



# Language and Message Construction in Nigerian Multilingual Hip-Hop Music

Vareba, Anthony Leva

**Abstract**— It has become common practice by popular Nigerian musicians to conceal, complexly encode or blur messages of their songs through multilingualism, twisted language, *double entendre*, lexical innovations among others. This tendency has, given rise to the phenomenon of meaningless songs which seems to pervade the industry. Using a qualitative content analysis and secondary data, this paper examines multilingualism in Nigerian popular music and its implications for effective communication and the globalization of Nigerian popular music. It argues that, though contributing to the esthetic of songs and giving a Nigerian flavor to Hip-hop, code-switching/code-mixing has more potentials of considerably reducing message fidelity (especially to an international audience), as it implies audience being multilingual to be able to fully understand the message- a prerequisite which is not always guaranteed. With this style of composition, messages are likely to be more decodable, by retrenched communities of fans (local audiences) than by an international public.

**Keywords**— Popular Music, Effective Communication, Language Use, Multilingualism, Code-Switching, Code-Mixing

## I. INTRODUCTION

The formulation of an intelligible message represents the most essential component in any process of communication, be it interpersonal or mass communication. In effect, without the message, one cannot talk of communication as there will be no actual physical product being exchanged between the source and the receiver [1, pp. 7; 2, pp. 13]. For effective communication to exist, the encoding of the message must be done according to the receiver's decoding ability and communicational skill. In music-making precisely, the message is principally embedded in the lyrics. The lyric thus serves as the musician's principal communication tool. He or she uses the lyrics to communicate and propagate his or her ideologies and thereby playing multiple social functions. In line with this and with particular reference to Nigerian popular music,

Emielu notes that:

Popular music is ideological, with its ideology embedded in the texts of the songs [...] With the fact that popular music is the most listen-to category of music, [it] can be used as a veritable instrument for ideological change and mass orientation. Popular music can also be put to a variety of uses, in product and advertisement, promoting government programmes and policies and also in becoming a social voice for the voiceless, oppressed and deprived masses as we can find in the case of Fela's Afro-beat. [3, pp.7]

As clearly underlined in this observation, the lyrics represent viable instruments for the musician to communicate, (to educate, re-orientate masses, inform etc...) besides entertaining. No doubt popular music has been put to multiple uses in most, if not all societies. It is principally through the lyrics (the message) that music plays its didactic function. Idolor corroborates this view in his assertion that:

The didactic function of music is affected through logical organization of lyrics and performance practice. Some lyrics are presented in direct or indirect satire through such speech figures as simile, metaphor, alliteration, allusions and even short anecdote to convey an observation/or an opinion to a witness – audience. In other situations, other activities in performance teach both viewers and participants the coded lesson(s). [4, pp.6]

This observation brings to the fore the fact that the performance practice complements lyrics in the formulation and communication of songs' messages. Elements of performance can include timber, pitch, melody, dance style, [4, pp.26; 5, pp.18; 6, pp.26] incorporated archetypal sounds and the like, aimed at making the message clearer. Therefore, a proper assessment of music messages will not be limited exclusively to lyrics but also consider performance practices.

It has become common practice by popular Nigerian musicians to conceal, complexly encode or blur messages of their songs through code-switching, code-mixing, as well as through the use of twisted language, double entendre and lexical innovations. Some artists have even been noted for meaningless songs, just as Nkechi concedes that "Nigerian popular musicians lack the patience to think through a subject to its logical end" [7, pp.66]. This is in line with Luwas description of electronic dance music as "aesthetics of ambivalence" with "song lyrics [which seem to painstakingly avoid subject matter with any pretence of depth] in addition" [8, pp.173]. This paper attempts to explore this practice and

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examines its implications for effective communication and the globalization of Nigerian popular music.

## II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Oyewo defines communication as “the process of transmitting, receiving and acting upon message/information, thought, ideas, attitudes and feelings through mutually agreed understandable/determined codes/symbols” [9, pp.157]. This definition reveals two principal facts to consider in the understanding of effective communication. First, it presents communication as not only limited to the transmission and reception (exchange) of message/information but as a process extended to “acting upon the message/information, thoughts, ideas, attitudes and feelings conveyed by the sources”. This stresses the importance of the feedback from receiver [1, pp.9] or the potential attitudinal change among audience upon reception of the message. This may be true especially to advertising messages which most often are evaluated with respect to increase in sales of the product being advertised. Most often, to know whether an advert has been effective in communicating the message of the advertiser, one needs to see whether it has effectively persuaded audiences to go for the product [2, 10, pp. 145; 11, pp.145]. Communication is therefore effective when it influences audiences toward attitudinal change.

Secondly, Oyewo’s definition of communication brings to the fore the involvement of “mutually agreed understandable/determined codes/symbols” [9]. This underscores the imperativeness of a careful encoding for effective communication to exist. The encoding is effected according to linguistic codes and other conventional signs that are mutually intelligible. Liali and Omobowale stress this fact when they contend that “true communications through the use of certain language(s) with social circles requires mutual intelligibility of meanings for appropriate understanding to avoid the problems of (mis)interpretations” [12, pp.474]. With this, language is viewed as an essential component of the encoding process in particular and communication as a whole. It is thanks to the appropriate use of language that the source achieves the formulation of meaningful message. Oyewo further observes that “the three most important functions of language in communication are to reveal the self, to express feelings and values and to convey meaningful message.” [9, pp.164]. In the absence of meaningful messages, it is clear that communication cannot be said to be effective [7, pp.66] meanwhile, one way in which to arrive at meaningful message is obviously using mutually intelligible codes. Dada opines that, in a multilingual society as Nigeria, effective communication demands an appropriate code choice [13, pp.6]. He explains that “Every society is organized into speech communities, each comprising a group of people who interact by means of speech. Therefore to live in many communities requires familiarity with more than one, often more than two languages”. Quoting Salami he adds that in a giving community, speakers often use different varieties of language. Domains for code choice comprise topic, person/receiver (role-relation) and locale/place. This simply means that the choice to use Pidgin English (PE) by a communicator (a musician in the

context of this paper) is a strategy to reach a specific target audience [13, pp.7]. But then, what can be said of the choice to use multilingualism or code-switching and code-mixing to communicate? How effective can communication be with the use of multilingual messages?

## III. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

This paper is anchored on two theories notably the encoding-decoding theory and the aberrant decoding theory. The first theory is postulated by Stuart Hall. It emphasizes the stages of transformation through which any media message passes on the way from its origins to its reception and interpretation. Though it was originally formulated in relation to television, it can aptly be applied to any mass medium, notably music [11, pp.145; 14, pp.23]. The theory is centered on two principal assumptions:

- a) Communicators choose to encode messages for ideological purposes and manipulate language and media for those end (media messages are given a preferred reading or what is now called ‘spin’)
- b) Receivers are not obliged to accept or decode messages as sent but can/and do resist ideological influence by applying variant or oppositional readings according to their own experience and outlook.

According to this theory, media messages are “encoded” according to established content genre (for instance pop music, news, soap opera and the like) with a face-value meaning and inbuilt guidelines for interpretation by audience. These messages are read by audiences depending on individual idea, experience and conception of “meaning structure”. In line with this Cesperes-Guevara suggests that:

meaning in popular music... does not depend only (or chiefly) on the intention or characteristics imposed on the piece by the performer or composer, because multiple historical, economic, ideological and technological factors and discourses intervene. As a consequence of this, musical meaning is not fixed and unique and its communication to the audience is not really guaranteed. [5, pp.18]

This theory therefore recognizes the polysemic nature of media text, the existence of interpretative communities and the primacy of the receiver in determining meaning. A very peculiar aspect of the theory is that meaning, as encoded in the media message does not necessarily or often correspond with meaning as decoded by audience.

On the other hand, the aberrant decoding theory casts doubt upon the role of intentionality and upon the idea that meaning is contained in the message. The theory is postulated to refer to a process whereby a message encoded according to a certain code is decoded by means of another. In such a case, just like in the encoding-decoding theory, the intended meaning will defer from the received meaning. O’Sullivan et al argue that aberrant decoding is an inevitable phenomenon in a context of multiplicity of cultures and subcultures. They opine that: “the variety of cultures and subcultures that receive a typical mass

mediated message means that it must inevitably be subject to a variety of aberrant decodings if it is to make sense to the variety of cultures receiving it" [14, pp.1].

#### IV. LANGUAGE LANGUAGE USE IN NIGERIA POPULAR MUSIC AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Over the years, popular Nigerian musicians have variously used language in their lyrics to reflect on the happenings in their society. According to Ugot, the language used in Nigerian popular music varies with respect to genres. She opines that "in Apala, Fuji, Juju and Yo-pop, the language used is predominantly Yoruba. In traditional music, language used is predominantly limited to that region [15, pp.231]. In High Life music, [some] artists ... spearheaded the popularity of code-switching and code-mixing in contemporary Nigerian music". As noted by Ugot, a remarkable phenomenon in Nigerian popular music has been the extensive use of code-switching and code-mixing - otherwise called multilingualism - characterized by a dominant use of Yoruba and Pidgin English language [15]. Multilingualism in music can be viewed as the incorporation by artists of local popular languages in the composition and performance of music. Liali and Omobowale defines multilingual music in the Nigerian context as

The new form of popular music developed within the Nigerian socio-cultural setting which combine in its lyrical texts multiple words of different languages. Such words combinations will of course involve "code-switching and random language mixing of lexical items in the composition and performance of such music. It is the alternation of words of different language origins in a musical situation. [12, pp.470]

According to Ugot, the popularity of this type of music was spearheaded by popular artists like Fela Kuti with his Afrobeat who, through code switching and code-mixing combined Nigerian Pidgin English and the indigenous language of Yoruba [15, pp.231]. It can be observed that in most cases, the code-switching and code-mixing involve one or more dominant local languages in Nigeria, notably Yoruba, Igbo, Haoussa and Pidgin English [7, pp.65; 12, pp.471; 15, pp.231-16, pp.4]. Multilingualism is for instance reflected in Elewon by Oritse Femi. In a stanza of the song, the musician says:

*Everyone don vex o!  
Politicians say dey want come give us bege  
Den talk say thay want come give us bege  
Bayelsa dey with alongi (gun) o  
Niger Delta boys don dey provoke i o  
Benin go talk I bawi (insult)  
A ni ema se laulau si wa o!  
Elewon !!!*

It can be observed in the song's lyrics that the artist combines Pidgin English and Yoruba. For an effective communication, parts of the lyrical texts will need to be translated, especially to a person who does not understand Yoruba. It can therefore be argued that multilingualism in the lyrical text rather facilitates restricted or segregated communication as it creates a situation in which the message is potentially not understood in its entirety, more especially by an international audience. Babalola and Rotimi corroborate this

view when they note that in using code-switching and code-mixing, "Artists are conscious of the possibility that their words may not be received by people outside their immediate context of language use" [16, pp.4].

Ugot shows how it may sometimes be difficult to understand messages of songs where code-switching had been used. She opines that: "Code switching is of the conventional type where such switches are almost unconscious, in other word, it is patterned in much the same way as following the grammatical rule for a single language. The speakers are generally focused on the message content of the conversation and the mode of such conversation is always difficult to recall in its entirety" [15, pp.232]. Code-switching is equally reflected in Dbanj's Tongolo. In this song the artist code switches from PE to SE and from these languages to Yoruba:

*Listen, listen /Mo wa talented / Yes mo wa talented/ Yes  
mo wa gifted  
Seri mi omagbe e lifted/ Seri hips e ma fi'le tinted/ Boy  
friend e gon owa evicted  
O mope Dbanj is addicted/ Te ba sope no mao wa  
persistent/  
Mo ni iyawo nle do not get it twested*

This song is virtually dominated by the Yoruba which shows that the artist is principally targeting a local public, more precisely, a Yoruba speaking public. Like in the first example, code-switching is principally used for aesthetical and rhetorical purpose (rhythm pattern) or exotica. The artist does not give the chance to an international audience to fully decode the message. Liali opines that "Nigerian hip hop artists employ multilingualism to create a community of music lovers that understands and shares in the meanings of the languages and issues articulated in the music." [17, pp.11]. Similarly, Babalola and Rotimi stress on the retrenched nature of communication in case of multilingual message formulation. They argue that:

It is important to note that hip-hop music and culture have always been about individual and communal expression and not necessarily concerned with "proper" use of language... It is clear that because the expression of thoughts in hip-hop is so personal, it tends to be grounded in local or regional syntax, dialect, slang and vernacular. It is based on the practitioner's unique situations, which can be understood by others in similar situations if they understand the verbal references, analogies, illustrations and other uses of literary tools for communication. [16, pp.8]

It has been argued that code-switching is a normal socio-linguistic phenomenon in communities like Nigeria where more than one language or dialect is spoken [15, pp.231; 18, pp.5 - 19, pp. 26]. Nigeria is a multilingual nation with an estimated number of 516 languages. Languages play a very important role in the respective communities where they are used. Of all these languages, Pidgin English seems to have the largest number of speakers [13, 87]. This may explain why the language is predominantly used in Nigerian popular music alongside other dominant regional languages as Yoruba, Igbo

and Hausa. An observant quoted by Liali and Omobowale opine that

The Hip hop now makes use of different languages that are present in Nigeria and even the universal language of the literate and illiterate that is Pidgin English. So, that captures the interest of the people because there is no way you will not find your way into it. If you are not the type that understands Yoruba, you will, find Hausa there, and if you cannot understand Hausa, you will find Igbo there. And if you do not fit into the general language of the people which is the Pidgin English. That is why you can see that even market women, bus conductors can sing the hip hop songs today because they can flow along with it and understand the languages. [12, pp.472]

This observation visibly undermines the fact that multilingualism involves multiple linguistic codes in a more or less random way. The audience may not always be individuals who understand all the codes used in the song and so, portions of the lyrical text may sound meaningless to them. Besides being a more segregated communication, a multilingual song do not have potentials for a wholesome message as a song composed entirely in one of the local languages will have. Message fidelity has more chances of being guaranteed in a unilingual song than a multilingual song.

Two other practices that tend to reduce message fidelity in Nigerian popular music is the use of twisted language and lexical innovations. In his assessment of Nigerian popular music, Nkechi captures this fact positing that in Nigerian hip hop, “not only are beats unique, but language are combined to create effects, new coinages deliver restricted messages and existing word are twisted to sing obscenity” [7, pp.67]. A good example of song with twisted language is Psquare’s Do Me where much of the song lyrics illustrate sex role and intimate bedroom practice through a twisted language. A section of the lyrics reads:

*If you do me, I do you, man no go vex/ Step on the dance floor, man no go vex  
Touch me, I you touch you, man no go vex/ You say, I say man no go vex  
Step on the dance floor, man no go vex/ So won't you given it to me, I will give it to you  
So make you give it to me some more, some more e get as e dey do me.*

This extract portrays a great use of double entendre by the artist. It may be argued that terms and expression as “touch me I touch you” and “give me some more” may be viewed as polysemic, leading to multiple interpretations. But by combining them, one may infer that the artists are communicating obscenities to their fans (who visibly should be initiated in decoding such coinages). The above extract aptly illustrates an instance of semantic noise as it visibly gives room for multiple interpretations. We cannot, in such a context, talk of effective communication. The artists do not communicate without ambiguity. Similarly, D’ Banj communicates obscenities in a twisted language in most of his songs. In the one titled “Booty call” the artist sings:

*I love that booty, I love that booty*

*I love that booty [It is booty call]  
See I want that booty furl [Its your booty call].*

Here again, language is twisted to conceal messages and to subtly sing obscenities. The word “booty”, is visibly not used in its strict sense. Decoding or inferring its meaning in this content will demand that attention be paid to the video elements that accompany it. In the video clip of the song, girls moving in a seductive manner are paraded, exhibiting their hips and their behind in an erotic manner. It can be observed that, most often, the popular musicians use their pop videos to reinforce, illustrate or render the message clearer. They sophisticatedly blur the message in their lyric through complex coinage. With that it can be inferred that D’ Banj “booty call” is all about liberal sex. The word “booty” is not other thing than sexual organs like (breasts and buttocks) but this is just an inference. The message once more is not communicated in an unambiguous manner. All these create semantic noise which more or less renders ineffective the communication, especially for audiences who are not his fans or are not initiated into understanding his language.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the phenomenon of code-switching, code-mixing (multilingualism) in popular Nigerian music. The paper observes that though contributing to the esthetic of songs and giving a Nigerian flavor to popular musical genres, code-switching has more potentials to considerably reduce message fidelity as it implies audience being multilingual to be able to fully understand the message. Meanwhile multilingualism involving local Nigerian languages is a pre-requisite which may not always be guaranteed for effective communication especially with an international audience. The paper therefore argues that code-switching/multilingualism in Nigerian popular music is more an agency of “glocalization” (the tendency of thinking and acting local in an era of globalization). With this style of composition and performance, it is obvious that music is principally aimed at a local consumption. Messages are too restricted to retrenched communities of audience as they are more accessible/decodable only by fans (especially Nigerians) of these popular musicians than by an international audience. Taking Nigerian Hip hop as a case study, contends that

The contemporary Nigerian version of hip hop is a product of transformations that involve a unique localization process. To be sure, it appears that the practitioners of hip hop imported an African-American musical form only to transmute it into an indigenized and localized version – a version that has been overwhelmingly accepted by a large number of young people in Nigerian society irrespective of class, religion or social status. [17, pp.6]

The paper concludes that this aspect of the industry reinforces the view that the Nigerian popular music has fast become an agency, merely for “the pursuit of public celebration” [7, pp.75] and as Denzi’s has once argued, “pop audiences only listen to the beat and the melody; the meaning of pop lies in the sense listeners make of songs for themselves” 20, pp.119].

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