

Stylo-Semantic Appreciation of Wole Soyinka's Poem 'Dawn'

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Abstract

Various linguistic theories have affirmed the importance of linguistics to literature. The application of such theories in any linguistic interpretation of a literary text has been proved to be a more objective critical response to the text. It has also revealed the lapses and subjective nature of impressionistic and expressionistic criticism. This follows from Prague's Linguistic Criticism, which views literature as a special class of language, which rests on the assumption that there is a fundamental opposition between literary (or poetic) language and ordinary day-to-day language. This study gives the semantic appreciation of Soyinka's poem 'Dawn'. Thus, it uncovers the formal underpinning which leads the readers of the poem to the meaning embedded in the poem.

Introduction

Wole Soyinka is undoubtedly a versatile writer and this partly accounts for the high level of communication often alleged in most of his works, especially his poetry. Soyinka himself admits that his works are eclectic, thus, this confessed that by him he had "read widely the world literature, European, Asiatic, American, etc". From this versatility emerges, in each case, a work of many parts and the consequent difficulty of understanding on the part of the reader whose experience is not as wide as the poet's. Soyinka's attempt to link one culture with another creates gaps in communication.

Structural complexity is another reason for the difficulty in understanding Soyinka's works. His experimentation with the stream of consciousness in his novel, 'The interpreter' is a good example. Other peculiar syntactic features in Soyinka's poetry are his compound and complex sentences and his strange use of the device of ellipsis. The weirdness of these syntactic structures is what Niyi Osundara has described as 'sentences of thunder'.

A point which requires some consideration in this analysis is the issue of poetry as having a high frequency of violations of the rules of grammar. One question one might ask is whether linguistic aberration is a relative term in the context of poetry. In other words, his ungrammaticality arising from the use of personification of inanimate objects as in "the tree laughed" the same as the near-literature utterances such as "the boy is coming" are extralinguistic and creative. It would rather be absurd to place ungrammaticality in Soyinka's poetry on the same platform with ungrammaticality in Tutuola's earlier prose; the former is a creative exploitation of grammatical options, the latter is a consequence of incompetence if not total ignorance of the rules of grammar. Deviation from accepted norm, it is often said, is tolerated and expected within various poetic traditions.

Statement of the Problem

There has been a schism between linguists and literary critics as regards whether literary works should be subjected to linguistic measurement. Some scholars believe that another important way to appreciate a work of art is to employ the knowledge of linguistics and by so doing, closing the gulf between literary criticism and linguistic analysis.

This study also establishes that Soyinka's language is complex but educative, creative

Objectives of the Study

Since Wole Soyinka's poetry is claimed to be prolix, a linguistic analysis such as this, is intended in this study and it shall uncover formal underpinnings, which will lead the readers to meanings embedded in the poem 'Dawn'. It will also attempt to prove that meaning resides in the linguistic patterning of a text.

Theoretical Framework

The major theoretical framework used in this work is that of Prague Linguistic Criticism referred to as Dialogic Theory. The Prague Linguistic Criticism circle view literature as a special class of language, and rests on the assumption that there is a fundamental opposition between literary (or poetic) language and ordinary language. Formalism views the primary function of ordinary language as communicating a message, or information by making references to the world existing outside of language. In contrast, it views literary language as self-focused: its function is not to make extrinsic references, but to draw attention to its own 'formal' features – that is, the interrelationships among the linguistic signs themselves. This theoretical framework is very suitable to analyse 'Dawn' because Literature is held to be subject to critical analysis by the science of linguistics but also by a type of linguistics different from that adapted to ordinary discourse, because its laws produce the distinctive features of literariness.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it will enable the readers of the poem, especially students reading it for examination purpose, to understand it better. It will also assist researchers into pragmatics and text linguistics.

Procedure

Data were collected from 'Idanre and other Poems' by Wole Soyinka. The researcher gave the appraisal of the poem, handling it line by line. He identified every word as a contributor to the network of meaning conveyed by the poem.

Review of Related Literature

The Relation between Language and Literature

Language and Literature are related. Language is a tool in the hand of human beings, which plays many various functions in the society. The different functions performed by language have made its definition multifarious. To a layman, language could be defined as the medium of expressing ideas or the totality of meaningful utterance in any given society.

Various scholars such as Hall (1968) and Lyons (1981) among others, have defined language from different perspectives. However, that by Osisanwo (1995:5) seems to sum up the kernel of what other scholars have said. He says:

Language is human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of noise, used systematically by members of a speech community for purposes of communication.

Furthermore, language has also been defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as:

A particular system of words as used by a people or a nation.

Literature has also been referred to as writings of universal interest with a subject matter, which is aimed at the society, most often to bring a positive change in the society. Furthermore, Literature is also in line with beliefs, traditions, religion and other cultural values of the society. One of the functions of Literature is to teach and correct the society at large. All the genres of literature, whether written or oral literature, depend on language through which most communication take place.

Language is the backbone of literature because the entire structure of literature is best made efficient and effective only with the use of language. The elements of the different genres of literature can only achieve their maximum output through language. This confirms the importance of language in literary works of art throughout the universe.

The purpose of a literary work whether prose, drama or poetry and even oral tradition is to create positive changes in the mind of the readers as well as achieve its intended goal. In order to achieve the writer's intended goal, language should be effectively made use of.

At this juncture, it is worthy of note that language and literature are interwoven and of paramount importance to each other. The language function which literature is part of, is present in all people – all literates, at times, take part in everyone of the activities: narrative, monologue, speaking, dialogue, writing and reading. When we read novels, magazines, newspapers and also take part in conversation, we are fitting the external world into our world. There is hardly any separation between language and literature. Egbe (1981:60) opines that:

*The knowledge of literature forms the
foundation upon which the child's proficiency in
English language is built.*

Egbe (1981) summarizes the function of literature as one, which provides entertainment for the reader and general user of language, since the process of communication goes on all the time. Literature, he notes, helps the reader to build up his cognitive and communication skills and his overall competence in the language. Furthermore, Traugott and Pratt (1980) remark that language is the most unique and most important in literary and non-literary pieces. Strawson (1991) stresses that the particular meaning of words and sentences are, no doubt, largely a matter of rule and convention, but the general nature of such rules and conventions can be ultimately understood only by reference to the concept of communication intention.

Traugott and Pratt (1980) and Strawson (2002) have indeed described the premises of language for us to understand the concept of linguistics: its nature and pattern. It will be sufficient, therefore, to define linguistics in consonance with Crystal (2000:62) as “the academic discipline which studies language scientifically” (investigating English Style).

Strawson (2002), in his description of language, opines that in analyzing a text, the analyst should be mindful of the fact that speech is a social event, a semiotic encounter through which the meanings that constitute the social system are exchanged.

The problems about Discourse Analysis are that individual members of any society can be regarded by virtue of their membership as ‘meaners’, that is, those who communicate their meaning and those of other individual meaners. As a result, the social reality is thus created, maintained in good order, continuously shaped and modified.

Crystal (2000) says that the business of a Discourse Analyst (being a linguist) in literature is to show how language is selected from a mass of linguistic features by a literary artist in pursuing his artistic consciousness. This is similar to what Leech and Short (2004) call the relational aim of literary stylistics, which is to relate the critic's concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern of linguistic description. Leech and Short (2004) say they use the term appreciation to comprehend both critical evaluation and interpretation, although it is with interpretation that stylistics is more concerned.

The Meaning of Stylistics

The primary focus of a linguistic analyst is the style of the text and ‘style can be applied to spoken and non-literary varieties of language, but by tradition, it is particularly associated with written literary text (Leech and Short 2004: 40).

Stylistics is a linguistic discipline that centres on how language is used by writers. It is also a linguistic study that centres on style. Style in language can be defined as the peculiar manner in which a speaker or writer presents his idea or subject matter so that the speech or writing is different from another or from those of other people. Style may also refer to some or all of the language habits of one person, e.g. Shakespeare's style, Soyinka's style, etc. Every writer has his/her own style. Therefore, stylistics in its simplest form, is the study of style. The implication of this is that style is crucial and central to the study of stylistics. One may then conclude that where there is no style, there is no stylistics.

Just as explained earlier on, every writer has his/her idiosyncratic style: a consistent way of using language to pass across his or her message to the intended audience, so in order for this style to be known, a stylistic (linguistic) study of writer's works is highly important. Knowing the type of style used by a writer or his consistency in terms of adopted style is only possible through stylistic analysis, i.e. the concept of stylistics is to "expose the tangible manifestation of style through descriptive and interpretive judgement (Lyons, 1981). The manner of analyzing and exposing "the tangible manifestation of style" is based on the following paradigms: graphological, phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic descriptions of the characteristic features, which give the work of a writer an identity.

Form and Meaning in Wole Soyinka's Dawn'

There is a close relationship between the form and the meaning of a text. The meaning conveyed by a text places the text in a particular locale as well as situates it in particular literary form. The nature and artistic function of linguistic organization in Soyinka's poem 'Dawn' pose a threat to the poem's easy accessibility. Several African and non-African critics have had contrary opinions as regards the poem's meaning. In fact, there are two divided groups. A group rests its interpretation on 'mythology'. James Booth and D. I. Nwoga are prominent members of this group. Another group, consisting mostly of non-Africans, attempt an explication of the poem through its metaphors and syntax. Leading in this group is Ken Godwin. Both groups, however, overtly or covertly establish the complexity of the poem's medium which is the language, a situation which makes Booth (2001:95) to say:

That the critics of Soyinka's poetry are so deeply and sometimes so passionately divided seems to me the inevitable consequence of the particular qualities of his rhetoric. It is the poet's attitude towards his medium of language which brings out the profound ideological and aesthetic difference in his readers (myth, metaphor and syntax in Soyinka's poetry).

Two views represent the main current mythographic criticism of Soyinka's language. The first is James Booth's (which states that the root of Soyinka's English is uncompromisingly Anglo-Saxon because it represents for him, the closest approximation to the primal root of Yoruba cultic diction. Soyinka uses English language impressively to depict African culture without losing the originality or relish of it. This, in most cases, involves the use of local colour to depict a rustic Yoruba milieu. Examples of this are in lines 4 and 12 respectively.

*'A guard of palm-fronds, piercing - 4
O celebration of the rites of the dawn' - 12.*

Graham, (1981) on the other hand considers Soyinka's language use, especially in 'Dawn' as obscure. According to him, these 'obscurities' belong to the processors of mythology rather than arbitrary potentialities of language. Myth, according to him, is a faculty which flourishes on sudden and unexpected analogies and recurrences. While it cannot be wholly denied that Soyinka's language is largely mythic in the sense of its inventiveness as poetic (literary) language generally, it is wrong and misleading to rely entirely on mythology as the gateway to or source of Soyinka's meaning as the mythographic critics of Soyinka want us to believe.

Such critical effort will only blind one to the potentialities of poetic language and consequently its meaning because, since a poem is a verbal artifact, its language is the most authoritative source to the message just as the language gives the poem its form (medium). In our opinion, it is, therefore, too academic, rhetorical, scholarly, flamboyant and impressionistic to say that Soyinka 'has not been preoccupied with language as a vehicle of mythic meaning'. Thus, Booth (2001) says unambiguously the more serious problem with the mythographic stand of criticism, whatever individual differences are shown by its exponents, is unwillingness to confront the slipperiness of Soyinka's poetic language, which in practice is a primary and persistent difficulty for all readers.

A Semantic Analysis of 'Dawn'

There is a pervasive sexuality in the poem, which is confusing because the palm tree seems to change from male to female, for instance:

The pun is spring-haired elbow' conveys both new growth and a coiled energy. There is a tense expectancy, but the elbow is not after all attached to anything and the image remains disembodied (Wilson, 1981:40)

Godwin (1982:114) presents a contrasting view, which is still largely subjective. According to him.

The palm is seen as if just stirring, resting on its buttressed trunk as it on an elbow, 'spring haired', a notorious difficulty, I take to mean covered in the hairy filaments produced in the spring or growing season, with 'spring' hinting also at the springing of an arch, such as the buttressing root provides. the filaments will obviously pick up and reflect The first rays of light.

Jones (1983), taking advantage of the poem's theological and mythical underlying structure, gives an extraordinary interpretation by saying that the last stanza of the poem delicately suggests the worship with which the dawn is greeted. Not only do the words 'celebration' and 'rites' suggest this, but also the blood red kernels of the palm become an apt sacrificial offering to a god who is himself 'afame'. In the end we have something like the character of dawn (rather than a photographic picture of it) through the images it creates.

After understanding a very persuasive and more objective inquiry into the poem's meaning through its syntax and metaphors, Nwoga (1981) irresistibly yields to subjective or conjectural explanation of the sun image in connection with the 'palm' and the 'elbow'. He puts it in parenthesis (perhaps this may refer to the sun being an earth from which the light emerges when he walks in the morning, lifts himself on an elbow and opens his armpit).

All these critical interpretations as highlighted in the foregoing are highly subjective and impressionistic because the linguistic choice and the organization in the text do not validate most of the claims of the critics. There is the need, therefore, to a more valid interpretation of the text, which will have greater claims to objectivity. This can only be done through a painstaking study of the level of linguistic patterning in the text. It is only through such effort that we can account for the nature and artistic function of poetic language which hold the key to its meaning.

The language of 'Dawn' is highly inventive. The difficulty of the language is its inventiveness. This is what makes it mythic. This poetic (or literary) language is inventive and as a result, mythic in the sense that it breaches or deviates from the norms of the language code. That is, the language of poetry must foreground to be inventive and 'mythical'. Foregrounding gives form and meaning to poetry and subsequently reveals the artistic function of language.

A linguistic reading of 'Dawn' reveals foregrounding at the syntactic and lexico-semantic levels. Our linguistic reading begins from the title because it attracts the attention of the reader to the subject. From the first to the last line of the poem, a vivid picture of the coming glory and impact of 'Dawn' is described in metaphorical imagery to highlight its symbolic importance to man, especially its relationship, with growth and fertility in the poem, hence the predominant use of sexual imagery in it. Examples are in line 4, 8, 10, 11.

*A guard of palm fronds, piercing. - 4
The even belt of tassels, above coarse - 8
leaf teasing at the waist, steals. The - 10
lone intruder, tearing wide - 11.*

In analyzing the sentences of the poem, Nwoga (1981) pinpoints that the poem does not contain one but two sentences about 'Dawn'. The first one is a long descriptive sentence with 'steals' in line 9 as its main verb and lone intruder in line 10 as the subject. The sentence ends in the one-line fourth stanza. (The absence of full-stop at the end of the line may be an error or oversight in the process of writing the poem; it could also have been deliberately left out by the poet to create another puzzle, which the reader must decode.

The first sentence spans over four stanzas and digresses into several details which emphasize the nature, power and effect of 'Dawn' on man and his environment.

The last stanza constitutes the second sentence of the poem, but unlike the first sentence spanning over four stanzas, the sentence lacks a finite verb, and it is not as expressive as the first. The first line of the stanza is the result of the final triumph of dawn over night expressed in the last two lines:

*Night-spread in tallers and a god/
Received a flame with Kernels'.
The exclamatory one-letter-words
'O' 'celebration' and 'rites' give the
stanza its festive tone, 'Dawn' with it
fully spread daylight is the god/Received,
aflame with kernel.*

One characteristic feature of Soyinka's high poetic inventiveness is limitless creation of puzzles which always makes the reader to be alert and to which he is expected to provide missing links or parts. However, the whole of the fifth stanza, which is the last one, is the second sentence of the poem:

The use of detailed description results in the predominance of puzzling modifying phrases, especially in the first and third stanzas. In the first stanza, the first line; "Breaking Earth upon" contextually unites with the title 'Dawn'. We know that it is dawn that is breaking – a metaphorical term reminding one of the idioms 'daybreak' and suggesting the coming of daylight at the early part of the morning. The use of the lexical item "breaking" is a semantic aberration which foregrounds meaning in the poem. Especially it harmonizes with 'The lone intruder' in Line 10. who 'steals' in Line 9. Componential analytic method makes us give the participial verb 'breaking' the following feature (+ concrete) (+ violence).

Any other usage of 'break' like 'break the news' or 'daybreak' and subsequently 'breaking earth' are semantic aberrations, which exist as metaphors or 'idioms'. The noun item, 'Earth' in the phrase 'Breaking Earth....' ought to be a concrete object to agree with 'breaking' because it has the feature (+ abstract) (+ place) but the metaphorical use of the two words is of stylistic significance to the subject and the main verb of the first long sentence of the poem, and to the entire message of the poem. The stylistic significance of this is that the poet dexterously uses ellipsis. For example, he deliberately left out the subject of the sentence "Dawn is breaking earth". This ellipsis does not in anyway impede communication on the part of the readers:

*Breaking Earth upon
A spring-haired elbow, lone.*

There is a mixed metaphor in 'Spikes'/'A guard of palm fronds', The palm fronds are not only said to be like spikes – a sharp pointed object which serves like guard around the palm-tree, protecting it from possible harm. The 'head-grains' (line 3) is a metaphor for the fruits of the palm but the preposition 'beyond' shows the tree to be taller than the level of the fruit (also palm-nuts or coconuts) as the palm fronds are higher and covering them. The appositional phrases are descriptive because they tell more about the palm tree and its parts, which the daylight begins to illuminate. It is the same 'spikes', which are 'A guard of palm fronds that the poet says are 'piercing/high hairs of the winds'. There is an endless use of metaphor as the palm fronds, which like 'spikes' are also 'piercing/high hairs of the wind'.

But the poet shifts this detailed description of the impact of dawn – the daylight on 'Earth' seen from its illumination on the palm-tree. As if the sunrays of the coming daylight can no longer be patient to wait, it 'steals' the lady's womanhood, which the palm tree embodies. The verb 'steals' is an animate feature used to describe the rate at which the daylight suddenly envelops the palm-tree.

The coming of the daylight (dawn) is one splendour, and also calls for celebration because of the benefits which it brings. It gives light to the world and enhances productivity among plants which in turn gives continuity to existence. Thus celebrative mood explains the panegyric mode of the last stanza of the poem.

*O celebration of rites of dawn
Night spread in tallers and a god
Received, aflame with kernels.*

The Interplay between Style and Meaning in ‘Dawn’

The semantic system of a language is the knowledge that a speaker of that language must have in order to understand sentences and relate them to his knowledge of the world (Dale, 1976). The system includes both the knowledge of individual lexical items and knowledge of how the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meaning of individual lexical items and the structure of the sentence. In other words, any reader of ‘Dawn’ who understands English language very well would consider the meaning of the words and sentences of the poem. This is in line with the view of (Ore, 1992, and Kado, 2007).

Meaning of ‘Dawn’ at Word Level

The componential analysis theory of meaning is what a reader of ‘Dawn’ should apply if he should understand the poem better. This theory views that the meaning of a word consists of its semantic properties or semantic primes. It believes that the meaning of a word can be broken down into semantic components. This theory believes in order to give a correct account of word meanings, we must examine their internal structure. It assumes that the reader can identify the basic semantic features which underlie each word in the language hence, the line:

....Spring-haired elbow’

should be viewed beyond its literal meaning but figuratively to connote both new growth and a coiled energy which Wilson (1981) interprets as conveying expectancy. Wilson reasons further that the elbow is not attached to anything, hence the image remains disembodied.

Furthermore, Soyinka’s deliberate choice and use of words such as ‘palm-fronds’ ‘blood’, ‘celebration’, ‘rites’, ‘god’, ‘flame’ and ‘kernel’ are to enable the readers feel that the dawn is greeted with a kind of worship and an apt sacrificial offering to an aflame god.

Meaning of ‘Dawn’ at sentence level

The manner in which the aforelisted words have been strung together as a cohesive text is in line with Frege’s (2000) principle of compositionality, which states that meanings of sentences are determined by the meanings of component words and by the syntactic structure of the sentence. It is also in line with Austin’s (1962) Speech Act Theory”, which is based on the belief that language is used to perform various acts. Soyinka has effectively strung the selected words together to convey the intended meaning of worship and celebration. To achieve this objective, Soyinka has figuratively extended meaning beyond clausal and sentential levels. For example, an imaginative reader of the poem would reason that ‘Dawn’ has been personified and such a reader would also definitely infer some extra linguistic meanings. For example, would reason that associating phrases such as ‘Blood drops’ ‘Coarse leaf teasing’. ‘Night spread in tallers’ conveys meanings which are beyond clausal and sentence levels. There is no gainsay that Soyinka’s linguistic dexterity in ‘Dawn’ is commendable.

Concluding Remarks

The study has handled the stylo-semantic analysis of Soyinka’s language and style in ‘Dawn’. The researcher’s interest is in Soyinka because many critics have alleged that his works are very complex and his language use is as well complex and prolix, whereas, Soyinka is creative and interesting. This work has buttressed the fact that Soyinka’s works are creative. This is the conclusion a linguist, a stylistic or discourse analyst can arrive at in his objective critical inquiries because the issue of greatness in art is quite a relative term as it is subjective. “Greatness’ to a linguistic critic is a matter of individual reader’s response to the text and in judging literary works, should be applied to justify the inventiveness of the literary work, this refers to the extent to which poetry conforms to its ‘foregrounding or de-automatisation of the linguistic codes in order to establish how style cannot be detached from message.

Furthermore, there is no denying the fact that Soyinka’s use of Language is complex, it is undoubtedly, creative, inventive, resourceful and purely academic. Hence, ‘Dawn’ can be analysed along extralinguistic plane. The reader of ‘Dawn’ needs to be patient and painstaking in deciphering the message of the poem. The analysis done in this paper, I believe should be helpful to the prospective readers of ‘Dawn’.

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Appendix

DAWN

Breaking earth upon
 A spring haired elbow, lone
 A palm beyond head-grain, spikes
 A guard of palm fronds, piercing
 High hairs of the wind

As one who bore the pollens highest,

Blood drops in the air, above
 The even belt of tassels, above
 Coarse leaf teasing at the waist, steals
 The lone intruder, tearing wide

The chaste hide of the sky

O celebration of the rites of the dawn
 Night-spread in tallers and a god
 Received, a flame with kernels.