

## « A SYSTEMIC TEXTLINGUISTIC APPROACH OF LITERARY IDIOLECT: TUTUOLA, ARMAH AND SOYINKA »

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the study is to examine the language and style used in some West African prose writings and point out some features in them that mark them as different from other varieties of contemporary English. The writers used in this study, namely Amos Tutuola, Ayi Kwei Armah and Wole Soyinka, have already shown their mettle in creative writing in English. The procedure for moving from an individual text to the identification of the common features of language use by individual writer (literary idiolect) or those by a group of writers (literary dialect), is also important for the successful application of the systemic textlinguistic theory. This article discusses the contribution of literary dialect to three African writers' narratives, namely Tutuola, Armah and Soyinka, by showing how they both affect the form and the content of their writings and shape our understanding of their texts.*

**Keyword :** *Text linguistics, language, literary idiolect text, context*

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### INTRODUCTION

African prose writings and point out some features in them that mark them as different from other varieties of contemporary English. The writers used in this study, namely Amos Tutuola, Ayi Kwei Armah and Wole Soyinka, have already shown their mettle in creative writing in English. The procedure for moving from an individual text to the identification of the common features of language use by individual writer (*literary idiolect*) or those by a group of writers (*literary dialect*), is also important for the successful application of the systemic textlinguistic

theory.<sup>1</sup>This cannot be ignored in a study interested in the literary idiolect of the writer. The literary text is conceived here as a mountain-like barrier with different sides. The text is a unit of language that has been used in a specific context by a text producer with the purpose of communicating a message through the use of the linguistic signs existing within a language's semiotic universe. The three writers provide indelible insights into what literature does to language expressions when they find stance in the form.

This study proposes to show how literary dialect affects both the form and the content of the use of language in the texts and, in the process, act as a narrative complement in the understanding, and the appreciation of the social relations created by the authors. After setting the theoretical framework, four main points will be considered: The use of home language lexical items; Difference in the use of word-classes; Loanshift, and Coinage.

## 1. SYSTEMIC TEXTLINGUISTIC APPROACH

The literary text is a second order text. This means that it has three main levels of meaning where its message can be projected: the primitive order of meaning, the prime order and second order level. One variation of norm and deviation principle deserves discussion because of its seeming adequacy. Systemic textlinguistics is an interpretative text model developed from Halliday's groundbreaking systemic Grammar. As Halliday argues:

*Language has to interpret the whole of our experience, reducing the indefinitely varied phenomena of the world around us, and also of the world inside us, the processes of our own consciousness, to a manageable number of classes of phenomena: types of processes, events and actions, classes of objects, people and institutions and the like.<sup>2</sup>*

It must be made clear that systemic textlinguistics is a global text theory designed for the interpretive analysis of all texts and the identification of their common features. Textlinguistic perspectives based on prose consider the text

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1- Olujare Adejare, *Language and Style in Soyinka. A Systemic textlinguistic study of a literary Idiolect*, London, Heinemann, 1992, p.6.

2- Halliday M.A.K, *An introduction to Functional Grammar*, London, Edward Arnold, 1994, p.21. Also read Hasan, R "Text in a Systemic-functional Model", in *Current Trends In Textlinguistics*, Berlin,New York: de Gruyter, 1978, pp. 228-46

as a process and not as a product, as well as the developing studies of discourse and its social, cultural, and ideological determinants. Let us have a look on the source data presentation.

The first source is *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*<sup>3</sup> by Ayi Kwei Armah. This novel denounces filth and corruption in Ghanaian life. The hero waves between his own uprightness and his family's urges on him to rise out of his lower middle-class status. The characters in this novel have different levels of education, which presents good examples of Ghanaian English. The second one is *The Palm Wine Drinkard*<sup>4</sup> by Amos Tutuola. It is Tutuola's version of Yoruba legend. A man addicted to drinking palm wine gets to search his palm-wine tapper and undergoes a series of adventures in his search. And the third source, *The Interpreters*<sup>5</sup> by Soyinka. This novel depicts the lives of a group of male university graduates from Lagos who must interpret their social context and attempt to live in it without losing their honesty. The novel uses complex language and particular vivid episodic descriptions in order to portray the social context of this group of interpreters.

The language of the three texts may reveal embedded meanings which may not be readily apparent in the events that constitute each story. These coded meaning reinforce the themes and thereby enrich the meaning of the novels under consideration.

## 2. THE USE OF HOME LANGUAGE LEXICAL ITEMS

Wherever we go and whatever culture we consider, the use of home language lexical items always mean something, whether in fiction or in the real life situations. The writers whose literary works have been selected for the illustration of the study do not use home language lexical items in the same manner. They use the home language words as they occur in the texts and when the circumstances demand that they use them. This is due to the fact that no two languages are identical despite marked similarities. Generally, some words and expressions are directly inserted in the English text without any explanations or annotations. We discuss the interesting examples:

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3- Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, London, Heinemann, 1971.

4- Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, London, Faber, 1952.

5- Wole Soyinka, *The Interpreters*, London, Heinemann, 1965.

- *Oware.*

It is a peculiarly West African game and may not have English equivalents

*Example:*

*"The children, sitting around the Oware they had dug in the ground turned to see what there was, then lost interest and continued their game". ( Armah, p.178)*

- *Akpeteshie.*

It is a Ghanaian home-made illicit gin, a local gin. Another name for *akpetechie* in Ghana is "Kill me quick". The same gin is made in other West African countries that have different names for it. But the name *akpetechie* seems to be the most common name, for it is also used in other West African countries. For example, in Sierra Leone the same word is used with a slight morphological substitution as *akpetechie*.

Examples:

*"The yessirman gave them gallons of the killing akpeteshie and the usual corned beef. ( Armah, p.96)*

*"Fofu would have spent the Sunday night into Monday dawn with her friends across the road at the squatters' enclave of Sodom and Gomorrah watching adult films her fourteen years required her to stay away from, and drinking directly from bottles of akpeteshie, or at best, some slightly milder locally produced gin."( Darko,2003:1)*

It follows from the above quotations that these simple lexical items are fitted in the texts without disturbing the grammatical structure of English sentences. In many instances the general meaning of the native words may be guessed by the non-native readers who have no previous knowledge of them. But sometimes, the meaning of the native word is very specific to their home language and the context in which it is used may not clarify it enough. The distinguishing feature of the literary idiolect is obligatory code switching. In fact the authors introduce lexical items from their mother tongues into English at points where English equivalents may be inadequate.

### 3. DIFFERENCE IN THE USE OF WORD-CLASSES

It is not a grammatical error analysis that is done. The deviant forms selected for analysis are persistent to deserve particular attention.

#### 3.1. Use of adverbs in position of adjectives

*Example:*

*“the gentleman left the really road on which we were travelling and branched into endless forest” (Tutuola, p.26)*

*Such a use of an adverb favours freedom to improvise, create, adapt or contextualise*

#### 3.2. Use of adjectives as verbs

The use of adjectives in the syntactic position of verbs is quite frequent, especially with some adjectives. One of such adjectives is “jealous”.

*Example:*

*“As I was a man I would jealous him more than that” (Tutuola, p.25).*

*The use of jealous as a verb may also be due to influence from Pidgin English*

*Evidently broad similarities must be accepted between the adjective and the intersemiotic transposition of the full utilisation of a semantic system to produce a new reading of the adjective / verb*

### 4. LOANSHIFT

The term “loanshift” is used in this section as a blanker term to refer to all substitutions that do not involve the internal or external morphological structures of the borrowed items. Meaning is mostly the concern here. Three patterns are analyzed: semantic transfer, semantic extension; and loan homonym.

#### 4.1. Semantic Transfer

There is semantic transfer when a word is used outside its normal use in the target language.

- *Auntie*

The prime level of meaning: The prime level of meaning: In British English, “auntie” is used in informal speeches to refer to the sister of one’s father or mother, the wife of one’s uncle or a woman whose brother or sister has a child. Most often the use of auntie instead of the more formal word “aunt” implies endearment. In West African English, auntie is used as an address to talk to any respectable looking woman. it does not always imply kinsmanship or endearment.

Example:

*“Go to the upper residential area, driver, Oyo said, on the hills beyond the Eskofo estate.*

*Yes, auntie” ( Armah, p.149).*

*The driver may have called her auntie in order to flatter her.*

- *Amount*

The prime level of meaning: in British Standard English amount as noun means “total” or “whole sum” or “quantity”. But West African English “amount” alone may stand for amount of money or money.

Example:

*“He said he want to borrow some amount” ( Tutuola, p.86)*

- *“Bushman”*

The prime level of meaning: in Britain, bush is extended to forest, jungle, farm and shrubbery. But bush is also used as modifier, meaning: rustic, unpolished or uncouth. It is often used to refer to people who lack the allegedly good manners of Europeans in general. Consequently the B.E. word bushman that designates certain tribes in the South African society has been semantically transferred in West African English to apply to someone who is not cultivated or a non westernized person.

Example:

*“It is only bushmen who wear their hair natural.*

*I wish you were a bushman” ( Armah, p.151)*

- *Passion-week*

The prime level of meaning: in British English., *passion week* is used in remembrance of the week of Christ’s agony at Gethsemane and suffering on the cross as well as the Christian practice of fasting during the week of Christ’s crucifixions. In West African English, mostly in Ghana English *Passion Week* is the day of month, usually one week before pay-day when there is general financial hardship and wage-earners are anxiously waiting for their wages.

Example:

*“at a time this, when the month was far gone and all there was the half life of passion week, lunch time was not a time to refresh oneself”. (Armah, p.25)*

#### 4.2. Semantic Extension

The items analyzed in this section are the British Standard English lexical items which cover a wider semantic field in West African English than their normal British English usage.

Example:

- *“Brother”*

In British English brother is defined as a male relative with the same parents. A brother may also be a male member of the same religious group. In West African use of brother is extended to a form of address to any age mate or to anybody whose age or outlook does not very obviously show that he is a superior person.

Example:

*“You have said it, brother, answer the taxi driver” ( Armah, p.165)*

- “Stranger”

A stranger is defined in British Standard English. as a person that one does not know. Somebody is a stranger in a place where he is new or a place that is unfamiliar to him. To the use of stranger is very common in West African English. The Africans add a host of other meaning: a stranger may be an alien, a visitor, a guest or a friend.

Example:

*“Estie, I found a stranger (Armah, p.44)*

- “Husband”

In England husband is the man to whom a woman is married. In West African English women also address their sons, nephews and grand-sons as their husbands in informal conversations to indicate endearment.

*Example: “Where is the wound, my husband?” (Armah, p.144) .*

In light of the use of the excerpts of this section, it stands to reason that the context has only made explicit reality of the semantic transfer of the items and helped fix the speech act.

## 5. COINAGES

The items have been created by analogy with existing lexical structures of English. They become new because of their combinatory uniqueness. Most of the words analyzed in this section are derived or compound words formed out of British Standard English morphemes or the morphemes of other languages. The item is coined by a combination of phonological and semantic process.

- “Bush-animal”

Bush-animal or bush-meat are compound words out of the BE words bush, animal and meat. In West African English bush-animal is game that is wild animal hunted for its meat. The meat of bush-animal is bush-meat or forest meat. The word bush is semantically extended to farm, forest

Examples:

*“Next I went to the bush in which I had set the trap for bush-animals” (Tutuola, p.75)*

*“I told them to tell the invisible man that today’s work was to kill bush-animals and bring them to my house” (Ibid. p.88)*

- *“push-baby”*

Push-baby is a compound word coined from two English words: push and baby. *Push-baby-baby* is coined on the same structural pattern as push-car, a railway work-car used for transporting goods. A *push-baby* is a maid-servant employed by white men and West Africans in high social position to take care of their children in the house and to take them out for riding to perambulators. These servants are called *push-babies*.

Example:

*“Young push-babies with frowning face broke through hedges behind different kinds of carriages” (Armah, p.147)*

- *“Inlawfulness” (Soyinka, p.76)*

*In-lawfulness* is a simpler coinage. It is coined by analogy with a word like “resourcefulness” through the addition of two suffixes *full* and *ness* to a noun. In this context *In-lawfulness* means the exploitation of ties brought about by marriage as a means of gaining an unmerited position. The members of the board are appointed not on merit but on the basis of marital ties.

Example:

*“lost elections, missed nominations, thug recruitment, financial backing, Ministerial in-lawfulness, Ministerial poncing, general arse-licking, Ministerial concubinage...” (Soyinka p.77)*

- *“Matterdom”*

*Matterdom* is coined by analogy from martyrdom the two words are made up of one free morpheme (matter/ martyr) and one bound morpheme ( dom). The item is coined by a combination of phonological and semantic processes. It occurs in the context of Sagoe’s urge to open his bowels after his ordeal at

the interview panel for *Independent Viewpoint*. This company is composed of people of matter (material thing, bribery) and martyr (spiritual things, psyche reality, impacting negatively on people's mind).

Example:

*« Who hunted you down from last season's stagnant pools, and constituted you into this obstructive lump and an endowment of the outward sign of matterdom. Matterdom, that was it, and savoured the word as Mathias led him hastily towards the toilet ... » (Soyinka, p76).*

- “De-sex”

*De sex* is coined by analogy with the word like de-establish or de-actor. The process is simple addition of the bound morpheme prefix “**de**” to the noun “sex”. This is not common practice in modern English. De-sex in this novel means sexual perversion and refers to Joe Golder, the homosexual lecturer. In fact, sex is well perceived here when it performs the function of procreation. Therefore one should not destroy the basic biological role of the sex and a good thing to evil. Therefore the reader can move from the sociological meanings of the lexical items coined to grasp the literary meanings prompted by the context.

Example:

*“Well, I should have thought it was obvious”*

*No. I lived with this European conspiracy to de-sex men and it drove me mad” (Soyinka, p. 100).*

In this respect, we may rightly say that a better approach to explaining semantic transfer, semantic extension and loan homonym in the authors' texts is to begin with the question “What happens when a linguistic form changes?” the process of change must go on in somewhat: an innovation is introduced. It may be deliberate creation of a single individual (author) or it may be a more-or-less simultaneous emergence among a whole group of writers because of analogical features already in their language system. The innovation is adopted for a variety of social and linguistic reasons. English language tolerates some innovations more freely than others. Shifts in word meaning that we sort out in the study are certainly the most common reflection of value shifts in a society.

The words “compromise”, for example, at one time had a favorable connotation; a compromise was a rational man’s way of achieving a nonviolent settlement<sup>6</sup>. But now, probably reflecting a new militancy and belligerency in American attitudes, it suggests appeasement, an undesirable yielding to pressure.

## CONCLUSION

This study has emphasized the contribution of literary dialect to bring fresh insights into world of language and the social relationships established by *Tutuola, Armah and Soyinka*. From this analysis, there is ample evidence that it is the first language of each writer that influences his use of home language lexical items. As can be noted from the study, semantic transfer, semantic extension and loan homonym reveal that because every language is backed by the culture of its speakers the same words and expressions may carry different meanings from one social context to another. To prescribe only one way of using language or to pretend that there is only one way of using language, be it literary or non literary, is at variance with reality. Indeed, if norms were to exist in literary language use, it would herald the death of creativity, the main attraction of this variety.

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