LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND STYLE: A STUDY OF ISIDORE OKPEWHO'S *THE LAST DUTY*

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Abstract

This paper attempts a stylistic analysis of Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. The work explores the employment of language style, to exemplify Okpewho's theme of war experience in Nigeria, which results in some ugly circumstances, including deprivations and hardship. Through language style, the study further reveals the survival strategies the victims of the war adopt to mitigate the unpleasant consequences associated with the unfortunate incident. This study examines the resources of language employed in the text, which demonstrates the novelist's peculiar style and choice of language use. This will enable readers' understanding of the text and enhance their ability to interact with the linguistic milieu of the writer. Therefore, attempt is made to expose the writer's foregrounded language choices in terms of the manner of usage, in order to portray his style. The analysis of the text, which is text-based and descriptive, utilizes Hallidayan model of analysis. The model helps us to adapt the narrative to suit the realities of our social environment through the prominent linguistic features in the text. It is against this background that the study analyses Okpewho's *The Last Duty,* focusing on the

artistic manipulation of the resources of language, with specific reference to the syntax and lexico-semantics of the text.

Key words: Style, language resources, lexico-semantics, syntax.

Introduction

Language, which is the major means of communication, constitutes the instrument of interaction in establishing and maintaining social relationship in every society. Various scholars have different perceptions in defining the concept of language. According to Longe, "language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which group of people (human beings) co-operate" (12). Gregory and Carrol posits that language is transmitted, patterned and embedded in human social experience as a means of communication. In his view, Osundare states that language is the supreme tool or means of communication among humans (36). These definitions consider language as a means of communication through whatever medium, which could be verbal, written, gesturing, facial expression or sign. The usefulness of any language depends solely on its social function, in which case, people use language to exchange ideas through shared understanding and meanings. This shows that language and literature are interconnected.

Literary writers explore specialized language form to express their messages, feelings, attitudes, experiences and world-views by means of language (Northrop Frye, 74). This means that language is the tool or pillar of literature, requiring each literary writer to employ a particular mode of presentation (style), to express himself. Every literary artist, in his creative

enterprise brings innovations to the language. For instance, he uses structure or arrangement and specific choice of words in a specific way for embellishment and captivation of readers' attention. This is possible because language is open-ended to permit the generation of new meanings and new forms (Leech and Short, 97).

Isidore Okpewho's The *Last Duty* is committed to the exposition of societal evils, and in the process, he has identified with the unfortunate and oppressed people, by awakening in them the will and the strength to bring about social changes. Therefore, his novel is marked by simple but profound language, because he believes that literary works should be understood by all. That is why he has taken his literary work to the homes of the ordinary people; hence, literature cannot and must not be separated from the social environment. Okpewho's work suggests that the writer should put his message at the service of the people, as his voice and vision are being portrayed. The creative use of language and the specific patterns employed in his creative work, bring about the peculiar style in the novel. Therefore, this study focuses on the lexis, figurative language and syntax of the text under study.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is qualitative and analytical, which is anchored on the application of Halliday's linguistic theory, to explicate the primary text. Thus, the study employs critical linguistic and literary analysis of the text to expose stylistics as its theoretical framework. Base on this model, the devices of stylistics are employed as the driving elements, which enable us to describe and interpret excerpts drawn from the text.

Theoretical Model

The analysis of the text, which is text-based and descriptive utilizes Hallidayan model of analysis. The model is adopted to explicate the narrative in order to accommodate the

realities of the social environment being analyzed through prominent linguistic features in the text.

Analysis And Discussion

1. Lexis

Lexis are words and expressions deployed to represent particular objects or thoughts, which help the writer to convey his/her thought. Employing foregrounding lexis makes literary works relevant and comprehensible to the readers. Usually, writers employ lexis that provide clarity of thought, subject and theme to the readers. The lexical quality of any literary work largely determines the depths of insight the readers want to share. Some examples of lexical features that manifest in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* comprise neologisms, conversion, loan words and reduplication.

a. Neologisms

These refer to words uniquely created to suit the contexts of use. Okpewho's *The Last Duty* lexical choices that depict his invention or innovation of new words, exceeding the normal resources of the target language (Leech, 42). The most common processes of word formation in the text are compounding. This strategy implies some kind of coinages in word formations, involving the joining of two or more items to make a single compound word. The extract below exemplifies the stylistic device.

Extract 1: *... his 'crippled arm' was the reason (p.65); On my way I heard the evening 'cock crow'(p.66); it is nearly morning now and still I cannot sleep. There is a strain on my eyelids, and my body feels 'half cooked' (p.157).*

The above expressions typify compounding in the form of coinages: 'crippled arm' is employed to convey insights about Aku's sympathetic feelings and mood towards the condition

of Odibo, a physically challenged, to whom she entrusts her son, Oghenovo, during one of her regular visits to solicit material support from Toje who took advantage of her because she was out there, unjustly imprisoned. 'Cock crow', is coined to describe Aku's secret meeting with Toje, who exploit her sexually. The lexical choice of 'crippled arm' is to aptly foreground Odibo's degree of physical disability. The employment of the term portrays Odibo's state of helplessness, his constraint, incapacitation and limitation while discharging his daily routine to earn a living. 'cock crow' is also foregrounded as a descriptive word (noun), referencing time consciousness. The term is used to mark out the unholy meeting between Toje and Aku. However, 'half-cooked' is suggestive of Aku's feelings of hurt, bodily pains, regret, frustration, tiredness and weakness she suffers after her moments of illicit sexual engagement she shares with Toje.

The encounter portrays that Aku is every woman who is faced with insurmountable hardship and pressure, who is constrained to do what she would not do normally. She sleeps with Toje because she is hungry, devastated and cannot access basic needs, and circumstances force her to turn to Toje to provide for her and her son.

Affixation constitutes another process of word formation in the text (the addition of prefix or suffix to an item already in the language). This is the process of attaching or appending an affix, which is a bound morpheme to a root or free morpheme (Ofuani and Longe, 88-89). In English, this appendage is either prefixal or suffixal to the root. An affixation is either inflectional or derivational. It is inflectional if it does not form a new word but only forms a grammatical function of plurality or number, tense, and comparative and superlative degrees. It is derivational if a new word is derived or formed by the affixation (Aronoff and Fudeman, 45). Okpewho uses the derivational morpheme to form new words in his work. For instance, the following constructions are found in the text:

> ***Extract 2:*** *… then her mouth stops moving, and her "untalking," "unsmiling" face does not look up again from the bowl of rice …(p. 117)*

Through the process of prefixation, the expressions in quotes in the above extract are derived adjectives from the verbs: 'talking' and 'smiling' respectively. The coinages are employed to reflect the bitterness and melancholic state of Aku to her son, Oghenovo, whose topic of discourse about his father's unjust imprisonment hurts her. Therefore, the coined adjectives capture Aku's resentment for such matter that reminds her of the husband's unjust treatment in prison. Hence, she declines her son's inquiry because she is troubled over her imprisoned husband for no just cause.

b. **Conversion**

Lexical conversion is the derivation of a word from another without any affixation. It is a mere change of lexical category, which leads to a category rule violation in stylistics (Syal and Jindal 91). We see this in the following extracts from the text:

> ***Extract 3:*** *"People here used me "to police" their prejudices" (p.59); His wife had been "prostituting" herself to somebody else" (p. 72); "Tears started "streaming" down her face" (p.98); The whole twenty-five of its detainees-leaving this prison in one "go" (p.148).*

The words or expressions in inverted commas as used above are transferred elements from their original word classes or grammatical categories to another. It involves a functional shift and a violation of the category rule in grammar. With reference to each of the words in inverted commas, **'to police', 'prostituting',** and **'stream'**, they are grammatically classified as nouns respectively, but used as a verb each in the contexts. On the other hand, 'go' which is a verb form, functions as a noun in the context. Each case of conversion in the above extract depicts instances of prevalent social ills, humiliation, pains and discomfort that characterize, a

war torn environment and situation, which Urukpe community represents in the text, especially as it affects Oshevire and his household. 'to Police' is deployed to emphasize commander Ali's protective routine role of regulating, controlling and keeping surveillance over Urukpe community, in order to rescue the people from rebels' attack. Again, the use of 'prostituting' conveys Aku's involvement in marital abuse and harlotry with Toje, which results in her sense of regret. However, Aku's son, Oghenevo is not happy about the ugly situation facing his family, especially because of the scandal. 'streaming' in 'tears streaming down his face', is a vivid description and expression of Oghenevo's bad state of mind. 'streaming' connotes deep expression of bitter feelings of neglect and abandonment, and his condition of emotional breakdown, because his mother denies him adequate attention, which she mostly shares with his man friend, Toje. The lexical item reflects the boy's level of bitterness, depression and agony, which represent the effects of war on members of the family. Finally, the employment of 'go' in the phrase 'leaving this prison in one "go", captures the collective attitude, will and desire of the inmates, including Oshevire and his fellow victims to struggle and free themselves from captivity by any means, in order to re-unite with their families.

c. Loan words

This is the act of taking and using a word from another language. Okpewho employs loan words creatively to enlarge his vocabulary stock in the text. Though the target language of the text is English, the writer borrows words from his native language, including other foreign languages to flavour his communicative process and to fill linguistic gaps, Here are some examples:

> ***Extract 4:*** *agbada (39) (native attire for male); garri (53), eba (64), and ukodo(76) (Urhobo and Ijaw languages for locally processed flour and a mouth-watering delicacy cooked with fish or meat and plantain or yam without oil). Other borrowed words from Nigerian indigenous languages in the text include: "migwo" (68); and "vren, doh (99) (stand up); "baba" (142), "Allah" (203), "Mama" (65) (various*

forms of indigenous compliments used to address earthly and Almighty father, and mother, respectively.

d. Repetition/Reduplication

Edward Finegan posits that reduplication simply means doubling; a word formation process whereby part of the base or the whole base is copied or repeated to create a new word with a different meaning or different word class (47). Lexical- syntactic repetition is a literary device whereby a word or phrase is repeated two or more times to emphasize the point being made, used to emphasize the emotional feeling associated with the point being made (Haspelmath 24). A typical example, among others in *The Last Duty,* is shown below:

Extract 5: *Ali! Ali! Ali! Shouts the surging crowd …(4)*

The above expression exemplifies a profound case of repetition used to acknowledge the good deeds of Major Ali, whose concern and efforts save and protect the people at the border town (Urukpe), from the attacks of the rebel soldiers. The repetition of "Ali" in this context conveys the people's inner appreciation and approval of the major's efforts in delivering them from danger.

11. Figurative Language

a. Proverbs

Proverbs are short expressions that connote wisdom and universal truth. Ruth Finnegan defines it as "a saying in more or less fixed form, marked by shortness, sense and salt, and distinguished by the popular acceptance of the truth tersely expressed in it" (393) (quoted in Dumbi Osani ,96). Proverbs are African cultural practice and African oral literature elements. They embellish or spice up oral conversations in Africa. According to Achebe *in Things Fall Apart*, among the Ibo, the arts of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the

palm-oil with which words are eaten" (6). African literary writers use proverbs to show the creative potentials, flavor and Africaness inherent in African languages. Okpewho employs proverbs in his work to show local colour in *The Last Duty*, as shown below:

> ***Extract 6:*** *A little ache can spoil a good head (48). Only a foolish traveler starves his camel of water (48). If you spare your scabies the harsh scrub of the sponge, merely because it will hurt your skin, you may later be faced with a malignant boil (109). A man does not suddenly reject his brother simply because he has contacted yaws (188).*

The above excerpt has series of proverbs. Rendered at different points in the novel, they are deployed to mark off the social cultural identity of African environment. The language items are a source of entertainment, wisdom and counsel on social issues.

b. Humor

This refers to expressions that indicate funny sayings, events and actions in literature. The novelist creates humorous episodes, events or names to ease tension in the novels. For instance, the character of Toje Onovwakpo symbolises humor. He displays sarcastic and satiric episodes in the text; he claims to be a respected celebrity of Urukpe (133). A big man and rubber magnate and, one of the few names that lend respect, recognition, credibility, who claims to bring the community to the limelight, yet he indulges in the devilish acts of intrigue, maligning, character assassination, and adultery, which results in his veneral infection, and loses his potency or erection. Again, he often claims and brags of being an illustrious and prominent son, and at the top echelon of Urukpe and its environs. Yet, he is not enlisted in the Igabo Progressive Union, and not an acknowledged member of the Great Sons and Daughters of Igaboland Almanac (105) - all to make a caricature of him.

iii. Grammatical Features

The number of grammatical rules in English is large, and therefore the foregrounding possibilities via grammatical deviation are also large (Leech, 47). Syntax in the text explores the potential complex degree of unusual or ungrammaticality of sentence structure. Therefore, this paper investigates language use in Okpewho's *The Last Duty* choices of phrases, clauses and sentences, including the devices of variations on the architecture of language, which help to create and express shades of meaning in the work as follows:

a. Selection Rule Violation

This is the violation or breach of collocation rule (Yankson 2). It is a semantic constraint in the co-occurrence of words in a sentence. Selectional restriction rules, which became prominent through Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG), has become an area of concern in stylistics because of their violations. Selectional restrictions pose the problem of grammaticality and acceptability. A sentence may be syntactically well formed, but semantically ill-formed because of the mismatch of words in the sentence. Okpewho employs instances of a mismatch of words in sentences for stylistic effects. Examples are:

> ***Extract 7****: …with her husband far away and* ***under the firm grip of detention*** *….(P.33).*

> ***Extract 8: Anger now knew*** *no verbal language (P.17).*

The highlighted portions of the above extracts characterize clear cases of mismatch or collocational violation of words in the respective utterances. They are not acceptable in spite of their grammaticality because of the incompatibility or incongruity of the syntactic elements. But according to Akwanya, "Selectional restriction can only apply if it is based on syntactic rules alone" (99). In the above extract, the noun, 'anger', an inanimate cannot co-occur with

the verb 'knew' because "anger" does not have the ability to realize something. However, the novelist chooses the expression to show the depth of fury the private rank soldier develops against his sergeant for snatching his girlfriend. Again, Oshevire's experience of being in detention is described as "firm grip", which is human attribute. It captures Oshevire's unfortunate condition of incarceration, which Chief Toje rejoices over, and takes advantage of to exploit his wife sexually.

b. Parallelism

This is a pattern repetition. It is the repetition of identical linguistic structures for stylistic effects (Yankson 14). Okpewho employs parallel linguistic structure in his work for the purpose of foregrounding. The following parallel syntactic structures are chosen for analysis:

> ***Extract 9:*** *My manhood flawed – SV, … My potency questioned (SV) (p.5); This is power (_SVC),… This is happiness (SVC) (p.26); …she beat me, and beat me, and I cried and cried p.15).*

In the above extract, Chief Toje utilizes the repetitive structures as expressions of worries over his declining libido, and his eventual feelings of reinvigoration, respectively. On the other hand, the repetition occasioned in the phrase: "…beat me, and beat me…", portrays Aku son's (Oghenovo) intense confusion and cry after he had been beaten and mocked by his playmate, that his father was in prison.

c. Code switching and code mixing

Okpewho creatively employs code switching and code mixing as a stylistic device in his text for stylistic effect. In this sense, he switches between Nigeria pidgin and standard English jargons and indigenous languages, as a result of the less formal education and social background of some of the characters in the text. For instance:

Extract 10: *"**Migwo**", I said on the a choked voice….(p:18).*

The insertion of 'migwo' in the above utterance reflects Aku's employment of a Nigerian indigenous language (Urhobo or Ijaw) to express appreciation and greetings to her oppressor, Toge, who takes advantage of her by giving her unsolicited gifts to entice her. So she uses that indigenous term to acknowledge the receipt of the cash from him. Other cases of code mixing include:

Extract 11: *"Oga"money for the drink" (125), "whence" (p. 3),*

In the above extract, Okpewho incorporates words and phrases from indigenous languages into English sentences to create unique linguistic blend. For example, "Oga" (Yoruba language for "Boss or Master") is used to address a character. English words are incorporated into indigenous languages to reflect language contact.

d. Compound Sentence

Compound sentences are always formed by stringing or combining two or more simple sentences together in different ways because the combination is contingent on the conjunction used. A compound sentence has two or more simple sentences of equal grammatical status or rank, joined together by a coordinating conjunction, such as "but" "or" and "and". Each clause in a compound sentence is an independent or main clause as it can stand on its own to make a complete meaning without appending or attaching itself to any other clause or element in the sentence to complete its meaning. However, writers' works are characterized with normal clauses and sentences - simple, compound, complex and so on, and they are varied in use, to avoid monotony. This is also applicable to Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. However, what stands out in the text is the continuous coordination or linking of clauses and sentences, and the fronting of subordinate clauses to delay the main statement or idea contained in the sentences. This implies that Okpewho makes an elaborate use of periodic sentences — a complex sentence

situation whereby subordinate clauses come before the main ones as a way of delaying the main idea till the end of the sentence (Wales 442). In linguistics, fronting a subordinate clause is regarded as a left-branching structure, which is different from right-branching structure, where the main clause normally appears at the sentence-initial position. We have the following sentences for illustration:

> **Extra 12*:*** *"After all, this is my house, I built this home, I own it, I married a wife and got these children and, if I cannot exercise my right of question as much as of positive control, who else is there to be called to account when any crisis comes to this home? "(p.24).*

The above extract is a very long and complex interrogative sentence, showing complex ideas and products of Toge's private thoughts and emotional state. The subordinate markers in the text are consciously omitted for words economy, but are recoverable by intuition. Other illustrations include:

> ***Extract 13:*** *"When I pay a man good money I expect good service ... And when a man pays me for any service he gets his money's worth (p. 165).*
>
> ***Extract 14****: "When he was certain the Land rover was on its way, he picked up his loaded S.MO"... "When he arrived, the vehicle was there alright"... "After a quick look around he made for the bedroom"(17).*
>
> ***Extract 15:*** *"When the big soldier started to talk to my mother in his big voice and told her to shut up and stop crying, and mother was crying and crying and crying, and the big soldier was talking more and more in his big voice and asking my mother to shut up, I began to cry and cry because I was afraid of the big soldier and I thought ..."(219-220).*

Okpewho utilizes the above narratives as examples to reflect or portray the dominant psychological disposition of characters in the text. Oghenovo's language matches with his psychological state, as his thoughts are captured by the use of direct speech. Presented in their original form, most of the time, the novelist utilizes sentences in one continuous stream, linked loosely by coordinating conjunctions (Nwahunanya 296). In other words, his style of sentence construction is replete with repetitive phrases and clauses linked together by simple conjunctions.

CONCLUSION

The paper is a stylistic investigation of Okpewho's *The last Duty*, through the exploration of language use in a literary text. The study describes and interprets how the writer spices his message through his choices of language to reveal his personality and style. Therefore, the work gives us insights on how stylistics synergizes linguistics and literature, with a view to exposing the features inherent at various levels of linguistic analysis, how foregrounded elements allows a break of the conventional rules of language.

The analysis, which is text-based and descriptive, is anchored on the Hallidayan model of analysis. This enables us to reveal the prominent features in the text in order to captivate the attention of readers, are. Attention is paid to two major levels of language use in the text, which constitute the linguistic descriptions - lexical and syntactic features.

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