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An Evaluation of Stylo-Semantic Imports in Selected Performance Poetry

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Abstract

Style and its study, stylistics, are at the fulcrum of linguistic description and critical interpretation. As an offshoot of rhetoric, stylistics specifically focuses on analytical and descriptive approaches to the investigation of the effectiveness of the use of language in a textual creation. One such approach is semantics, a linguistic approach to the evaluation of the meanings that a text conveys. Beyond conveying meaning, texts sometimes import meaning from their contextual usage to communicate underlying messages. This study focuses on the evaluation of stylo-semantic imports in selected performance poetry with the aim of considering how hidden meanings are created, and hidden messages are passed across in performance poetry. The poetry under evaluation was selected randomly across three poets, each representing a major Nigerian tribe. Data were analysed using semantic toolkits. The study found that imports of cohesive relations characterise the selected performance poetry, and personal pronouns were used in place of their antecedents. The use of pronouns in place of their antecedents was intended to avoid repetition. These cohesive strategies were employed by the poets to avoid the redundancy and boredom often associated with nominal repetition. The study concludes that even though performance poetry, like any other genre of poetry, is primarily intended to pass certain information or promote some forms of ideologies by way of persuasion, the use of stylo-semantic imports has helped to communicate the underlying ideologies that may not be well captured by the conventional medium of communication.

Keywords: Style, Stylistics, Semantics, Performance Poetry

Introduction

The arbitrariness of human language has paved the way for its flexibility and adaptability, which subsequently enhance its creative use for effective communication. Therefore, when attention is paid to the circumstances surrounding language use, a clinical insight is given to the discourse to reveal the locution, illocution and perlocution. This forms the formidable basis of empirically assigning variable meaning to a given text, because concepts, rather than being autonomous entities, acquire their meaning as part of the system (Gobir 273). Their meanings are determined by their relationship with co-text; a position they acquire in the linguistic chain and even in the extralinguistic context.

In view of the preponderance of the authorial 'fingerprints' in literary composition, the onus lies on a linguist to dissect the language use by taking it apart to see how it works. The work of a linguist, in this context, is like a mechanic. Purely out of curiosity, he takes apart unfamiliar motor parts. The difference between a mechanic and a linguist in this description is that a mechanic, after taking apart the components of a vehicle, will probably put it back together. However, since a linguist takes language apart figuratively, his subsequent task is not to reassemble it but to describe how the parts work in a way that reveals the uniqueness (style) of language use. Stylistics, therefore, is a practice of analysing the language of literature using linguistic concepts and categories with the goal of explaining how literary meanings are created by specific language choices and patterns (Akanmu, Olaleru & Olugbodi, 682).

This study set out to evaluate poetry analysis from a linguistic perspective using stylo-semantic toolkits. It aimed to bridge the existing critical gap in the literature through the application of emerging linguistic functional models, by deploying the stylo-semantic features of cohesion and

rhetoric to explore the extra-linguistic features of performance poetry, for a better understanding of poetic texts.

Literature Review: Stylistics and Semantics

Over the years, linguists have had to grapple with the misconception that linguistics is too limited and ineffective to adequately account for the rhetoric and aesthetic of language in a literary creation. However, with the development of linguistic theories and methodologies, stylistics began to evolve. At the inception, it was an eclectic and interdisciplinary linguistic effort that was devoted mainly to the investigation of phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Style and its study, stylistics, therefore, is at the fulcrum of linguistic description and critical interpretation. Stylistics as a linguistic endeavour has opened the hitherto enshrouded world of literature by setting apart the linguistic components of a text to reveal the embedded meaning (Babatunde 14).

According to Osundare (11), 'A stylistic analysis is thus a temporary breakdown, an anatomy of technical parts of a work with the inevitable aim of eventually putting them all back together and re-establishing the inevitable unity with content'. At the end of the exercise, content will have ceased to be entirely what it used to be; it will have transcended its original state, having been pressed through formal analysis to release some of its hidden messages, some of its unarticulated import.

Semantics simply studies the meaning of words in isolation or their contextual usage within a sentence. Studying semantics at the level of words is lexical semantics. Babatunde (13) explains:

The lexicon refers to the set of lexemes in a language as stored in the brains of proficient users including all the relevant linguistic information (for each lexeme)

required for the production and interpretation of utterances. (p.13).

Explaining further, Babatunde maintains that since the meaning of lexemes cannot be determined by their constituent parts, it therefore becomes necessary to have a theoretical dictionary called the lexicon of a language. 'A lexical item is entered into the lexicon bearing in mind the morphological, phonological, syntactical, and semantic features' (p.13). The aggregate of those features accounts for the meaning of a lexeme. Lexemes therefore are formed through different processes.

Rhetoric as an aspect of semantics: rhetoric is an art of communication. Wales (346) describes rhetoric as the art of speech. To display great skills in the art of communication, communicators employ certain rhetorical devices to make their speech elegant, sophisticated, and impressionistic. This, to a large extent, is determined by the linguistic creativity of a speaker or writer and his dexterity at manipulating the rhetorical devices for effective communication. Thus, for rhetorical language to be 'grand' and impressive, the rhetorical devices must be employed to a great extent.

Rhetorical devices such as scheme, including anaphora, cataphora, epistrophe, polyptoton, asyndeton, symprole, parenthesis, antithesis, ellipsis, etc., and tropes (metaphor, personification, metonyms, simile, oxymoron, meronymy, reification, etc. Stylistics proves a rewarding and potent tool for accomplishing adequate and accurate textual decomposition for the intended meanings which are hitherto hidden within the fabric of a woven language (Gobir 137). This, therefore, makes stylistics an appropriate framework for this study.

Stylistics and the Study of Poetry

Stylistics, as a linguistic approach, is not just a medium of literary expression but the main pillar of the literary edifice and a vital tool that supports literature's status as a transitive expression. Osundare (11) explains further that 'For the most remarkable writers are those who have shaken themselves loose of the conventional bondage of language, broken the existing linguistic rules, thereby creating a need for new ones.' Poetry, among other literary genres, is the most malleable one that grants a speaker/writer the liberty to play around the conventions of a language to allow for a creative foregrounding. Poetry, therefore, enriches language ideationally, lexically, and structurally. It extends its expressive and cognitive frontiers, and creates new possibilities.

'It is the responsibility of a linguist to investigate, analyse and interpret the salient alchemy by which the poets "transmute the base metal of everyday language into the gold of arts" (Spencer xii). Archibald, cited in Osoba (30), states: 'Poetry, more than any kind of literature, develops and heightens stylistic structures: the figures and images of poetry are stylistically derived content'. This spurs the researcher's interest to select stylistics as the theoretical framework for the study of Contemporary Nigerian Poetry. This is, again, because it is only through stylistic analysis that one can better see the function and meaning of the aesthetic and structural components of a poetic work. Fundamentally, poetry provides a fertile ground for stylistic analysis.

Therefore, the selection of performance poetry as data for the analysis in this work is rooted in its nature as a literary genre that allows for freedom of expression and dynamic patterns of language use by individual poets. And this is also due, in part, to the fact that, unlike the printed collection of poetry, linguistic critics have barely taken notice of the activities of the new performance poetry, and none to speak of reviewing the linguistic curves presented by this new genre of poetry.

Methodology

This study is conducted using a qualitative research method. Selected performance poetry of Dike Chukwumerije (Igbo), Mariam Abubakar Hassan (Hausa) and Titilope Sonuga (Yoruba) served as primary data. The secondary data include materials sourced from extensive library research work done to gather relevant information and data on the subject matter, such as journals and critical linguistic essays, which are intermittently referenced for exemplification to buttress some common arguments. The relevance of these works lies in the fact that they constitute basic conceptual and analytical guides that were used in carrying out the theoretical focus and detailed analysis of this work. An informal interview was also conducted with the poets to gather information that guided this research and its systematic stylistic analysis from a semantic perspective.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the selected data for this study, constituting selected Nigerian poems, especially performance poetry of selected Nigerian poets, has revealed that stylo-semantic imports in the selected poems include cohesive devices as well as rhetorical devices. The results are presented in the succeeding discussions.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the manner in which interdependent choices made by a writer at different points correspond with each other to form a network of sequential relations. It is interesting to explore how performance poets have been able to cohere the poems with their performance. This is because the performance of poetry is a network of thoughts in relation to the logical sequence of the outside world of reality. Cohesive strategy in performance poetry,

therefore, is not only limited to the intrinsic coherence within the text but also the cohesive effect of the non-verbal aspects that make the poetic delivery a unified whole. This technique is applauded as it is thought-evoking and instils clarity and a high degree of persuasion.

Analysing the intrinsic cohesive strategy reveals that the use of conjunctions is a major device employed to achieve cohesion in performance poetry, and/or with, but, if, since, among numerous others, are used to link sentences and stanzas together in a text. With this, the poets are able to achieve unity of thoughts. Also, the connectives have been used to create a free flow of ideas from the standpoint of looking at poetry as spoken/oral discourse, as emphasised. The following underlined connectives illustrate the examples as found in the poems:

But the strenuous poisonous tree
Has the truth in You and Me
Just a tap from You and Me
While we fix this mystery
Someone blames on the devil
But I have never seen a devil
With his pocket full of money
Money meant for everybody (lines 14-21)

Another is found in Sonuga

With diggers and daggers
And Sharp edged cutlass
With love and hatred
And wine-laden sour taste
With yatches and spears
And broad mouthed machetes
With hoes and matches
And stolen fund shameless heart (lines 43-49)

In Mariam's Activist Poem

Travelers set on fire, just like movement hijacked
Or the homeless ones rendered helpless..... (lines 30-31)

Someone once said: "you either died a hero

Or watch yourself live long enough to become a villain
Which is it gonna be? (lines 52-54)

With the preceding extracts, it is clear that the pervasive use of connectives is common to performance poets given the nature of their mode of delivery. It therefore becomes logical to argue that the pile-up of connectives is a way by which the mounted pressure and tension in the poets are eased off. The tendency for the poets to ease their tension has led to the overuse of compound noun phrases and structures, which in turn requires the excessive use of connectives, as seen in the extracts. This allows for a smooth performance that got the audience, in most cases, glued to their seats.

Cohesive relations are also achieved in performance poetry by the use of pronouns in place of their antecedents in order to avoid repetition. Personal pronouns like *I, we, they, their, which, have, me, us, and them* as referents are featured prominently in performance poetry. This cohesive strategy is employed by the poets to avoid redundancy and boredom that are often associated with nominal repetition. Below are few instances:

I know of a restless mother
Who wrote to her son somewhere
In a government school in Nigeria
Hoping he may makes it back
Praying her eyes warms her heart at his sight again (lines 8-12)

I know a young wife, pregnant,
Who, yesterday, smile at soldier of a husband
Said: 'See you later"
He kissed her forehead
But that was the last of it (lines 14-17)

In Dike You and Me

Stopped the car and bring out Muslims
Burn them all to avenge Christian
It was you who put a bomb on
Blew a whole on our Nation

It was me who put a suit on
 Went to work and stole the nation
 It was you who took my hand
 It was us hand in hand

(lines 30-37)

Show to God if you are there
 There is no need to come here

(lines 51-52)

In the above-cited extracts, the referents — he, our, me, his, her, it, them — are endophoric references whose referents are within the text. For instance, in lines 14-17, the referent pronouns 'you' and 'he' refer back to the soldier husband who never came back to his family because he was killed on the battlefield against the bandit. Such referents are called anaphoric. Whereas the referent 'you' in lines 33 and 38 can be described as exophoric, whose referents are outside the text. While the 'there' and 'here' in lines 51-52 are referring to spaces outside the text, the pronouns 'you' and 'us' in lines 32 and 37, respectively, refer to the audience listening to the performance. The poet employs cohesive reference strategies to absolve the devils of blame for misfortune, and the problem of buck-passing common to Africans. He therefore implies that everybody is responsible for the calamitous situation into which the country is plunged. Therefore, in addition to making the message clear, the strategy intensifies the affective effects that the text generates in the audience's psyche.

Another cohesive devices common to performance poets is repetition. In most cases, repetition of words, phrases or clauses is foregrounded as a stylistic device not only for emphasis but to enhance the performance aesthetics for entertaining purposes. The repetition of the word:

Make music with rumbling intestine
Make a home out of anything, most times just the sky
Make a cover out of anything; sometimes just your skin

The repetition of the phrase 'I am' in *I' am a Nigerian*

I am one of five Africans

I am one of eight Europe
 Anywhere in the world
I am a Nobel Prize winner
I am Olympic Gold Medalist
 A Grammy award winner
 A soccer champion
 A priest of the Vatican
 An Oscar Nominee
 A giant of Literature
 A distinguished Scientist
 A musical icon
 My root lie in the dusty Sahara of the North (Lines 1-14)

A critical look at the repetition of 'I am' in the above text reveals that it was a deliberate attempt by the performance poets, as it stops in line 5 where it could as well continue. But during the performance, the poet drops the repeated phrase to allow for a seamless switch from low pitch level to high pitch level to catch the attention of the audience for what is to come in the later part of the poetic performance. A similar situation is also found in Dike's performance by repeating the words 'you and me':

You and Me can handle this
You and Me can wreak all this
 Show to God if you are there
 There is no need to come here
You and Me can handle this
You and Me can save this

In addition to this is the constant repetition of the clause 'I know of' at intervals in Mariam's poems. These are effective cohesive devices which possess phonological denotation of maintaining a balance on the two sides of their poetic argument. Also of stylistic importance in the examples is that these stanza openers create unity of time and space within the poems in which they appear. They also carry confirmations of the message with which they wrapped in relation to the consequences of issues raised.

4.7 Rhetoric

Performance poetry, like any other genre of poetry, is primarily intended to pass certain information or promote some forms of ideologies by way of persuasion. These are ideologies that the poets feel may not be well captured by the conventional medium of communication. A thorough look at the message central to all the performance poets in this study reveals an evangelism for a socio-political and economic renaissance, achieved through their choice of rhetorical devices.

The poets carefully select their words and expressions to achieve the desired purpose of persuading their audience towards liberation from the endemic socio-economic malady into which the nation is plunged. Their expressions are brief, lucid and concise. This is not unconnected with the transient nature of the medium they have chosen. Despite the clarity of their language, their expressions are laden with rhetorical devices that spice up their communication. It is noteworthy that the rhetorical density of their linguistic composition is largely a product of sound exploration (phonology). Some of these sound-related rhetorical devices, such as alliteration and assonance, were mentioned in the previous chapter. However, since performance poetry, unlike the written pedagogical collection, thrives more on sound banalities, exploration of more sound-related rhetorical devices (Schemes) and their implications becomes necessary in order to give a clear linguistic description of various elements which cohere to give a persuasive force enshrouded in an entertaining medium of poetry performance.

Pun is a lexical device which performance poets use to elevate their performances. Pun is a play on words such that it signals modification of the real sense of words involved. It is a phonologically potent device which performance poets use to elevate the aesthetics of their works. Sonuga and Chukwuumerije are clear examples of this, as most of their works are pun-ridden performances. They utilised the technique to convey certain loaded implicatures and entailments, most of which require thorough inferential procedures for full understanding. Examples of this abound in Chukwuumerije's *What is Development?*

When house is home
 And leave in our homes in peace not in pieces
 To take out today, put back tomorrow
 That make my destruction
 Prerequisite for his expansion

In the above example, one grasps the fullest import of a deductive process, most especially when he says '*we leave in our homes in peace not in pieces*'. The expression evokes a rehearsal of a sarcastic relationship among various tribes in the country, who live in mutual suspicion and are constantly afraid of what to expect from one another.

The hurried rhythm in performance poetry, as explained in the previous chapter, produced alliterative verses, which is an indication of how emotion and attention can be heightened as a result of the inherent power of persuasion in good oration. The numerous instances of alliteration and assonance, marked by sound repetition in close succession, are foregrounded not only to create a rhythm for good performance but also to catch the attention of the audience and keep them glued to their seats until the end of the performance. The sound repetitions also reveal pockets of anaphoric devices.

An anaphora is a phonologically related rhetorical device that occurs when words or phrases are repeated at the beginning of successive lines of a poem or speech. These devices are mostly common to performance poetry because of the strong effect they have on the audience. If sounds are repeated, it is meant to constantly remind the audience who might have lost track of the poet's theme as a result of distraction from the environment or even noise in the medium. Instances of anaphoric expressions abound in the collected samples for this study. Some examples are cited below from Dike's poems:

In a rich spring forest of the East
In the rocky Hill of the West
In the field swamp of the Delta
In the world of our ability and vibrance of our city
 My strength flows from the water of Niger and Benue

My joy springs from the rush sharara fall
To the National wonders of Yankari (lines 15-21)

Nigeria is my rock
Nigeria is my hope
Nigeria is my home (lines 21-23)

Mariam has a distinct way of using anaphoric devices:

I know dreams buried.
They aren't seen it.
It will never grow.
I know dead youths whose country has failed them
I know surprise of desperation and anger (lines 18-22)

Just a citizen asking if I am next.
Just like the Tejina kids
Just like screamed voiced from train attack (lines 26-28)

During the performance, there is a sharp drop in Mariam's pitch in the last line (28), which clearly reveals how bad the poet feels about the terrible incidents happening right before our eyes but unable to do anything to stop them. The deafening silence in the audience section also shows that the poet succeeded in affecting the audience with the same feelings, which is the whole essence of a good performance.

Instances of *epiphora*, otherwise known as epistrophe, are also numerous in the poetry performances under review. Epiphora is the opposite of anaphora. While words or phrases are repeated in the beginning of each poetic lines in anaphoric cases, the repeated words or phrases appear at the end of successive poetic lines or sentences in a speech. Examples are:

Has the truth in You and Me
Just a tap from You and Me
While we fix this mystery
Someone blames on the devil
But I have never seen a devil

This is employed basically for rhyme and rhythmic purposes to give the performance a near-musical outlook. To highlight contrast between different options of possibility is another rhetorical devices called *symploce*. Symploce, which is the repetition of words or phrases at both the beginning and end of successive clauses or verses, adds a sense of balance that neither anaphora nor epiphora can do alone. For instance:

Make a home out of anything, most times just the sky
 Make a cover out of anything; sometimes just your skin
 Quench thirst of anything; sometimes out of tears (line 49-50)

In Dike's

Steal their peace and keep their own
 Take their life and keep their own
 Keep their land and burn the country
 When their land is in that country? (lines 40-43)

The above-mentioned rhetorical devices are stylistically marked to provide a rhythm that balances the sound undulation in poetry performance. This is to create an entertaining effect that stimulates the audience's interest in the performance. Those foregrounded stylistic effects enable the poets to exhibit persuasive connotations as they stand to win the audience's consent to fuel the tension in their message.

Further exploration of sound or word repetition shows the repetition of the conjunction 'and' in some Sonuga's verses as exemplified below:

49) With diggers and daggers
 And Sharp-edged cutlass
 With love and hatred
 And wine-laden sour taste
 With yachts and spears
 And broad mouthed machetes
 With hoes and matches
 And stolen fund shameless heart (lines 43-

This type of rhetorical device is called *polysyndeton*. It is the use of repeated conjunctions between words or clauses in poetic lines or sentences, mostly used to create emphasis. Describing the terrible socio-political situation of the country, Sonuga's deliberately put together collocates of arms carried by the masses to protest the oppression of the political class. Each of the arms mentioned is conjoined with 'and' to emphasise the importance of each of the items in the struggle for socio-economic and political emancipation.

Conclusion

This study has set out to evaluate poetry analysis from a linguistic perspective using stylo-semantic toolkits. It aimed to bridge the existing critical gap that exist in literature through the application of the emerging linguistic functional models, by deploying the stylo-semantic features of cohesion and rhetoric for the exploration of the extra-linguistic features of performance poetry, for a better understanding of the poetic texts. Based on the analysis and presentation of results, the study found that several cohesive devices and rhetorical tools are employed by the studied poets to create an entertaining effect that stimulates the audience's interest in the performance. Those foregrounded stylistic effects enable the poets to exhibit persuasive connotations as they seek to win the audience's consent to fuel the tension in their message.

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