



A Linguistic Analysis of Selected Excerpts from Two Literary Genres

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ABSTRACT: English language is used in different ways and forms and each of these ways results in a variety. Variety differentiation is often intuitively done on the basis of the preponderance of certain lexical items or sets. Paradoxically, expressions rather than lexical items are the basis for identifying an excerpt as literary. This paper focuses on a linguistic delineation of the topography of literary script with reference to excerpts from Zaynab Alkali's **The Stillborn**, Elechi Amadi's **The Concubine** and Michael Echeruo's **Lullaby**. It argues that literary language is eternally fresh on the basis of the emphasis on form achieved through special manipulation of the linguistic code. The paper identifies parallelism, syntactic dislocation, and heavy modification of noun, tense consistency cum flexibility and multiple points of view as the hallmark of creative flexibility in literary texts and consequently concludes that only creative readers can appreciably decipher the entire communicative value of a literary script.

KEYWORDS: Literary script, linguistic delineation, variety, language manipulation.

REVIEW PAPER

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Article History:

| **Submit: 24.10.2021** |

| **Accepted: 27.11.2021** |

| **Published: 15.12.2021** |

How to Cite this Paper: Murana, Muniru Oladayo. "A Linguistic Analysis of Selected Excerpts from Two Literary Genres". Middle East Res J Linguist Lit, 2021 Nov-Dec 1(1): 13-17.

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INTRODUCTION

The interface of literature and language has been a common knowledge in the linguistic circle. Richard (1963) believes that literature is only a name for doing a job well with language either by voice or by pen. Doing a job well presupposes efficacious use of language which is informed primarily by special choice of linguistic form. Moody (1971) explains the composition of literature as specialized forms, selections and collections of language - either spoken or written. Leech and Short (1981:6) argue similarly that literary expression is "an enhancement or a creative liberation of the resources of language which we use from day to day." This creativity involves breaking or bending of formal rules and conventions and more importantly requires corresponding creativity on the part of the listeners or readers.

Literature is also peculiar in its world. It thrives in a flexible, non-material world of imagination. Thus, its interpretation is essentially predicated upon different norms. This is Lawal's (1977) argument that knowledge of language is necessary but not sufficient for literary competence. Ahmad (2002) similarly identifies literary truth as a feature of literature which opens it to a peculiar interpretation. Verdonk (2002) explains that language is employed in the material world to make references to all sorts of items whereas in the textual world, the reference is not to the everyday social context. The alternative world created by literature provides the text consumers temporary opportunity, like the drunk, to escape the mundane problems. This paper examines some features of the language of literature with specific references to prose and poetry.

Linguistic Features of Literature

Focus on form

Welleck and Warren (1973) stress the place of language in literature. They describe language as the raw material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paint of picture and sound of music. Their metaphor depicts the bond between the literary artist and language - his tool. Emphasis on language form in literature is aimed at achieving the literary essence of creating captivating texts imbued with aesthetic qualities. Fabb (2003: 446) explains the prominence of form in literary writings:

A literary text communicates a description of its own form. The literary text does this by making form prominent; in verse this is achieved for example by metre or parallelism, where form becomes prominent because it is repeated. Hence, attention is drawn to form; in effect the form of the text is communicated to the audience.

The primary focus on form is aimed at achieving some communicative essence. Hence, the reader’s attention is attracted and his reading strength sustained to consume the message of the text. Parallelism, though more prominent in literature, nevertheless is characteristic of literary and non-literary discourse. Repetition of form or structure is observed in the introductory paragraph of Alkali’s fiction, *The Stillborn* reproduced below.

Text 1

The lorry swerved from side to side and Li held to the side of the bench. She felt sick and, closing her eye for a moment, softly uttered a prayer. Nervously, she cast a glance at the others who were fellow pupils going home for the end of the year holidays. None of them seemed to have noticed the reckless speed at which they were going. They were happy children singing and clapping in rhythm to the droning of the engine and calling praise names to the lorry driver who would from time to time accelerate in acknowledgement. Li felt alone although she was among friends and age –mates none of whom was much older than herself.

The Stillborn: 1

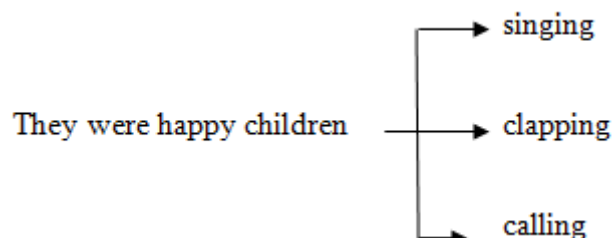
S The lorry Li	V swerved held	A from side to the side	A to side of the bench
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The first two clauses of this text are patterned structurally alike; each begins with a subject, followed by a verb and two adjuncts. The clause - *She felt sick* – is also similar in its subject-verb components. Besides, the next intervening clause introduces a pair of partially parallel clauses:

A	S	A	V	O
closing her eye for a moment,	(she)	softly	uttered	a prayer
Nervously,	She	-	cast	a glance

The intervening nonfinite clause involves structural rankshifting through which the novelist achieves a change from emphasis on the participants - the lorry (therefore, the driver) and Li (she) - to place premium on the circumstances of Li’s action. Thus, the initial participant orientation gives way to manner exposition and narrator’s subjectivity.

There are also instances of phonological parallelism especially in the penultimate sentence of the excerpt:



In poetry, form projection is premeditated and ensured to generate music, beautify and make the verse typical. Leech and Short (1981:2) observe in this direction that ‘aesthetic effect cannot be separated from the creative manipulation of the linguistic code.’ The first two stanzas in part one of Echeruo’s *Lullaby* are apt for illustration.

Text 2

*now the sun goes down
in the valley
beyond the palm
the broods will be returning*

*soon the last cork crow
the last clay- pot be stowed
and the fifth finger licked.*

As a poem specifically composed to calm the nerves of children and lull them to sleep, lullaby thrives on its psychedelic rhythm and its theme is immaterial. The success of the text above is not based on end rhyme or graphical refrain, it is informed by pattern repetition at both group and clause levels.

A	S	V	A
now	the sun	goes	Down
			into the valley
			beyond the palm

A	S	V
soon	the last cork	will crow
	the last dry pot	be stowed
	the fifth finger	Licked

Parallelism is employed in this poem to expand the simple message that the setting of the sun heralds the preparation to sleep in the rustic setting it presents. In the viewpoint of a little child, the sun (not the earth) rotates. This explains the rhetorical deviation in the first line of the poem. The poet’s deviation from the graphological convention of poetry composition by beginning each line of the poem with small letter as well as his employment of the metaphor of the retired sun, points to the stale love that forms the theme of the entire poem.

Narration as Encompassing Description

The composition of prose fiction involves artistic narration of conceived events. Narration alone will be puerile without some dose of vivid description. This is because while narration appeals to the ears, the appeal of description is to the sight. Thus, novelists lend credence to their narration and consequently cast magical spell on their readers through their exploitation of the interface between narration and description. In the next excerpt from *The Concubine*, Amadi describes one of the visitors who called at Emenike’s house following his ill health in the wake of the fight between him and Madume, a fellow villager.

Text 3

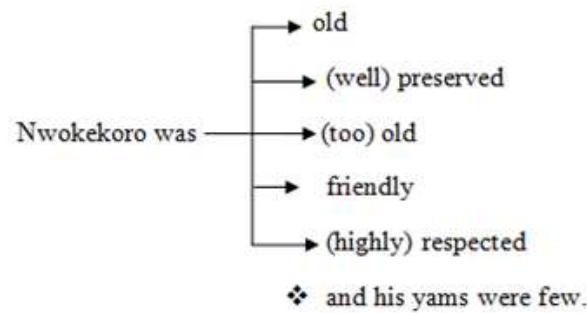
The next caller was Nwokekoro, the priest of Amadioha, the god of thunder and of the skies. He was a short fat man, old but well preserved and had an easy -going disposition. He never seemed to be bothered about anything. He had no wife and no compound of his own. His small house was in his junior brother’s compound. He was getting too old for active farming, so his yams were few and he owned very little property. He was friendly with everyone and was highly respected. His office as high priest of the most powerful god lent him great dignity.

The Concubine: 8

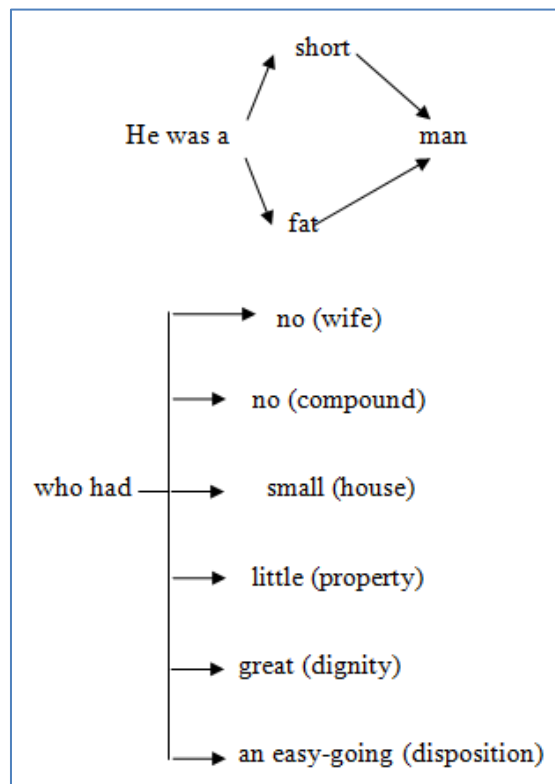
The narration at this point of the novel gives way to description. Besides paving way for expanding the story, description is a major way of emboldening images in a narrative in the mind of the reader. Amadi’s description of Nwokekoro in this excerpt is broad and balanced. It covers his height (short), age (too old), body size (fat), disposition (easy-going) and status – marital (no wife), economic (little property) and social (highly respected).

The descriptive tool employed by the artist is mainly adjective. This occurs more than twelve times in the short excerpt in both attributive and predicative positions as schematized below:

A: Predicative Adjectives:



B: Attributive Adjectives



A polar system is discernable from the list of adjectives above. Through this polarity, the author ensures a sort of descriptive balance. The character is described as short, fat, old but well preserved and friendly. He had little property yet he was highly respected. This description shatters the reader’s expectation, especially those familiar with the context of the production of the text. Nwokekoro’s height is associated with mischievousness or crookedness and his lack of property is enough reason for courting disrespect in a world where the rich are the honorable. However, the last sentence of the excerpt provides the key to the paradox and makes the description rational.

Besides the preponderance of simple adjectives, descriptive felicity is achieved in the text through the degree adverbs: *too* (old), *well* (preserved), and *highly* (respected). While the last two adverbs are clearly positive and employed to intensify the good attributes of Nwokekoro, the first one (*too*) requires some grammatical and pragmatic reading. The adjective premodified by the item is gradable and as Leech and Svartvik (2002:123) note, *too* indicates ‘more than some usually desirable) norm.’ The norm or standard in this context is engagement in active farming. Nwokekoro is exempted from this norm for his overage.

Apposition is the last descriptive tool exploited in the composition of the excerpt. The introductory sentence of the passage contains two concurrent instances. With the first, the author identifies Nwokekoro while the second defines the deity that makes him venerable, Amadioha.

Tense Predictability, Variability and Point of View

Prose fiction involves narration of connected imaginary incidents. The actions being relayed and scenes described belong to the past and consequently the tense of the verb in the narration is predictably past. Besides locating the incidents and scenarios in the past and, therefore, detaching them from the reality of the present, consistent use of the past tense creates coherence in the story strung together by the creative artist.

In the first excerpt (Text 1), more than a dozen past verbs abound. The first sentence alone features five: *swerved, held, felt, (was) closing, and uttered*. This tense consistency primarily typifies narrative texts. Most literary narrations involve third person point of view. This, however, is supported by other narrative viewpoints to create freshness and lend credence to the narrations. These needs essentially lead to the shift in the typical tense of storytelling. Text 4 below is part of the continuation of the earlier excerpt from *The Stillborn*.

Text 4

The lorry swerved dangerously once more as it took a sharp turn and the occupants were thrown to one side. The singing turned to shrieks and Li muttered what she thought was her last prayer. Suddenly, the weight shifted from her legs.

'Thank God for that,' she thought.

'At last my legs are free'

The shrieks died down immediately and several voices shouted that the village was in sight. Thirteen-year-old Faku, Li's friend, jumped up and, grabbing Li by the arm shouted above the din:

'Climb the bench fast! We are almost there.'

The Stillborn: 1

The writer's change of point of view in this excerpt amounts to a delegation of perspective which is achieved first, through her presentation of the direct thought of Li and subsequently, via the direct speech of Faku. This delegation of perspective demands that the temporary narrator employs present tense for the imminent conversation. Present tense is employed in narration for creating dialogue and relating eternal truth (Olaofe and Kazim, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Literary composition involves creative ingenuity observable in the language of the text. The literary artist employs the resources of language in a way that gives the work produced a permanent freshness. Literature has as one of its principal aims the craving to create aesthetics through which the reader's nerves are relaxed, and form projection is a major means of achieving this in written text. Thus, the prominence of form in literary writing is not accidental; it is intended to attract the reader's attention and demonstrate the artist's linguistic prowess and resourcefulness. Creative manipulation of the linguistic code as shown in the excerpts in this chapter is the hallmark of literature. This is achieved through parallelism (syntactic and phonological), syntactic dislocation, noun modification, tense consistency and flexibility. The overall implication of these creative devices for the reader is creative reading without which the total communicative essence of literature will be elusive.

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