

Grief across Cultures: An Analysis of paralinguistic features in two selected songs from Mozambique and Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Language is central in defining individuals across nationalities and cultures. However, due to the global nature of today's world, where language contact and acculturation have diluted numerous languages and cultures, one is left to wonder if at all there are any facets of language that have stood the test of time. One area that has received limited attention is analysis of paralanguage in song as one of the ways cultures can be interpreted. Singers and song writers have traditionally drawn their material from everyday communication. However, studies have largely dwelt on the lyrics or verbal aspects of songs or the music accompanying them but not paralanguage. Yet paralanguage is part and parcel of the oral traditions of any given culture that requires interpretation. This paper seeks to examine this dearth and particularly zeroes in on songs of grief. It was prompted by one such dirge whose non-lyrical nature has made it fit into a number of African cultures. The song, "Tormented soul" by Xavier Matias from Mozambique was composed and sung in mourning the former president of Mozambique, Samora Machel in 1986. It was later recorded and released in 1988. The other selected song is Thomas Mapfumo's "Zimbabwe Mozambique" which was also released in 1988; a song dedicated to the sons and daughters of Zimbabwe who died in Zimbabwe's liberation struggle. This paper thus does a content analysis of these songs through the paralinguistic features in the respective songs. The questions that we attempt to answer in this paper are the following: Does expression of grief in paralanguage mutate over time? Can paralinguistic features of grief be considered as markers of any given culture? If so, can they be part of our linguistic heritage? This analysis is also informed by Ubuntu philosophy as well as Afrocentricity.

Key words: Grief, paralanguage, paralinguistic features, song, vocalics, vocables,

Paralanguage has often stayed in the background in issues to do with communication and has often been conveyed as a complement to verbal communication. The fact that it takes different meaning when contextualised with the different cultures has also complicated focus on it as a form of communication. However, there are times when the use of paralanguage dominates communication as is the case with emotive language. This study scrutinises songs of grief as critical in the presentation of paralinguistic features of language. Analyses of songs of Xavier Matias and Thomas Mapfumo reveal that emotive language relies heavily on paralanguage and not only is paralanguage able to express deep emotional estrangement, it is also universally understood particularly among African cultures. The analysis utilises *Ubuntu* theory in demonstrating the socio-cultural function of paralanguage in the grieving traditions of many African cultures.

Background

Language is central in defining individuals across nationalities and cultures. According to Ngugi (1986, p. 13), “...any language has a dual character [as] a means of communication and a carrier of culture.” However, due to the global nature of today’s world where language contact and acculturation have resulted in the demise of numerous languages and cultures, one is left to wonder if there are linguistic facets that can aid in demonstrating one’s undiluted identity and culture. Indigenous languages seem to have lost the battle against western languages and many young people, particularly of African origin, have lost their language and cultural roots due to their proclivity to western languages and culture (Gudhlanga, 2005). This has been necessitated and largely accounted for by the colonial education system that numerous African and former colonised countries from other parts of the world adopted. This has had the challenge of using the same ideological tools that the former colonised used as a weapon of manipulation and control of their subjects to the detriment of indigenous languages and cultures. Althusser (1971) has identified education as one of the ideological tools that made it possible for the former colonial subjects to submit to their erstwhile rulers. Thus, in this article, we strive to search (within the new context of the global environment) some aspects of language that seem to have stood the test of time despite cultural contact. This includes expressions of grief, not verbal expressions, but wordless expressions of mourning, lamentation and other nuances that add meaning- what we refer to as paralanguage. Paralanguage has largely been associated with the accompaniment to verbal messages and are part of non-verbal communication.

How then is intense grief expressed in paralanguage in different cultures? According to Wharton (2016), this is mostly done using non-verbal communicative behaviours and these contribute immensely to interpretation of meaning. To clarify, this article is guided by two principles of grief by Jeffreys (2011, p. 46) which augur well with *Ubuntu* philosophy. Jeffreys’ first and sixth principles will guide this paper namely;

Principle 1- There is no one right way to grieve [there are different ways of expressing grief].

[and]

Principle 6 - We grieve old loss while grieving new loss [one incident of grief can open floodgates of other forms/ incidents/ memories of grief].

These principles assist us to appreciate the diversity and complexity of the grieving process as many have culturally creative expressions of grief (Rugonye & Bukaliya, 2016). Research, however, has focused

mainly on expression of grief through verbalised discourse (Evans, Bowlby, McCarthy, Wouango & Kebe, 2018). Yet people grieve differently - music and song being part and parcel of this as their coping mechanisms with grief. In most African communities grieving is expressed through song and accompanying paralanguage. It is the purpose of this study to examine the paralanguage which is usually left out in research. It has been viewed and discussed under aspects of the broader field of non-verbal communication. Despite there being debate as to what paralanguage constitutes, Pennycook (1985, p. 259-260) refers to it as:

voice modification which could be applied to different situational contexts...any human utterance could be fully accounted for in terms of voice set, the physiological and physical peculiarities which allow identification of mood, state of health, age, sex, body build, and so on; voice qualities, recognizable speech events which include degree of control of pitch range, articulation, rhythm, resonance, and tempo; and vocalization, specifically identifiable noises (sounds) such as laughing, crying and whispering, as well as uh-huh (affirmation) or uh-uh (negation).

This means paralanguage involves verbal voice intonation, pitch, rate of speech among many others. Paralanguage has also been referred to as vocalics or vocal qualifiers of a language or according to Pennycook (1985, p. 226), non-lexical aspects of speech communication. In this paper we take this paralanguage to include vocables in music - words whose reference is more to form rather than meaning. Lacasse and Lefrançois (2008) simply refer to vocalics as expressive sound. Scholars such as Poyatas (1993, p. 23) state that paralanguage “includes only the vocal aspects of language use that are not, strictly speaking, part of language: affective tone of voice, the non-linguistic elements of prosody,” that is, patterns in voice stress and intonation or rhythm in sound.

Wharton (2016, p. 72) citing one Olalah has demonstrated how human vocal behaviour cannot be removed from that of his animal counterpart where,

the frequencies produced by small animals, with consequently small larynxes, are typically higher pitched than those produced by larger animals with large larynxes: ... high pitched vocalisations encode harmlessness, unassertiveness or submission, and low-pitched vocalisations encode danger, assertiveness, and dominance.

In similar manner, humans have a way of communicating emotive language. The main difference, however, lies in humans being creative in their construction of language and meaning, an element that is absent in animals (Wharton, 2016). This production of sound is in tandem with early theories of language

origins such as Muller's (1861 cited in Wharton, 2016) pooh-pooh theory of language development which connects the origins of human speech to emotive sounds that were uttered to register pain, pleasure, fear, among others. We argue that these early utterances have not totally left humans and when in great pain or pleasurable experiences, humans revert to the most basic instincts in terms of language. This is also in line with the fact that inexplicable pain is extremely difficult to present in verbal terms and hence the use of vocalics such as groans and grunts. We also underline that such vocalics tend to be contextualised in certain cultures and hence Bantu languages seem to have some common traits when it comes to expressive vocalics or vocables.

We take the definition by Abercrombie (2016, p. 70) who defines paralanguage to include all those aspects of linguistic communication that are not part of language per se, "but are nonetheless somehow involved with the message or meaning a communicator conveys." In this paper, however, we mainly focus on vocables that are both stand alone, non-speech noises that are meaningful on their own, as well as in combination of other non-verbal and verbal features of song. Pinker (1994, p. 9) has this to say about paralanguage, "simply by making noise with our mouths, we can reliably cause precise new combinations of ideas to arise in each other's minds." This means vocables may be used to frame words or words may be inserted among them in song or alternatively they may constitute an entire song as is the case with Xavier Matias's "Tormented Soul." Despite vocables being often dismissed as unintelligible and nonsensical syllables on their own, in an African context they are full of meaning. We interrogate these vocables and other non-verbal features in the expression of grief, what we refer to as paralinguistic features found in song. Pragmatists agree that paralanguage is key in the interpretation of meaning particularly with emotive language. As such, paralinguistic features assist in classifying songs through the degree of emotiveness, for example dirges, love songs among others. They also help with the interpretation and mood of the song. In grief songs paralanguage is often accompanied by "intense reflection awakening numerous memories ... in search for a new footing" (Pohl, 1997, n.p) hence interpreting emotion. This paper focuses on non-speech expressions that are elicited when one is grieving and reflecting at the same time, with reference to song. These are the paralinguistic features that the paper is dealing with, which are critical to the interpretation of the grief culture of a given people.

Dirges in African society are sung communally to express grief, reflect on loss as well as comfort the bereaved. Karpinski (2012) has observed that paralanguage, particularly melody and voice quality, have cross-linguistic or cross-cultural meaning. Largely, the lyrics of the sung songs are used to translate the grief. However, unlike verbalised laments in song, in this paper we strive to focus on the paralinguistic features in songs and in particular expressions over the loss of heroic figures. We try to answer the question – is there camaraderie in grief where paralanguage is concerned? Findings from this analysis demonstrate

that recorded music, once in the public arena, has a way of uniting people. Even if there is no verbal communication, paralanguage also unites, hence demonstrating that meaning can be across cultures. It is against this background that this paper analyses the paralinguistic features generated in song based on two different cultures whose origins are found among the Shona from Zimbabwe and from an indeterminate culture in Mozambique. Several researchers have expressed their frustration over the unsuccessful search for the background of Xavier Matias. One such researcher is Mudzingwa (2016) and Mberi (2014) lays his exasperation to rest when he concludes that it possibly was Matias's intention to universalise his song so that it fits into diverse contexts of grief. The paper examines the paralinguistic features as markers of culture and at the same time assesses whether paralanguage has stood the test of time within the context of grief.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is informed by *ubuntu* philosophy and Afrocentricity. It is grounded in theories that are Afro-centred and attempt to analyse and understand African phenomena from the vantage point of Africans. Employing such theoretical approaches is relevant to this study which discusses grief in African cultures using paralanguage. *Ubuntu* “connotes humanness, a pervasive spirit of caring, and community harmony and hospitality, respect and responsiveness, that individuals and groups display for one another” (Mangaliso & Muthumi cited in Akinola & Uzodike, 2017, p. 92). This principle of caring for one another is ideal in this study which examines grief across different African cultures, focusing on paralinguistic features in song. According to *Ubuntu* philosophy, one's grief is everyone's grief. We grieve together as Africans and are unified by grief. At the same time, no one is invited to a funeral in African culture, but people attend because they empathise with each other during times of loss.

The study is also guided by Asante's (1980) Afrocentricity and interpretation of some songs is done that may not be understood from a western perspective or from someone who is not conversant with the African cultural perspective. Interpretation and analyses of cultures should avoid what Adichie (2021) refers to as “The danger of a single story,” a story which is not only misunderstood, but loaded with stereotypes over African cultures and identities as well. Afrocentricity is a theory “which calls for all African phenomena, activities and way of life to be looked at and be given meaning from the standpoint and worldview of Africans” (Gray, 2001, p. 3, Asante cited in Hudson-Weems (ed), 2007, p. 29). The Afro-centred theory of Afrocentricity is also important to this study because it does not relegate Africans to the periphery, to the margins of the European experience in which “Africans become spectators of a show that defines [them] from without” (Asante cited in Mazama, 2003, p. 4). Afrocentricity also focuses on agency of the African people. It asserts that “African people must be viewed and view themselves as

agents rather than spectators to historical revolution and change” (Asante, 2007, p. 17). To this effect Asante emphasises that, “African people must acknowledge themselves as players of the world stage not as junior citizens in the halls of theoretical or practical knowledge” (Asante, 2007, p. 47). People of African descent are, thus being called to extricate themselves from the margins of their history. They are called upon to claim and occupy the centre as well as influence revolutions for the benefit of humankind. This philosophy is important to this study which examines the use of paralinguistic features in songs of grief in African culture. Dirges in African culture are songs of grief which help greatly in the healing process of the bereaved as well as understanding the historical processes that Africans have gone through. From an African perspective, anyone can identify a sad song through paralanguage. From a western perspective wordless vocal sound (vocables) may be unintelligible or be regarded as nonsensical. This study examines paralinguistic features which might be regarded as insignificant to people who are not well versed with African culture, but that possess significant meaning. These are intangible aspects of culture which might not be comprehended by non-participants of that culture.

Research Methodology

The study uses the qualitative research method which presents data through narrative description as opposed to quantitative which focuses on numbers. Narrative description enables the phenomenon to speak for itself. Qualitative research is grounded in subjective interpretation of selected two songs from Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The paper does a content analysis of the selected songs and their meaning as well as analysing the meaning of the paralinguistic features in these songs namely, “Tormented Soul” by Xavier Matias and “Zimbabwe-Mozambique” by Thomas Mapfumo. The songs were purposively selected based on their popularity and accessibility as well as the uniqueness in terms of their use of paralinguistic features. The study relies heavily on content analysis as a tool for unpacking of the paralinguistic features in the songs that express grief in African culture.

Contextualising Selected Songs of Grief

The selected songs are “Tormented Soul” by Xavier Matias (Mozambique) and “Zimbabwe-Mozambique” by Thomas Mapfumo (Zimbabwe). Both songs were composed around the same period 1986 and 1988 respectively and are centred around the loss of heroic figures. Both songs also zero in on Samora Machel, with Xavier Matias’s composition being a tribute to Samora Machel after his death. Thomas Mapfumo’s song is based on the sacrifice of many (both Zimbabweans and Mozambicans) who perished during the war of liberation. The song is part of a celebration of the commitment of Zimbabwean and Mozambican forces to the liberation struggle of Zimbabwe as well as the concerted efforts at fighting

banditry in Mozambique. It is also partly a lament of the suffering of Zimbabweans (and Africa at large) during the wars that were raging in the respective periods. Mapfumo's song constitutes partly verbal and partly vocalics - with the verbal part informing the later. The songs differ from communal dirges as they are not communally performed, but rather individual songs as composed and sung by artists as they mourn the loss of dearly departed ones or recognised heroes in society. It should be noted that the artists who sing these songs, express their own personal grief which is synonymous with the grief experienced by individuals upon the loss of loved ones. However, ever since the songs entered the public domain, particularly Xavier Matias's "Tormented Soul," they have become anthems of grief for the bereaved.

The songs by both artists are therefore interpreted from the point of conception/ composition which we regard as a private and personal endeavour of the artist not a public one, that is, at the encoding stage. In this context, does it mean then that the communal ethos of African grieving is lost through individual composition? No at all, once the song enters the public domain, it ceases to be a private form of grieving, but a shared experience as demonstrated in this paper. The accompanying music also assists the analysis of the meaning behind the songs.

Paralinguistic features in Thomas Mapfumo's "Zimbabwe –Mozambique"

The song is gleaned from the Shona culture, so we scrutinise it from Shona paralanguage that is signified in the song. The sound of *mbira*, a musical instrument amongst the Shona of Zimbabwe and a cultural symbol of the Shona people, is heard in Mapfumo's song. Unlike Xavier Matias's song which is all vocalics, Mapfumo's starts off with verbal singing then resorts to vocalics. It is interesting to note that the tempo or rate at which the background music is played is initially a slow, heavy beat as the singer narrates the bilateral relations between Zimbabwe and Mozambique whose roots are found in the wars of liberation. This narrative captures memories of war, the sacrifices, trauma and loss of life and the loss of a pillar of that war, Samora Machel, as well as laments post-independence strife in Africa. This confirms Jeffrey's (2011) principle that people grieve old losses while grieving new ones – a camaraderie born out of war and strife; a camaraderie that can only be explained by *Ubuntu*.

However, the song's tempo changes to a fast rhythm. It turns to largely vocables, and this in itself is paradoxical. Under normal circumstances, fast music conjures a light happy mood, yet the reverse is true at the point in question. The fast pace ironically captures the trauma of memory, war and loss. How do we know that the light fast beat is the sorrowful part of the song? The paralanguage understood from a Shona perspective assists in this interpretation. There is recognisable Shona in the refrain of the vocables "*haiye here iye iye, hoyerere iya ho*" "*horerere iye iye, hore iya honde*" "*hongore iye iye iye*" These vocables

provide a semantic prosody that can assist in interpreting the meaning of the song. They hint an afflicted mind recalling the anguish and trauma of war and loss that can only be expressed as such. Amongst the Shona, this is usually accompanied by a downcast face and the shaking of the head denoting dejection as one reflects on an unfortunate incident or loss. This is in line with what Wharton (2016) states regarding the interpretation of paralanguage, that paralanguage and body movement are usually intertwined in the meaning making process. This, however, does not remove the enduring fact that paralanguage, minus the body language can still communicate a message. The vocables are unmistakably African, and a good illustration is a character in the film *The Gods must be crazy* (1980) who sings distinctive Shona vocables. To demonstrate that the almost similar vocables to Mapfumo's vocables denote sadness. The song "*Amai vachauya*" (mother will come) is a sad song of someone deep in thought and solitude – the character is probably missing his mother or his wife. Notable are the vocables "*huye huye huye ho iye re ree*" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuJZa6DWugM>), with striking similarities to the song "Zimbabwe Mozambique."

In Thomas Mapfumo's song, interjections of verbalised chorus are appeals for assistance for the struggles of independence for the larger Pan-African cause, for example, appeals for assistance on behalf of countries that were still grappling with colonialism and apartheid then: Namibia and South Africa respectively. The concentrated fusion of the rhythms of *mbira* and other modern instrumentation plus handclapping, all of which are an indication of the absent dance aspect (when the song is listened to) can only be witnessed when performed live or with recorded visuals. This calls for an explanation on how such a song recording trauma and death can record such a fast tempo. The tempo brings in another feature of non-verbal language - dance - and how it should not be analysed without the context from which it is taken. Among the Shona, dance is deemed therapeutic particularly in times of grief. So, in Mapfumo's song, we experience a grieving dance which is usually done in frenzied fashion - that is to dance away the pain and the psychological trauma of loss. Silvermana, Baroillerb and Hemer (2021, p. 3) have observed that "grief is not restricted to a singular emotion, often assumed to be sadness" demystifying any doubts on the multidimensional expression of meaning in song. Thus, Mapfumo's song constitutes part grief and part celebration of the sacrifice of the armed forces and the general populace in fighting oppressive forces. Pennycook (1985) underlines the importance of dance when grieving. He states that the human body becomes the physical repository of traumatic experience and through dance, "might archive, memorialize, or render catharsis for suffering" (p. 265). Thus, the vocables in the song "Zimbabwe-Mozambique" capture and enhance one's understanding of unspeakable grief; a grief that can be shared through song and dance. It takes a Zimbabwean from the Shona culture to understand and accurately interpret the prosody of the vocables of Mapfumo's song. This is also reflected in other musicians of Shona origins

such as Hope Masike, Chiwoniso Maraire, Stella Chiweshe, Oliver Mtukudzi to name just a few. The vocables of this nature reflect a troubled psyche.

Paralinguistic features in Xavier Matias's "Tormented Soul"

Xavier Matias's unique song makes use of a singular instrument - an acoustic guitar whose slow, sonorous, and mournful strains accompany the vocables of the no-word/wordless song. Unlike Thomas Mapfumo's "Zimbabwe- Mozambique," the consistently slow pace of "Tormented Soul" or as many know it, the "Yei Yei" song, captures and matches the heartrending voice of the artist. Unfortunately, the indigenous group from which the artist hails is unknown, yet the repeated hushed vocables "yei yei yei yeee yeeeeei" denoting deep reflection as well as dejection are distressing and captivating. The refrain is a high pitched/piercing guttural vocable "aaaaayi ayi, ahhhh yayayaaa" highlighting the intensity of the pain experienced at the time. It can almost be equated to literal weeping.

The song is best interpreted in onomatopoeia as it constitutes deep groaning, moaning, and seeming weeping combined, which reflects the heartache and deep sorrow that the song carries. The few writers who have attempted to describe its non-lyric nature have captured it as painful, wailing, humming, melancholic, among others (Teya & Guvamatanga, 2014). Mudzingwa (2016) could not have put it any better when he describes the song:

An emotion threading between guitar strings, through worn fingers, meeting its vocal doppelganger on a studio microphone, straining past the lump in Matias's throat. Matias in a recording studio, draped in mourning garments ... ashy sack cloths, bent over, tears streaming, pleading upwards to the deity of oppressed souls. It is a song beyond language and lyrical inconvenience....no words could have sufficed (<https://nbo.press/search-tormented-soul/>).

The song today now applies to different African contexts and cultures where mourning and grief are experienced. It is popular in every household in Zimbabwe and heralds, like in the case of Samora Machel, the passing of a hero or prominent figure. In Zimbabwe, it is the Heroes' Day theme song every year (for the past 34 years) when this song is played in memory of significant figures, or when commemorating fallen heroes *et cetera*. Comments on *YouTube* where the song is posted replicate the different contexts around which the song is now interpreted, from personal loss, national, Pan-African and even global. The song whose culture of origin is indeterminate has managed to unite different cultures whose endeavour is to grieve with one voice.

At the same time, while Matias's intention was to pay tribute to Samora Machel, his song has become a universal song for any African who understands grief. This goes on to emphasise the fact that heroic figures are not owned by one community in Africa. Samora Machel was considered a Pan-African giant in terms of his contributions to Southern Africa's struggles for independence as well as those of Africa at large. When the Mozambicans were grieving over his passing, everyone in Africa grieved with them. Polh (1997) underlines this fact when she says humans do not exist in isolation and hence the process of grieving is done in unison. Song thus unites and brings solace in a world "battling for integrity ... identity and self-confidence," a world that is fractured by socio-economic and political challenges (Chitando, Mateveke, Nyakudya & Chinouriri, 2022, p. 3). Grief is the closest one can get to comprehend personal feelings (Madongonda & Gudhlanga - forthcoming) and vocables are the only vocal sounds that can express this experience. It can be concluded that vocables are those forms of language that have evaded the onslaught of colonial languages and have withstood the test of time, unadulterated.

Conclusion

Without scrutinising vocables or vocalics, it is very easy to dismiss them as nonsensical wailings or utterances. Yet closer attention reveals deep-seated meaning. At the same time African oral/folk traditions should not be dismissed as primitive, no matter how seemingly insignificant they appear. These traditions should be preserved and archived with the media playing the role of producing/ reproducing them in a bid to pass on the heritage to future generations. Paralanguage thus plays a socio-cultural function and is part of the grieving traditions of many African cultures. This paper has demonstrated that vocables in the selected songs are a reflection of pain and the nostalgia of heroic figures lost through death, as well as the trauma suffered through war and strife. These forms of expression of grief are found across African cultures. Coincidentally, both artists under study focus on the same issues of liberation and loss. Therefore, the similarities between vocables of Matias and Mapfumo could well reveal common roots found in languages of Bantu origin. Vocables can thus be markers of cultures and identities and further studies are most likely to reveal more to this under-researched area.

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