

Hieber, Daniel W. 2016. Singing the morals: The function of musico-linguistic shifts in Kisii folktales. Panel on *Playing the changes, saying the changes: The social meaning of musico-linguistic style-shifting*, organized by Jessica Love-Nichols (UC Santa Barbara) and Morgan Sleeper (UC Santa Barbara), Nov. 17, 2016, American Anthropological Association (AAA) Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

Singing the morals:

The function of musico-linguistic shifts in Kisii folktales

Abstract

Daniel W. Hieber
University of California, Santa Barbara

keywords: Kisii, genre, music, code-switching

It is well known that the act of invoking a genre is fundamentally one of social action: speakers perform texts with specific social ends in mind, drawing on intertextual connections to imbue their performance with social meaning (Basso, 1996; Bauman, 2004; Briggs & Bauman, 1992; Hodges, 2015). But when a particular genre consists of or includes musical signs in addition to linguistic ones, the question becomes, ‘What does music add to the social act? Why mix the two modalities, and why switch between them?’

This paper describes the use of short songs in a particular moralizing genre of narratives called ‘folktales’ in Kisii, a Bantu language of southwestern Kenya, and shows how these musical performances not only play a role in the socializing function that these narratives have, but are in fact central to how the narrator accomplishes social action through the genre. Because the moral messages of these folktales are never supposed to be told explicitly, Kisii narrators must use indirect means of conveying the proper stances that listeners are meant to have towards events and characters in the narrative. By having characters within the narrative sing emotionally expressive songs, narrators avoid explicit moralizing by either themselves or the characters, while simultaneously layering the text with an implicit social metacommentary. In this way, the switch from linguistic to musical signs becomes the most central component of the text-as-social-action.