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**THE NEXUS BETWEEN STYLISTICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF POETRY:
AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POEMS**

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors discussed the formal and functional elements underpinning poetry from a stylistic perspective. They observed that the application of graphological, phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexico-semantic and discoursal variables, with appropriate cohesive and rhetorical devices, made a good poem. They also found out that in African poetry, the markedness of lexico-semantic choices is more profound. With illustrative analyses of selected poems, they submitted that the knowledge of stylistics was indispensable to every literary artist or critic as well as teachers of literature, the dearth of which would constitute a major missing link.

Key words: poetry, language of poetry, stylistics

Introduction

Stylistics, according to Crystal and Davy (1969), is a branch of linguistics which studies the characteristics of situational distinctive uses of language, with particular reference to literary language, and tries to establish principles capable of accounting for the particular choices made by individual and social groups in their use of language. In other words, it is simply the linguistic study of style (Leech and Short 1981).

Stylistics demonstrates how the styles (how language is used in a particular context) we adopt for different types of discourse work in projecting our thematic concerns, enabling us to produce texts, oral or written, which are internally coherent and socially relevant. It analyses language habits with the purpose of identifying those features that are restricted to certain individuals' use of language in certain kinds of social contexts. Widdowson (1975:3) observes that stylistics is the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation.

Stylistics and Poetry

Poetry is a genre of literature in which the sound and meaning of language are combined to create ideas and feelings. To define poetry is even an arduous task to do, and a lot of definitions abound. To J. A. Cuddon, poetry, "a superior form of creation" is a comprehensive term "which can be taken to cover any kind of metrical composition." While it is the "best words in the best order" to S.T. Coleridge, it is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquility" to William Wordsworth (Bodunde 1999). In essence, all poetry is a *rhythmical* composition of words expressing an attitude, designed to surprise and delight, and to arouse emotional response (Kennedy, 1990). Above all, one thing that is peculiar to poetry is the idea of *belles-lettres* a French phrase that means "beautiful writing".

Of all literary genres and sub-genres, no one makes a judicious use of style than poetry. It is in poems that the garden of style blooms. This is why poetic words glisten and irradiate exquisite splendour. Through the effective use of words by the poets, ideas known to us are recreated and we are stirred by the powerful feelings. The style of poetry, the poetic language spurs our sensibilities and widens our scope.

Stylistics attains its full sway and import in poems. This is because there are no hard and fast rules guiding the composition of poems, really. This freedom, called

poetic license, allows the poet to violate grammatical rules through the use or non-use of punctuation marks, inversion of the word order, creation of novel words for special effects and non-conventional arrangement of words. At all levels of stylistic analysis, it is discovered that poetry is the domain of style.

Levels of Stylistic Analysis of Poetry

A full description of style in poetry occurs at various levels. It is only when all these levels are taken into cognizance that we can account for the richness of style in poetry. These levels range from graphological, phonological/phonetic, lexical, syntactic to semantic and pragmatic (also called discursal) levels. A survey of this stylistic behaviour with illustrative examples under the various levels is undertaken below, being the crux of this paper.

The Graphological Level

The pattern of putting graphic symbols on paper to encode meaning is rule-governed. For instance, the rules of punctuation, accurate and acceptable spellings, capitalization of sentence initials are well-established rules. But poetic license allows the violation of all these rules, creating stylistic effects in poetry. In fact, it is the unconventionality of terms and patterning that makes a poem "marked". And "markedness" is important in any stylistic investigation.

In George Herbert's "Easter Wings", for example, there is a stylo-thematic significance in the arrangement of the two stanzas, graphologically. The two stanzas are 'wings-like', indicating the quest for the spiritual flight of the persona, which is the theme of the poem. The same poet wrote a poem called "The Alter", with long first and last lines, short and centred middle ones so that we have the arrangement an alter. Lewis Carroll's verse beginning with "Fury said to a mouse" was originally printed so that the words formed a mouse's tail curling down the page (Hockett 1958).

The "Awareness" of Don L. Lee is written in capital letters, all through, consisting of three words, repeated and alternatively re-arranged; first, indicating the importance of the theme (capitalization) and second, the need for a change of attitude (re-arrangement). This is it:

BLACK	PEOPLE	THINK
PEOPLE	BLACK	PEOPLE
THINK	PEOPLE	THINK
BLACK	PEOPLE	THINK
THINK	BLACK	

In Wole Soyinka's "Post Mortem", every word in the poem, including the line beginnings, is in small letters. This graphological device is masterminded to demean and diminish the essence of "Post-Mortem", the autopsy carried on the human corpse. In many poems of Osundare, especially in his collection, *Village Voices*, there is a deliberate avoidance of punctuation marks where one would have expected such to be.

The Phonological/Phonetic Level

Since poems are basically meant for oral rendition, poets evoke a great deal of style at this level. The auditory effects exhibited by a poem go a long way in driving home the themes of the poet. Most style markers used at this level are metre, rhythm and rhyme. Adeniyi (1998) asserts that the salient ingredients of poetry are imagery, rhythm and sound. It is this level that informs Edgar Allan's definition of poetry as

the rhythmical creation of beauty. It is also because of the musical/auditory effect of poems that Ezra Pound said: "Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music".

In many African traditional poems, there is the dominant effect of sound, making poems sound like songs. In a modern poem like 'Twinkle twinkle little star', a famous rhyme, the effect of sound and internal and end-rhymes makes the poem to be memorable. The mnemonic quality distinctively marks poetry out as a medium of imparting knowledge and moral discipline in the young ones. They read the poem, memorise it easily and internalise its message. Thus, poetry at this level is deployed to serve pedagogical purposes.

The Lexical Level

At this level, poets use specific words for specific effects, provoking stylistic markedness. The morphological processes of compounding, blending, re-duplication, affixation, clipping, nonce formation, etc. are deployed to accentuate poetic feelings. Often, as in many poems of Osundare, there is a transposition of native language on the English verse. In "E kuulee o", for instance, we have "alapandede" (a bird) and there is a deliberate repetition of "Ile koko n'tagbe" both of which are foreign to a non-Yoruba reader.

In "The Dance is Calling" by Ezenwa Ohaeto, the poet transposes 'Ikoro' (a large wooden drum beaten on special occasions) and Ijele, Ngbedike ('types of masquerades') on us. While Soyinka uses coinages and unfamiliar lexical items, Achebe (as we have in some poems in *Beware Soul Brother*) taps the strength of his poetry from Igbo expressions. Every word a poet uses is significant at this level and it has a stylistic import. In Frank Aig-Imoukhuede's "One Wife for One Man", we have a robust poem written in Pidgin, satirising monogamy, the "talk about new culture". This lexico-semantic device projects the theme of the poet in the condemnation of white man's ideas, and the style is biting and humorous – a deliberate 'corruption' of his language.

The Syntactic Level

At this level, poetry parades a wide range of deviation of the syntactic rules. More often than not, for stylistic imports of emphasis and exaggeration, the conventional word-order is altered. The first stanza of Wole Soyinka's "Abiku" captures this inversion:

In vain your bangles cast
Charmed circles at my feet
I am Abiku, calling for the first
And the repeated time.

Normally, one would have expected the first two lines here considered a sentence to read "Your bangles cast charmed circles at my feet in vain" in line with the SPCA structure. Also, the second two lines, which constitutes the topic sentence would have been 'more appropriate' to come first. But these two variations are poetic style having great semantic implications the explanation of which the scope of this paper is constrained to discuss. This is why the poet 'does' it that way.

Also, in John Pepper Clark's "Ibadan", we have a whole poem in an incomplete sentence, just a nominal phrase. Besides, a full stop ends it as if it is a sentence. The poem is:

Ibadan,
 running splash of run
 and gold – flung and scattered
 among seven hills like broken
 china in the sun.

Essentially, style is achieved through syntactic deviation and this is quite noticeable in many poems we read. Punctuation marks, which have grammatical importance, are avoided in what is stylistically known as “run-on lines” while they are misused or abused in some other contexts. One can arguably assert that Wole Soyinka over-uses the punctuation marks in his “Telephone Conversation”. Almost all punctuation marks in English deployed in the poem to achieve stylist effects. But this said, the style is meant to achieve dramatic dialogue which the poet successfully achieves.

The Semantic Level

Literary appreciation occurs most at this level. There are many ways through which poets evoke meanings through the artistic composition of expressions to the extent that what is known appears new under a new garb. Poetic devices or figures of speech, which Allan Parter calls the “variegated flowers of speech”, are used to achieve the goal of projecting several meanings. Imagery, irony, metaphor and satire are achieved through everyday words but cast in special expressions to convey the feelings of the poet.

In fact, without style at this level, poetry becomes ordinary, it is through this artistic “location of directness through indirectness” that poetry gains its tenor and achieves its essence. Thus, hardly does one lay one’s hand on any poem that is worth the name without being tantalised, scintillated, amused, confounded or overwhelmed by the skillful way of the poets in achieving and instilling meaning.

To cite a few examples at this juncture will not be superfluous. Niyi Osundare uses metaphor profusely in his “New Birth” in *Village Voices*, saying, “A new river is here/beckoning boatmen for new boats”. This device he also uses in his definition of what “Poetry is” (a poem) saying “Poetry/is/man/meaning/man”, condensing personification in metaphor. The import of this metaphor to style is captured by the French stylist, Proust, who says “I believe that metaphor alone can give style a kind of eternity.” Perhaps this informs the prodigious use of metaphor by poets.

In Tanure Ojaide’s “The Fate of Vultures”; we have a scathing satire of the second republic politicians booted out of office and clamped into gaol by the military usurpers. Shehu Shagari, the President, under the caustic satirisation of the poet becomes “Shamgari, Shankari, Shun garri” while his Deputy/Vice, Alex Ekwueme becomes “Alexius, architect of wind-raised mansions”. While Tunde Olusunle paints on our psyche with the filthy image of Lagos in his “Lagos”,

This is Lagos
 Where sardined humanity
 Spill from the bowels
 Of rickety buses

among some other forms of imagery depicting the confusion, the conflicts and contradiction of Lagos, an “album of addition”, William Wordsworth presents us with

oxymoron in his assertion "The child is father of the man" in his poem entitled "The Rainbow".

Considering the very few examples we are able to cite here, it is discovered that a great deal of style is achieved at this (semantic) level. The more we think about the carefully-selected strings of expressions of the poets, the more meanings swim into our ken, impregnating our minds with nascent ideas that give birth to the widening of our intellectual horizons.

The Pragmatic Level

Style occurs at this level as a result of the fact that language is not used in a vacuum. Since pragmatics is basically concerned with language use in specific social contexts, poets mark style with expressions that are of contextual import. This is why the knowledge of the poet (i.e. his biography) is sometimes needed for the full understanding of a poem. Also, the understanding of a particular context giving birth to the creation of a poem is also considered at this level.

For instance, the fore-knowledge of the pragmatics of the military take-over of government in Nigeria in 1984 and the effects it had on the politicians is needed to understand Tanure Ojaide's "The Fate of the Vultures" earlier cited. Also, it takes a Nigerian or somebody who followed the political undercurrents in Nigeria during the iron rule of General Sani Abacha to really comprehend almost all the poems of Ozenwa Ohaeto in his *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*. In fact, it becomes crystal clear, given our pragmatic knowledge, that the poet, a Nigerian based in Germany, considers himself a night masquerade, masked and covered by the night, indicating fear and insecurity that pervaded the years of Abacha. The collection is thus, even from the title, the voice of a frightened poet who had to disguise and voice out in the dead of the night, airing his views which condemn and highlight the various atrocities of General Abacha's era.

Thus, the authorial background, the contextual dynamics inform the pragmatic level of literary/poetic analysis. And this also goes a long way in determining the various styles adopted by the poet as his language or tone would be evaluated as being formal, frozen, informal or sarcastic as the case may be.

Style in Poetry: A Synthesis

Stylistics, a branch of linguistics, here examined as it relates to poetry, was borne out of a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary study. It is either referred to as Literary Stylistics (because it tends to focus on literary texts) or Linguistic Stylistics (because it tends to focus on linguistic elements). Generally, as accentuated by Stanley Fish, a stylistic analysis is an attempt to put criticism on a scientific platform. Its main aim is to provide a detailed description as much as possible on the transmitted text of the work in question.

A stylistic approach to the analysis of poetry is most unique because it prompts to deepen the process of poetry interpretation. Poetry is more "self contained", to use the expression of Michael O Toole (1987), than other forms of writing for its characteristic nature, earlier adumbrated. No theoretical framework can relatively compete with stylistics in its analysis because stylistics makes poetry susceptible to multi-dimensional, in-depth and catholic description. In considering or treating poems therefore, as it is prudent, according to Nowothny (1962:1), stylistics begins with what is "there" in the poem, "there" is the sense that it can be described and referred to as given by the words, the content and form which are, to borrow Flaubert's comparison, "like body and soul".

Conclusion

Poetry is a feeling expressed in (imaginative) language and in deep thought. For this to be achieved, some patterning and structuring technically referred to as 'style' is highly pertinent. Style involves the skillful articulation of written or spoken ideas with such an artistic 'touch', making 'extra' in the extra-ordinary rather than the ordinary use of language. The domain of stylistics, the linguistic study of style, is the investigation and description of that art through which great writing, especially great poems, are identified. Stylistics which grows well, blooming with flowers on the fertile field of poetry, dwells much on textual distinctiveness, recurrence and aesthetics. Through the levels of graphology/phonetics, lexis, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, the vast ocean of poetry is explored/navigated and pearls of meanings and ideas are discovered.

This paper thus has circumspected the concept of stylistics, its constituents and how it relates to poetry. Various levels of Stylistic analysis are explained and exemplified with poems exhibiting them. The whole idea is tailored towards seeing stylistics as a powerful framework through which a wholistic assessment/evaluation of a poem or poetry at large could be made. It is foregrounded that a symbiotic relationship exists between poetry and style: one can hardly be discussed without having a recourse to the other. And since poetry is a product of thought, the harmony of stylistics and poetry is expounded, in justification of the Wesleyan couplet:

Style is the dress of thought (i.e. poetry), a modest dress
Neat, but not goudy, will true critics please.

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