

Decoding the Non-Verbal: Sociolinguistic Influences on Multimodal Surrogate Language and Traditional Communication in Ejigbo, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the constituents, sociolinguistic forces, and functional roles of Surrogate Language (SL) within the traditional Yoruba communication system, with specific focus on Ejigbo Local Government Area (LGA) of Osun State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sets out to identify the non-verbal, multimodal constituents of SL, to examine how sociolinguistic variables such as age, occupation, and social class shape SL proficiency and use, and to assess SL's contribution to meaningful communication, emotional expression, and cultural preservation in the community. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study gathered primary data through structured questionnaires (n=250), Focus Group Discussions (n=30), and in-depth interviews with key informants (n=12). The study is theoretically anchored on Labov's Sociolinguistics Theory (SLT) and Thomason's Language Contact Theory (LCT). Findings establish SL as a developed, multimodal repertoire involving symbolic artefacts, codified sound waves (aerophone instruments), and intricate body cues such as gestures and paralanguage. The study records robust sociolinguistic stratification in SL proficiency and use, with age, social class, occupation, and rural residence emerging as decisive determiners. Despite pressures from globalisation and language shift, SL remains a vital vehicle for discrete message coding, cultural memory preservation, and community solidarity in Ejigbo. The study advocates for curriculum integration, ethnographic documentation, and digital archiving to sustain this endangered communicative heritage.

Keywords: Surrogate Language, Traditional Media, Yoruba Culture, Multimodal Communication, Aerophone Instruments, Ejigbo LGA.

Introduction

Communication, in its widest sense, is the conveyance of meaning from one individual to another; it comes in a wide array of channels other than spoken language. While speech has often been considered the most dominant and universally recognised form of human interaction, it represents just a fraction of

the communicative repertoire available to societies around the world. In many cultures, especially within sub-Saharan Africa, non-verbal systems of communication serve as an essential device in conveying meaning, emotion, and intention. These systems, deeply ensconced in the culture, are more accurately described as Surrogate Languages or Traditional Media. Not a replacement for spoken language, SL works as a complementary mode, an auxiliary or codified surrogate used to bridge the gap that culture, time, or space may cause.

SL among the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria has evolved into one of the most sophisticated and well-documented traditional communication systems, one that is deeply woven into the broader fabric of Yoruba cultural life and identity (Adebanwi, 2018). One of the most iconic representations of Yoruba SL is that of the *dùndún*, or talking drum, a musical instrument capable of closely mimicking the tonal sequences and rhythmic patterns of the Yoruba language. The speech it transposes into sound allows messages to be transmitted over space and across social divides with remarkable accuracy. As Villepastour (2010) observes, however, to restrict Yoruba SL to the talking drum is to ignore the immense multimodal complexity of the system. Yoruba SL is also constituted by visual signals, symbolic objects, and an array of other aerophone instruments: gongs, trumpets, and flutes are deployed together to produce a layered, dynamic repertoire underpinned by dense cultural knowledge and social context.

With over 400 languages, the linguistic landscape of Nigeria poses both challenges and opportunities for traditional communication systems. Yoruba is a tonal language spoken in many states; as such, it is bound to be more adaptable to surrogate forms than non-tonal languages. Among all these, Ejigbo Local Government Area in Osun State has emerged as a particularly significant site for exploring the resilience and sociolinguistic complexities of SL. Ejigbo is a town that, though gradually modernising, is heavily influenced by its traditional institutions and ways of life. This makes it an ideal environment for examining how SL continues to function and evolve amidst the pressures of globalisation, urbanisation, and formal education (Finnegan, 2012; Salawu, 2006).

Despite the historical recognition and cultural significance of SL and Traditional Media, a number of gaps still characterise the scholarly discourse. Much of the extant research has narrowly focused on the acoustic properties of the talking drum, with little regard for the symbiotic roles that other modalities like symbolic objects, gestures, and visual cues, play. This mono-modal approach fails to capture the full communicative potential of SL as a multimodal

system. The present study tries to fill this gap by positioning SL as a genuinely multimodal phenomenon, one that integrates sound, sight, and movement to convey complex messages. This challenges prevailing assumptions and expands the analytical framework for understanding traditional communication. Additionally, literature often neglects the sociolinguistic variables that affect SL's function and distribution within the community. Age, social class, education, and locality determine to a great extent who uses SL, for what reason, and in which context. These variables are central to this study's third objective, which examines how SL contributes to meaningful communication, emotional expression, and cultural perpetuation within Ejigbo. As younger generations become progressively inculcated with Western-centric approaches to education and media, indigenous languages stand the risk of being marginalised. Understanding these sociolinguistic dynamics is essential in the implementation of strategies to sustain and revitalise SL in an evolving social landscape.

The central concern of this study is a survey of the constituent elements, functionality, and sociolinguistic parameters that determine surrogate language in Yoruba traditional culture, with specific reference to Ejigbo LGA. Consequently, this study is informed by three key questions: First, what are the non-linguistic, multimodal features that define SL among the Ejigbo people? Second, how do sociolinguistic parameters like age, occupation, and social class affect the use and proficiency in SL? And third, how does SL contribute to meaningful communication within the community with respect to message coding, expression of emotions, and perpetuation of culture? These questions underpin the research and together form the framework for understanding the enduring significance of SL in Ejigbo.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Review of Surrogate Language and Traditional Media

Traditional media in the African context are considered to be indigenous, non-Western channels of communication, very often emanating from oral and kinetic traditions in the forms of storytelling, proverbs, dance, and music, among others (Obidike 2011, Finnegan, 2012) . Surrogate Language is one of the most important constituent parts of Traditional Media, comprising a system whereby non-verbal or non-linguistic forms are encoded according to the structures of the spoken language, one that carries strong markers of cultural identity across Nigerian communities (Adegbite, 2019). The most recognised form of SL is the drummed language, especially the Yoruba dùndún. The talking drum can only work effectively because the Yoruba language is a tonal language, whereby the pitch of the drum imitates the high, mid, and low tones

of spoken syllables (Villepastour, 2010). However, the literature necessitates a move toward a multimodal understanding. Studies have highlighted that SL often incorporates visual and tactile signs:

- ✓ **Visual SL:** Includes the use of specific clothing, symbolic objects, or architectural symbols. In Ejigbo, for example, the presentation of ewé ọdán (leaves of the majestic tree) is used to admonish an arrogant person, drawing meaning from the Yoruba proverb that cautions pride, while osùn (camwood) sent to an offended party conveys an appeal for forgiveness.
- ✓ **Kinesic/Proxemic SL:** Encompasses deliberate gestures, body postures, and the use of space to convey status or warnings.

The current study builds on this, claiming that SL in Ejigbo is a synergistic combination of the acoustic, visual, and kinetic modalities, where the understanding of one depends, in many instances, upon the contextual use of the other (Finnegan, 2012). The Ejigbo community, located in Osun State and known for its strong adherence to traditional Yoruba institutions, offers a particularly fertile context for examining this multimodal interplay. The town's annual festivals, monarchical structures, and age-grade systems continue to sustain active SL use across a range of communicative domains.

Theoretical Framework

Sociolinguistics Theory (SLT)

The work of William Labov is foundational to modern sociolinguistics. His model of linguistic variation, particularly the principle that language use is systematically correlated with social variables such as age, class, and occupational network, provides the analytical bedrock for examining SL stratification in Ejigbo. Labov's framework is appropriate here because it enables the study to interrogate not just what SL forms exist in the community, but who uses them, under what social conditions, and with what degree of competence (Labov, 1972). SLT asserts that the linguistic choices individuals make, in this case, the decision to use or their proficiency in understanding SL, are intrinsically linked to their position within the social structure.

Application to SL: SLT predicts that the use and competence in Surrogate Language will be significantly differentiated across the Ejigbo community based on:

1. **Age-Grading:** Older members are predicted to exhibit higher SL proficiency.
2. **Social Class and Occupation:** Individuals tied to traditional structures are expected to rely more heavily on SL.

3. **Locality:** SL thrives in rural settings where traditional governance remains strong.

Language Contact Theory (LCT)

Developed primarily to explain language shift, language maintenance, and language death, LCT is pertinent in the study of SL as a non-dominant, indigenous linguistic system coexisting with the dominant national (English) and major regional (Yoruba) languages (Thomason, 2001). LCT is particularly well-suited to the Ejigbo context, where digital media, formal education, and urban migration exert visible pressure on the intergenerational transmission of SL. It enables the study to frame SL decline not as neglect but as a rational sociolinguistic response to cultural contact and economic incentives.

In the Nigerian context, the proliferation of digital communication, which increasingly mediates everyday personal and social interaction (Baym, 2015), and the obligatory use of English and standard Yoruba in formal settings exert pressure on localised systems like SL. LCT helps analyse this tension in two directions:

- ✓ The decline in SL proficiency among younger, educated Ejigbo residents can be viewed as a form of language shift, where SL domains are being ceded to verbal communication.
- ✓ Conversely, LCT also explains language maintenance, why SL survives and even thrives in specific protected domains, such as religious ceremonies, royal communication, and traditional festivals, where it functions to exclude non-initiates or reinforce cultural authority.

By applying LCT, the study contextualises the findings regarding the waning use of SL as a rational linguistic response to cultural contact and socio-economic imperatives, rather than mere neglect.

Methodology

Following established practice in anthropological and ethnographic research (Bernard, 2017), this study adopted a descriptive survey design within a mixed-methods framework, aimed at ascertaining the sociolinguistic dynamics and multimodal constituents of SL in Ejigbo, Osun State. The descriptive survey design facilitated quantitative data collection that captured the prevalence and frequency of SL usage across diverse sociolinguistic groups. These were complemented by a qualitative component comprising Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) that provided contextual insights into the semantic meanings, cultural significance, and functional roles of SL elements. The triangulation of data sources guaranteed a robust and

nuanced understanding of SL practices, validating statistical findings with experiential depth.

The study was carried out in Ejigbo LGA, a culturally significant Yoruba town in Osun State. The choice of Ejigbo was informed by the fact that it possesses living traditional institutions. Importantly, the town maintains a fairly stable indigenous population with a well-demarcated urban-rural divide, enabling meaningful comparison across residential zones. A community where traditional governance, annual festivals, and age-grade systems remain active, Ejigbo constitutes an ideal site to study the resilience and change of SL within a community navigating the tension between modernisation and cultural survival. The study adopted adult members of the indigenous population aged 25 years and above, on the basis that this age cohort has acquired adequate cultural literacy and experiential knowledge to meaningfully engage with traditional systems of communication.

A combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques was used to select 292 participants. In the quantitative component, 250 residents were selected through Simple Random Sampling to ensure representativeness across Ejigbo's administrative zones, reflecting both urban and rural areas. The qualitative sample included 30 participants for FGDs, selected via Snowball Sampling to identify culturally active individuals with shared traditional experiences. In addition, 12 key informants were purposively selected for IDIs, comprising six scholars of Yoruba culture and six traditional practitioners; including drummers, town criers, and herbalists, recognised for expertise in interpreting and using SL. Data collection was facilitated through two main instruments: a structured questionnaire with closed-ended items including Likert scales and categorical variables, aimed at gathering data on socio-demographic characteristics, self-assessed proficiency in the three SL modalities (sound waves, symbolic objects, body cues), and frequency of use; and semi-structured guides for FGDs and IDIs that elicited detailed information on specific gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact used within SL, as well as the cultural meaning ascribed to these non-verbal elements. Participants were further probed on how age, education, and social status influence SL use, and its role in emotional expression and maintenance of social relationships.

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages mapped the distribution of SL forms, while inferential statistics in the form of cross-tabulations and Chi-square tests explored associations between sociolinguistic variables and SL usage. Qualitative data were

transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), where recurring themes such as ‘multimodal complexity’, ‘age-related attrition’, and ‘message coding’ were systematically extracted and interpreted. In line with the study’s multimodal orientation, both the quantitative and qualitative data were disaggregated and analysed separately across the three SL modalities identified in the literature and confirmed in the field, namely sound waves and aerophone instruments, symbolic objects and visual cues, and body cues and paralanguage, before being synthesised to show how the three operate together as an integrated communicative system. This enabled the paper to present a detailed portrait of SL as both a cultural artefact and a living communicative system within Ejigbo.

Results and Discussion

1.0 Multimodal Constituents of Surrogate Language

The findings of this study establish that SL in Ejigbo is neither a unitary nor a straightforward acoustic phenomenon but a complexly layered multimodal system. SL in this context consists of three key non-linguistic modalities: *sound waves*, *symbolic visuals*, and *body signals*, operating interactively to produce meaning. As revealed in the subsequent sections, each modality was consistently demonstrated through participant testimonies, FGD discussions, and observed communicative practices in the Ejigbo community. In this way, the findings challenge the strongly held view of SL as no more than drummed speech and instead situate it as a dynamic communicative repertoire firmly entrenched within Yoruba cultural logic. Such integration of modalities embodies an eloquent encoding of messages whose correct deciphering is predicated on cultural literacy; hence, SL can be upheld as a linguistic and semiotic system.

1.1 Sound Waves and Aerophone Instruments

While the dùndún remains the most iconic instrument in Yoruba SL, the study underlines the indispensable roles of other aerophones and codified sound waves. IDI Participant 8, a male practitioner from Inisha, Ejigbo, elaborated on the classification of Yoruba drums: “The first category can be referred to as the sacred ones because they are always used during traditional rites and ritual festivals. These include Bàtá, Ìpesè, Àgèrè, Gbèdu, Ìgbìn, Kósó. But, apart from using Gbèdu during traditional religious performances, it is usually drummed to announce the death of the king. The second categories, which are common ones, include Dùndún, Bàtáko, Ş èkèrè, and BèDžé. They are the ones being used for eulogising, advertisement, and entertainment” (IDI Participant 8, Male, Inisha, Ejigbo). The agogo (bell) and gong are also active within Ejigbo’s

communicative ecology: IDI Participant 7 noted that king's emissaries use bells to call people's attention to official proclamations, while the gong signals communal gatherings and public warnings. Trumpet and flute sounds are reserved for ceremonial and royal contexts where they signal reverence, status, or sacred presence. These instruments are not used arbitrarily; their meanings are shaped by traditional proverbs and oral conventions, confirming that sound in SL is governed by phonological and semiotic rules emanating from Yoruba oral tradition.

1.2 Symbolic Objects and Visual Cues

The use of visual elements in SL is highly symbolic, particularly in contexts where subtlety or coded messaging is required, and reflects a broader Yoruba aesthetic tradition in which everyday objects are routinely invested with layered cultural meaning (Abiodun, 2015). The study found that ordinary items serve as communicative tokens whose meanings are drawn specifically from Ejigbo and wider Yoruba cultural logic. IDI Participant 2, a female academic from Inisha, Ejigbo, offered several precise illustrations: the presentation of ewé ọdán (leaves of the majestic tree) admonishes an arrogant person, referencing the Yoruba proverb “Ewé ọdán ẹ̀ jù bẹ̀ẹ̀ lọ, ẹ̀ràn ló fí je ẹ̀” (the leaf of the majestic tree was more pompous than that, goats eventually eat it); and osùn (camwood), a substance traditionally used for bodily adornment, is sent to a person one has offended as an appeal for forgiveness, invoking the idiom “fí se osùn kí o fí para” (use it as camwood to rub the body). Palm fronds (màriwò) tied across an entrance or around a tree in Ejigbo signal that a space is consecrated, while palm fronds placed in front of a vehicle indicate a corpse is being transported (FGD Participant 14, Male, Inisha, Ejigbo). These visual signals are deeply contextual and require cultural initiation to decode accurately. Their deployment demonstrates how SL constitutes a visually rich language premised on shared cultural background knowledge.

1.3 Body Cues and Paralanguage

With specific reference to Ejigbo SL practices, the human body emerges as a crucial medium of communication, with gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact playing integral roles in message transmission. Paralanguage, non-lexical utterances such as whistling, ululation, and shouting, transmits emotion and intention that speech may not clearly convey, as was repeatedly evident from the FGDs and IDIs. A particular ululation such as iyèyè immediately conveys communal joy or celebration within the Ejigbo community. These cues depend highly on emotional intelligence and cultural fluency: the receiver must go beyond perceiving the gesture to interpreting its socio-emotional coding. SL

is thereby a fundamentally relational and affective means of communication, one in which meaning is co-constructed between culturally competent interlocutors.

2.0 Sociolinguistic Stratification of SL Usage

The results confirm that sociolinguistic variables significantly influence SL proficiency and usage, a finding that directly upholds the predictions of SLT and the study's second research objective. Age and education emerged as pivotal determining factors: older subjects (60+ years) showed near-universal comprehension of SL, while younger adults in the 25–35-year bracket demonstrated notable gaps in the decoding of complex sound and visual cues. This pattern reflects the influence of LCT, in which enculturation processes have been displaced by Western education and exposure to digital media. SL, once transmitted through apprenticeship and communal immersion, is therefore in danger of attrition, with knowledge increasingly concentrated among the elderly.

3.0 Influence of Occupation, Social Class, and Locality

Occupational roles and social class further stratify SL usage. Traditional practitioners, farmers, artisans, and chiefs, display high SL proficiency because of their reliance on it for daily functions and ceremonial duties. In contrast, white-collar professionals whose work environments emphasise either English or standard Yoruba report low SL usage. The inverse relationship between SL proficiency and integration into the formal economy underscores how social class moulds linguistic domains. In addition, locality plays a decisive role: rural residents, insulated from intense cultural contact and modernisation, maintain strong SL traditions compared to their urban counterparts. This rural–urban divide supports the view that SL flourishes within a culturally insulated ecology.

4.0 Functional Impact on Communication and Culture

Beyond its structural intricacy, SL serves essential communicative and cultural purposes. Data from the study confirm that it allows for the discreet coding of messages, whereby leadership passes important information through symbolic objects or drummed patterns intelligible only to initiates, a political and security function serving as cultural encryption. SL is equally powerful in emotional expression: drummers can convey sorrow or joy with nuance, while gestures and paralanguage reinforce social connectedness and mutual respect. Emotional intelligence emerged as a determining factor in decoding these cues. Finally, SL preserves Ejigbo's cultural heritage through oral archives like *oriki* and festival performances, anchoring identity and community solidarity across generations.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes two specific contributions to knowledge. First, it moves the study of Yoruba Surrogate Language beyond its conventional, largely acoustic focus on the talking drum, showing with primary data that SL functions as an integrated multimodal system combining sound, visual symbolism, and body cues. Second, by mapping SL competence against sociolinguistic variables such as age, occupation, social class, and locality, the study offers an empirically grounded, stratified account of who uses SL, how, and under what conditions, within a specific Yoruba community; an account that can serve as a template for comparative work in other Yoruba-speaking areas and, potentially, other African surrogate language traditions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study provides an empirically supported, comprehensive analysis of SL in Ejigbo Local Government Area, tracing its rich multimodality through data drawn directly from Ejigbo community activities, practitioner interviews, and focus group discussions. The phenomenology of SL in Ejigbo goes far beyond mere acoustic elements like drums and gongs to include symbolic visuals and kinetic expressions like gestures and paralanguage. These different components combine into one effective communicative resource that reflects profound cultural knowledge and social nuance. The research demonstrates that SL does not merely function as information transmission but is a dynamic medium for encoding meaning, emotion, and identity, elements this study has substantiated through participant testimonies and observed communicative practices.

Importantly, the research clearly shows that SL proficiency and usage are significantly sociolinguistically stratified. The factors of age, occupation, and locality clearly determine who can interpret and successfully deploy SL. Older, traditionally employed, and rural dwellers are more competent, while the trend is one of attrition among younger, urban, formally educated populations, a pattern consistent with wider concerns about Yoruba language endangerment in Nigeria (Fabunmi & Salawu, 2005). This trend accords with Language Contact Theory, which postulates that globalisation, formal education, and urban migration are agents in the gradual erosion of indigenous communicative systems. Despite these pressures, SL continues to serve vital functions in Ejigbo, including covert communication, emotional expression, and the preservation of culture.

The study advocates a set of strategic interventions to help safeguard and revitalise SL. First, integrating SL education into the local school curriculum

would bridge generational gaps in cultural literacy. Second, detailed ethnographic documentation of SL modalities is necessary to preserve their meanings and usage contexts. Third, comparative studies between Ejigbo and urban centres like Ibadan or Lagos would shed light on the mechanisms driving SL decline, while cross-ethnic comparison with other Nigerian surrogate language traditions, such as the Igbo Ojā (Eze & McPherson, 2025), could help establish whether the patterns observed in Ejigbo reflect a broader national trend. Fourth, the role of Emotional Intelligence in SL interpretation warrants targeted psychometric research. Finally, support for digital archiving efforts should be provided to ensure SL's rich audiovisual heritage remains accessible to future generations and scholarly inquiry.

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