it contains the discourse peak, the final stanza can be seen as a tacked-on appendage, albeit one which fits naturally after the various penultimate stanzas used in the paradigm of 4000 performances. This reflects Smith's (1968:195) observation that "one may secure closure for even the most unstructured work simply by appending to it an independently well-closed section." I believe that Mr. Owono feels 'I've said enough' at some fairly arbitrary point, probably based more on a subjective time sense than a sense of discourse progression, and begins to drum the final preformed stanza.<sup>3</sup>

Writing of Yoruba chanted praise poems, *ork*, Barber (1984:509) suggests that rather than "a finished artifact, the chant could be thought of as a stream of material which is poured out until something cuts it off." In a manner similar to Antoine's performance paradigm, *ork* have closing formulas tacked on at a point not determined by what material has come before.

In temporally-perceived arts such as speech and music, formal structure and boundaries of structural units may not be easily recognized by an audience. Arriving at the end of a written poem,

the reader looks back and becomes aware of the poem no longer as a sequence but as a total integrated pattern, a coherent form with its boundaries determined by its inner relationships. Such a conception of wholeness is clearly the product of a written literary culture where form is conceived spatially and where it is made visible, all its parts exposed simultaneously to view on the page, so that boundaries are thrown into relief. There are

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Owono found it very unnatural to talk about his method of composition on the drum and this particular thought, indeed this entire article, represents the author's etic analysis and not any insight gained by Mr. Owono's verbal explanation.

many genres of oral literature—including *ork* [and Mr. Owono's speech surrogate performances—P.N.] . . . to which this model of wholeness is simply inappropriate, for in an important sense the relations between the parts are indeterminate and do not predicate the work's boundaries. (Barber 1984:499-500)

A performance by Mr. Owono is a succession of units, including individual drum formulas and co-occurrent clusters of formulas, which are interchangeable to a great extent. One formula signals the start of the final stanza ('to all my father's descendants') but also appears several times previously in each performance. The initial boundary of the final stanza is only known in retrospect and cannot be predicted by what comes before (though it can be roughly predicted to come between two and three minutes into a performance).

Smith (1968) has produced a seminal study on the details of poetic closure (primarily in Western written poetry). A number of 'terminal features' from her study can be found in Mr. Owono's closing stanza. These include:

1. unqualified assertions
2. tone of authority
3. references to finality
4. sense of truth
5. summative phrases
6. closural allusions

## 2.1 UNQUALIFIED ASSERTIONS

An unqualified assertion "conveys a sense of the speaker's security, conviction, and authority. Since he did not guard or cover himself with implicit or explicit reservations, we assume that he did not need to" (Smith 1968:182). Mr. Owono asserts that everyone who is a descendant 'of my father' (that is, God; the catechist himself is not a native of Mekomba) should come with no exceptions; he also proclaims that no one should be found empty-handed before God in the judgement. These unqualified assertions are meant to be inclusive of the entire community and audience within Mekomba and show the catechist's strong conviction about his topic and his authority to lead the village church. He is not drumming, 'Wife, come and bring food'; he is drumming about the most important things in his life.

## 2.2 TONE OF AUTHORITY

The catechist conveys a tone of authority throughout the poem which does not cease in the final stanza. In a typical performance he addresses the audience directly as 'you' and gives imperative commands twenty times, including several in the final stanza.

As well, the reference to God's name in this final stanza alone lends weight based on heavenly authority to Mr. Owono's imperative commands. He is implying that if the village congregation does not gather now, they will have to answer to God for their inaction. This mention of the supernatural is reminiscent of griots claiming divine patronage for their oral poetry elsewhere in Africa (Okpewho 1979:246).

## 2.3 REFERENCES TO FINALITY

The final stanza, especially the peak, contains several references to finality which are not present elsewhere in the poem. Each audience member is urged to consider his or her own personal journey 'to the end of the dead,' and thereby to reflect upon his or her own mortality. Then comes an allusion to the last judgement, when each person might 'whisper to God over and over' the fact of their unpreparedness (if they do not

get out of bed right now and come!). The catechist exhorts them to 'leave your beds, leave forever'. This stanza presents immediate church attendance as deadly serious through the closural references to finality.

## 2.4 SENSE OF TRUTH

A sense of truth is conveyed in the final stanza by the reference to God and by Mr. Owono's final line, 'you will say to me what else?' Here he implies the people have no more excuses. Hearing this rhetorical question, the audience should have the sense that "what has just been said has the 'conclusiveness,' the settled finality, of apparently self-evident truth" (Smith 1968:152). The catechist implies he has exhausted his poetic skills to convince people of the obvious truth of his message, and he (and God) are tired of peoples' excuses.

## 2.5 SUMMATIVE PHRASES

Another terminal feature used by Mr. Owono in the final stanza is summative phrases. Closural effects may be brought about "when certain formal elements that appear *throughout* the poem (but not systematically) recur in its concluding lines" (Smith 1968:163). The phrase **bibug bi doten** 'words of doctrine' has appeared throughout the performance and neatly sums up the point of the poem.

The eight non-peak phrases in the final stanza are all heard (in at least one performance) somewhere before this conclusion. Four of the eight phrases are heard two or more times previously in each performance. These four common phrases, which are obligatory only in the final stanza, certainly present the point of the poem as summative phrases. Though they are drummed with intervening phrases and pauses, they make a succinct summary of the discourse when put side-by-side. The four summative phrases in (3) are used at least three times in each drummed performance including the final stanza.

- (3) **descendants of my father  
all of you leave the bed  
you come and hear doctrine  
now it goes in the church**

These phrases well express the discourse theme, existing as dominant recurring sound patterns. "In nonsystematic repetition, the terminal recurrence of sounds used earlier strengthens closure by confirming the reader's experiences, thus reinforcing the sense of the 'rightness' of the lines in question" (Smith 1968:166). The final appearance of the summative phrases not only confirms the hearers' experience of the poetic lines, but it confirms actual shared experiences: "All of you who have been coming to hear doctrine for decades, let's do it again right now." In an analysis based on counting occurrences of phrases, it could be said that these four summative phrases are the flexible backbone of the discourse, with all other phrases filling in the details.

## 2.6 CLOSURAL ALLUSIONS

Many poems end with indirect allusions of closure, using words such as 'last', 'finished', 'end', 'rest', and 'peace', according to Smith (1968:172). Mr. Owono's final two lines of the poem reflect this device. 'Now it [doctrine] goes in the church' implies that he has finished drumming his speech act, and that all Christians should now gather. His last phrase, 'you will say to me what else?' implies that people have no more excuses, so they should stop 'talking' on the drum and gather together. In addition, the references to death, the last judgment, and the phrase 'leave your beds forever' all carry connotations of finality.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

It seems obvious that if this final stanza appeared repeatedly in the discourse, and the earlier stanza that begins 'you finish brushing your teeth' was substituted for the final stanza, all sense of discourse peak and poetic closure would be lost. Mr. Owono's skills, creativity, and experience helped him compose a concluding stanza that is aesthetically satisfying to an Ewondo audience and meets criteria put forth by a critic of classical English poetry. The formal and thematic structural principles, in this case, were applicable across cultures. Terminal features that mark 'how poems end' in written poetry also mark the close of this Ewondo drummed poem. Smith's model of poetic closure and Longacre's notions of discourse peak bring analytical insights to the study of Mr. Owono's poetic, persuasive monologue on the drum.

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