

Hyponymic Presentation of Niger Delta Issues in Tanure Ojaide's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a lexical study of Tanure Ojaide's poetry with a view to interpreting the meaning relations between the hypernym (super-ordinate term) and the hyponyms in the presentation of Niger Delta issues in the selected poems. The study is essentially based on the premise that hyponymic classifications are of interest in texts due to the pieces of information they give about a writer's culture and word-view. The paper adopts the Lexical Field approach. This is a Structuralist semantic approach to the study of lexis based on the idea that one can identify, within the vocabulary of a text, particular lexical sets covering particular areas of meaning (semantic field). Our data was purposively sourced from three different poetry collections of Tanure Ojaide with respect to appropriateness of subject matter and linguistic features. Our attention was mainly focused on the content words. The study discovered that the poet uses super-ordinate terms and co-hyponyms in the presentation of Niger Delta issues in the selected poems. It was also found that Ojaide uses hyponymic lexical relation to project aspects of his culture and world-view and the current realities of the Niger Delta region. It finally discovered that lexical items in hyponymic relation enable the poet to realise the textual meta-function of language – cohesion.

Keywords: Hyponymy, Niger Delta issues, lexis, semantic field, poetry

Introduction

This paper is a linguistic study of lexical hyponymy and the presentation of Niger Delta issues in Tanure Ojaide's poetry. Tanure Ojaide is one of the most significant poets to come from the Niger Delta region of South-South Nigeria. He is also one of the most prolific and among the first to blaze the trail in what is known today as the Niger Delta literature, a literature which seeks to project the effect of oil exploration and exploitation on the flora and fauna of the region and the utter disregard and negligence of the region by the government and the multi-national oil companies. This crop of literature which can be regarded as regional literature is written by both indigenes of the region or outsiders about the region with setting and themes drawn from the experiences of the people

(Ojaide, 2015:56). Much of the literary output of the Niger Delta literature is in the genre of poetry, and among its prominent poets are Ebi Yeibo, Ogaga Ifowodo, Nimo Bassey, Ebiware Ikiriko, Joe Ushie, and Tanure Ojaide whose poetry is the subject of this study.

Ojaide is not just one of the most prolific poets to emerge in Nigeria after the generation of Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Christopher Okigbo, he is also one of the most committed in the interpretation of the social, political and environmental issues bedevilling his country, Nigeria, in general and the Niger Delta in particular. Part of Ojaide's major commitment in his poetry is his preoccupation with the revelation of the predicament and the dilemma of the people of the Niger Delta region and its landscape who have suffered from oil exploration, exploitation, disintegration and environmental devastation since the discovery of oil in the region 1958. He is deeply concerned with the destruction of the ecology of the Niger Delta region by the conglomeration of oil companies and its attendant effect on the inhabitants of the region. Therefore, this paper focuses on how Ojaide uses hyponymy to organise the lexical items in the selected poems to project the Niger Delta issues of environmental degradation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the lexical field. A lexical field can be defined as a group of lexemes which belong to a particular activity or area of specific knowledge (Saeed, 2000:63). The lexical field theory is a Structuralist semantic approach to the study of lexis. It is an approach based on the idea that it is possible to identify within the vocabulary of a language (or a text) particular sets of expressions (lexical fields) covering particular areas of meaning (semantic field) (Singleton, 2000: 66-67).

The lexical field theory is traceable to the ideas of Humboldt (1836) and Helder (1772) (as cited in Lyons, 1977:250). According to Lyons, it was made popular in the 1920s and 1930s by some German and Swiss scholars notably Ipsen (1924), Jolles (1934), Porzig (1934) and Trier (1934). In fact, one of the exponents, Jose Trier wrote that it is a "net of words cast over meaning in order to capture and organise it and have it in a demarcated concept" (Singleton, 2000:67). The field theory considers the vocabulary of a language (or text) as an integrated system

of lexemes interrelated in sense. Lexemes that are semantically related whether paradigmatically or syntagmatically within a given language system (or within a given text) can be said to belong to the same lexical field (Lyons, 1977:251). In its broadest sense, lexical field refers to a subset of a language's vocabulary that make up some thematic unit; more particularly, it is a more hypothesised structure in which the lexical items associated with a particular semantic area are organised on the basis of a number of semantic relations (Murphy, 2003:92). The above point makes it crucial to our study. By implication, the identifiable lexical fields through semantic sense relation of hyponymy in our data will go a long way to underscore the thematic thrust of the texts (Emama, 2017).

According to Lyons (1977:254), a set of lexemes in any one language system which covers a conceptual area and, by means of relation of sense which holds between them, gives structure to it as a lexical field. By this, it is obvious that a set of lexemes belonging to a particular lexical field must be related in sense. Thus, lexical sense relation of hyponymy is crucial to the delineation of a particular lexical field. Adopting the lexical field approach to the lexical analysis of a literary text is a rewarding endeavour. This is because it will enable us to define and determine the lexis of a particular text as the observable relations between lexical expressions within particular contexts (Singleton, 2000:68). It will also help to see the vocabulary of a text not as a vast number of lexical items, but as comprising groups of items which realise or give structure to areas or domains of reference in the real world (Wales, 1989:174). It will also help to uncover the ways in which a writer organises and constructs lexical meanings to project his/her experiences of the world and his/her perception and processing of experience since the speaker's [or writer's] view of the world, of how it is structured and divided into subsystems of separate "things" and processes, is obviously carried by vocabulary (Fowler, 1996).

Literature Review

Hyponymy is one of the most fundamental paradigmatic sense relations in terms of the structure of the vocabulary. Though it is of a recent origin (by analogy with synonymy and antonymy), the notion of hyponymy is traditional enough and it has long been recognised as one of the constitutive principles in the organisation of the vocabulary of all languages of the world (Lyons, 1968: 453). Scholars have defined hyponymy in a number of ways (Carter, 2012; Finegan, 2008; Saeed, 2003; Cruse, 1986; Palmer, 1981). Carter (2012:35) states that hyponymy refers to what can be described as inclusive sense relation. It is a relationship existing between specific and general lexical items in that the meaning of the specific item is included in the meaning of the more general term. To Finegan (2008:181), a hyponymous lexical relation is one in which the referent of a subordinate, more specific term is included in the referent of a super-ordinate term.

Hyponymy is a lexical relation which corresponds to the inclusion of one class in another (Cruse, 1986:88). According to Palmer (1981:88), this inclusion is a matter of class membership. While the upper term is referred to as the super-ordinate term (technically hypernym), the lower term or terms are known as hyponyms or co-hyponyms. Finegan (2008:181) illustrates this lexical relation with the colour terms as he states that *blue*, *red*, *yellow green*, *black*, and *purple* are hyponyms of the super-ordinate term, *colour*. However, there may be an absence of a super-ordinate term or hypernym (Lyons, 1968:456). Finegan (2008:181) further affirms this as he exemplifies the absence of a super-ordinate term in the case of *uncle* and *aunt* which form a lexical field because they share a common sense relation in their meanings but one cannot identify their hypernym in English.

Hyponymy can be seen in terms of unilateral implication (Lyons, 1968:455) or in terms of one-way entailment. For instance, to say *I own a spaniel* entails *I own a dog* but *I own a dog* does not entail *I own a spaniel* (Singleton, 2000:70). What this implies is that the meaning of *spaniel*, the more specific term (the hyponym), is included in the meaning of *dog*, the more general term (the super-ordinate) but the meaning of *dog* is not included in the meaning of *spaniel*. Hyponymy is a kind of asymmetrical synonym and its basic organisation is hierarchical (Carter, 2012:35). Lexical items in hyponymous relation can be represented as inverted tree

diagrams in which the lower nodes represents terms which are hyponymous to the one above (Singleton, 2000:70). It should also be noted that the super-ordinate term may not generally imply its hyponym. It is usually the case that the situational context or the syntagmatic modification of the super-ordinate will determine it in the sense of one of its hyponyms. This underscores the place of hyponymy in literary texts as it will go a long way to organise the lexical system of our data as a set of interrelated system delineating a particular domain of existence in the physical world.

The present study focuses on the use of lexical hyponym in the delineation of the Niger Delta issues in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide whose poetry has received much critical attentions. Nwagbara (2010) sees Ojaide as an eco-critical poet who negates ecological imperialism in his poetry while Bodunde (2002) sees the dominant aesthetics in Ojaide's *Delta Blues* as the appropriation of the physical environment of the Niger Delta as an object in the portrayal of the decline in the well being of the people. In the same vein, Adekoya (2013) dwells on the first part of *Delta Blues* with a focus on the effect of oil exploration on the people and the natural environment of the Niger Delta just as Tsaaior (2013) approaches *Delta Blues* from the perspective of post colonial discourse. Furthermore, Eka (2002) sees Ojaide's *Fate of Vultures* as a collection that employs repetition of words for reinforcement of the matter being communicated. Adagboyin (2002) examines the rhetorical effect of the use of pronominal forms in Ojaide's *Fate of Vultures* just as Ibhawaegbele (2012) discusses the use of pronominal forms as signals of authority, opposition, and solidarity in Tanure Ojaide's *Fate of Vultures*. The above review shows that the poetry of Tanre Ojaide has received much attention but none to the best of our knowledge from the perspective of hyponymy.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data for this study is analysed using the lexical semantic approach. This is a Structuralist semantic approach which studies the vocabulary based on the idea that one can identify, within the vocabulary of a text, particular lexical sets covering particular areas of meaning (semantic field). For our lexis, the terms *simple*, *compound* and *phrasal* structures are taken as lexical items (Halliday, 1966:157). This is because many lexical items consist of more than one word (Morley, 1985:3). Our attention is

mainly focused on the content words at the expense of grammatical or function words. The content or full words (also called lexical words) are those lexical items which have substantive meaning even out of context. They belong to the major class. The grammatical words have little or no independent meaning and they belong to the closed class. Therefore, our analysis largely concentrates on the content words which have identifiable meaning references and which can be classified into hyponymous relations to conceptualise different semantic field in the real world based their sense relations.

Furthermore, eight poems have been selected from three different collections of Ojaide's poetry for this study. This selection is purposeful with respect to appropriateness of subject matter and manifestation of linguistic features and the need for an in-depth and rigorous analysis. The lexical items manifesting hyponymous relation were then identified and analysed to show how they are organised to reflect the issues peculiar to the Niger Delta region and their thematic implications.

Data Analysis

Ojaide, who can be seen in "Correspondence: From Home" (*The Blood of Peace*, 1991:91 - 95) as a troubadour, presents his nostalgic feelings and longings for his home, the Niger Delta, after one of his numerous sojourns abroad. In this poem Ojaide is enchanted to revisit *the tangles of the land's tresses*, to come to *his first love / in her attire of green*. This home he describes *as a delta of marks* in the last stanza. He uses lexical items in hyponymous relation to project his memories of the primordial features of the region which marks out the region and his love for it.

As can be seen in the poem, *Delta of marks* is the hypernym while *yam, cassava, rubber, trees, birds, anthills, animals, water, fish* and *the greenery* are the co-hyponyms which have inclusive meanings as parts of the marks of the region. *Yam* as presented is a source of food both to the living and the dead. *Plantain* is a super-ordinate term to *kepekere* and *dodo* while *cassava* is also a super-ordinate term to *farina, garri* and *starch* (which was used in barter trade). All are sources of food and parts of the natural habitat of the region. *Rubber* is presented as a cash crop. *Tree* is a hypernym to *palms, cork-tree* and *akata stick*. They also have their functions as marks of the region. *Fish* functions as a super-ordinate term to *omwe, omoja, carp, oware,*

omworo, *eel*, *snakefish*, and *mudfish*. Below are diagrams illustrating these hyponymic relations:

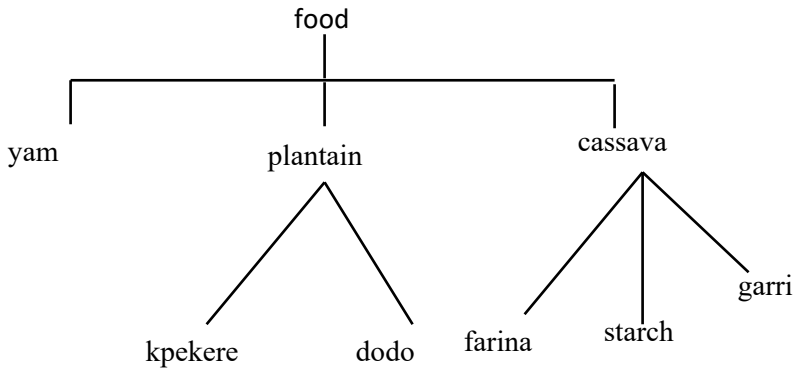


Fig. i

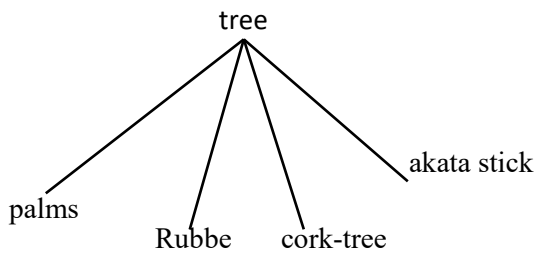


Fig. ii

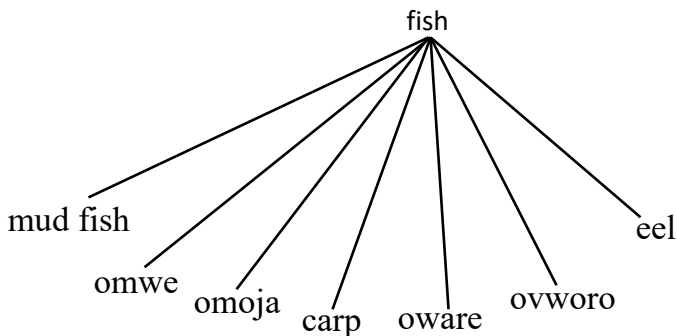


Fig. iii

All these are primordial marks of the Delta environment which attracts the poet home. The world-view projected through this hyponymous lexical relation is that of the Delta as a land of self-sustenance before it was destroyed by excessive poaching by the multinational oil companies in connivance with the military and the political rulers of the country.

This pristine Niger delta environment described in “Correspondence: From Home” was later to experience wanton destruction, devastation and degradation by different forces. First, it was the rape of the region by European merchants and traders. This was before the crude oil era. Valuable features of the poet’s *youth landscape* which were significant aspects of the ecosystem of the region were poached away by these traders to different museums in Europe symbolised by *Hawthornden* and *Steepletop* as co-hyponyms in “Transplant” (*Tales of the Harmattan*, 2007:39). In presenting the semantic field of rape of the region, the poet uses *landscape* as the super-ordinate term while *pristine streams*, *multi-ethnic population of plants*, *costumed birds*, *graceful games*, *deer*, *antelope*, *porcupine*, *iroko*, *mahogany*, *birch*, *eucalyptus*, *maples* and *pine* as contextual co-hyponyms to this primordial landscape.

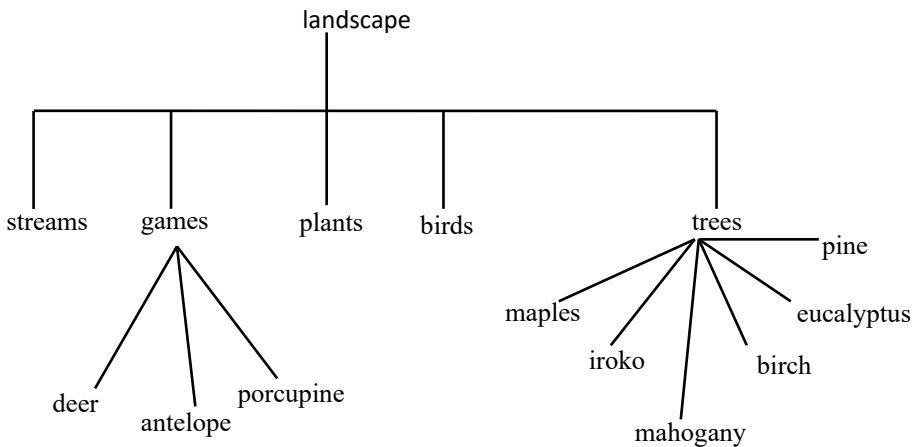


Fig. iv

All the co-hyponyms to the superordinate term, *landscape*, as shown in Figure iv above, were raided and transplanted to European museums and whatever that was left were burnt by *fires of oil blowout* just as the creeks

and streams were clogged by perennial oil spillage. Thus, the poet bemoans and laments the fate of his people as they have lost their source of livelihood as he states thus:

we no longer have a place to meet chased from
home into Warri and Port Harcourt (“Transplant”, 39)
and that it is
Only outside do I now see the landscape of my childhood.
 (“Transplant”, 39)

The above extracts from the poem underscores the theme of subjugation and displacement of the people from their natural habitat occasioned by the constant raiding and rapping of its landscape.

The gods are not spared of the activities of the desecration of the Niger Delta region in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide. In particular, the water gods in the poem “At the Kaiama Bridge” (*The Tale of the Harmattan*, 2007:33-34) were forced to retreat and desert the people as a result of desecration of the streams and rivers due to oil spillage, percolation and constant gas flaring. Ojaide uses lexical hyponymy to present the different water gods which have been made to retreat seaward as a result of wetland drilling and persistent oil spillage. Lexical hyponymy is used to organise these different types of spirits thus:

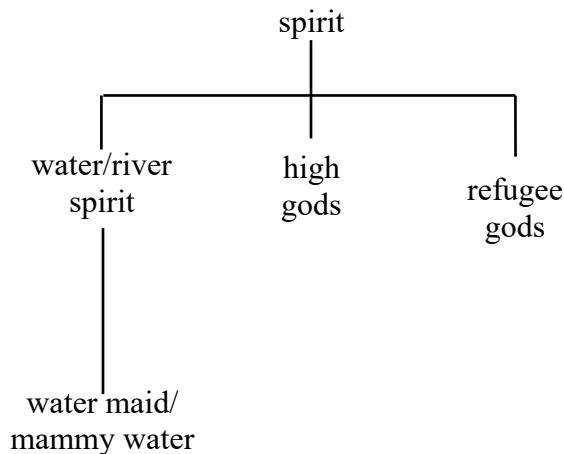


Fig. v

As seen in Figure v above, the hypernym is *spirit* with *water/river spirit*, *high gods*, and *refugee gods* as co-hyponyms. In the oral tradition of the people of the Niger Delta, the water gods or spirit are imbued with beauty and a source of blessing to the people. They are said to have a direct contact with the people who adore and worship them. But incessant gas flaring and constant oil spillage has clogged the water ways. Thus, the chemical and gaseous fluids emitted into the rivers, streams and creeks of the region have made the gods to retreat as *the drilling wetland* is no longer safe for them to hold their congress for life.

Through lexical hyponym, Ojaide presents a semantic field that projects further destruction and desecration of the primordial environment of the Niger Delta in “Without the trees” (*Tales of the Harmattan*, 2007:38). This is shown in the lexical items *without the trees*, *without the evergreens*, *without the creeks*, *without the currents*, *without the sun*, *without the shrubs*, *without the forests*, *without the farms*, and *without the stars*. “[T]rees, evergreens, shrubs, forests and farms can be seen as co-hyponyms. Creeks and currents relate to the waters of the Niger Delta environment while the sun and the star are co-hyponyms used in this poem as metaphors for the leading lights of the Niger Delta struggle for environmental justice killed by the government. Thus, through hyponymy, the poet relates both the destruction of the environment and the human capacity of the region.

These lexical items are semantically related to the environment which is being destroyed by the activities of oil exploration and exploitation. Apart from the *sun* and the *star*, others are obvious factors of the environment. But in the context of the Niger Delta, *the sun* and *the star* (Niger Delta freedom fighters) are also being destroyed by incessant gas flaring, thus they cannot agitate for the environmental justice as the sun is fumigated while the stars are smothered. This is seen in the murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa, “the Ogoni nine” and other indigenes of the region who are frontline agitators for the well being of the people of the region and its environment. All the lexical items form a semantic field through their hyponymous relationship with the environment which is their super-ordinate term. Also, the lexical items *fumigated*, *devoured*, *poached*, and *smothered* as co-hyponyms form a lexical field of destruction to further foreground the theme of environmental despoliation. Therefore, in this poem, Ojaide presents the conceptual domain of environmental

degradation through the use of lexical items that are hyponymously related.

In “Invocation” (*Blood of Peace*, 1991:31-32), Tanunre Ojaide uses the lexical relation of hyponymy to tell us his different types of songs / poems:

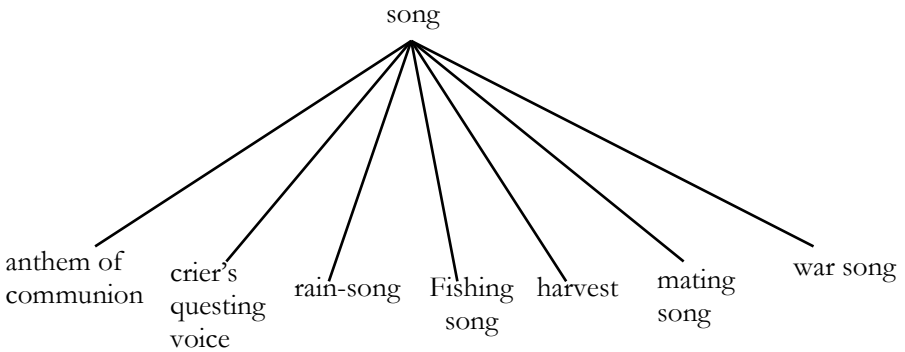


Fig. vi

In Figure vi above, *song* is the super-ordinate term while the other lexical items are the co-hyponyms. Through this, we can see the major concern of Ojaide in his poetry. His song is an *anthem of communion* through which he shares his feelings, thoughts and observations with his people; it is *the crier's questing voice* through which he searches for peace, agitates for freedom and equity for the marginalized masses in his country. In stanza eight, we see the other types of songs and their functions: *rainsong* to provide fruits even in the *desert*, *fishsong* to provide fish and *revive dying streams*, *harvestsong* to provide food to the hungry, *matingsong* for procreation and *war song* to combat the tyrants and oppressors and defend *the threatened*. It is in these functions that Ojaide presents the messages of his poetry as critics have interpreted his poetry in the light of the above functions.

However, in “So Many Questions” (*Songs of Myself*, 2015:134–135) the sources of the songs which are parts of the primordial environment of the region are all destroyed. The lexical relation of hyponymy is used to show the destruction of the primordial ecosystem of the Niger Delta environment. This, Ojaide achieves by using the lexical hyponyms of the birds that created the various *voices* that have been *muffled* by the activities of oil exploration:

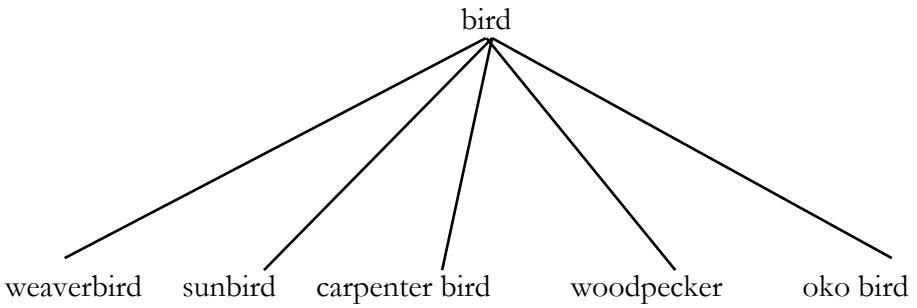


Fig. vii

In Figure vii above, *bird* is the super-ordinate term while *sunbird*, *weaverbird*, *carpenter bird*, *woodpecker*, and *oko bird* are co-hyponyms. Through this, the poet questions the source of *music* that will come again from the Niger Delta region since the producers of the music have been destroyed. Again, the poet uses hyponymic lexical sense relation to organise the destroyed music of the Niger Delta.

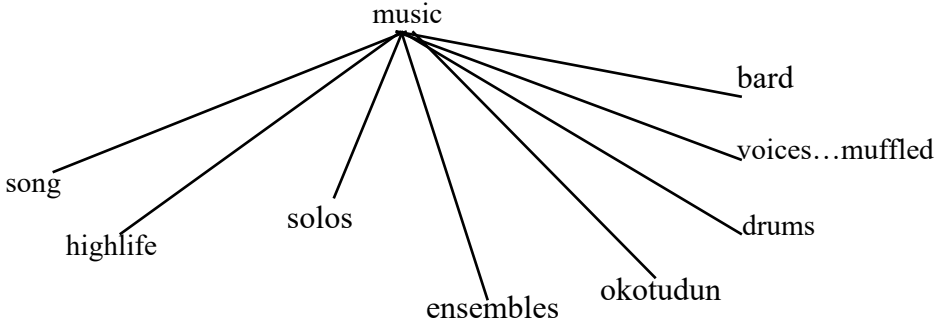


Fig. viii

In the above, *music* is the super-ordinate term while the other lexical items are co-hyponyms of music. Rexlawson is one of the foremost musicians to come from the Niger Delta in the late 1960s and early 1970s. His brand of music is called *highlife* which was a source of inspiration, enjoyment and relaxation for the people of the region and beyond. *Okotudun* is a sound made by the *oko* bird of the Niger Delta region while *song*, *solos*, *ensembles* and *voices... muffled* are all related to music as co-hyponyms. To the poet and the people of the Niger Delta region, the

music is no more as the sources have been destroyed by exploration activities.

Furthermore, *snakes*, *Iguanas* and *agamas* which can be seen as co-hyponyms to reptiles have also been destroyed. Thus, there is no inspiration for a *bard* to carry the *polyrhythm* of the *highlife* in the region. Among other features of environment destroyed are *earthworm* and *insect population*. This use of hyponymic sense relations helps the poet to organise the lexical aspects of this poem as sets of interrelated systems delineating the semantic domain of environmental destruction of the Niger Delta in the physical world.

In echoing Gabriel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun" and "A Reed in the Tide", Ojaide projects a semantic field of further destruction of the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta environment in "Can I still Call From the River Nun?" (*Songs of Myself*, 20015:114-115). Some aspects of the environment destroyed are organised hyponymously as shown below:

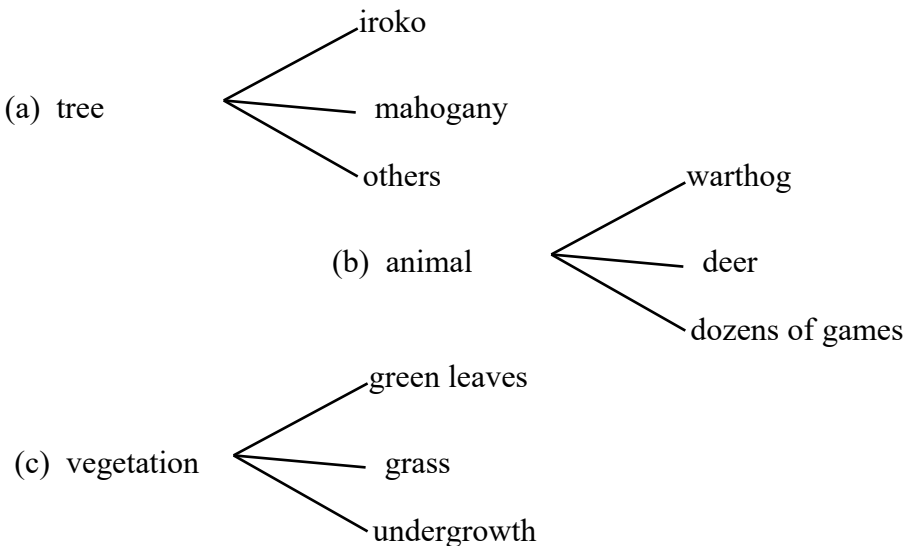


Fig. ix

In (fig.ix.a) above, *tree* is the super-ordinate term while *iroko*, *mahogany* and *others* are co-hyponyms of *tree*. These are burnt to ashes by the fire of the conglomerate of poachers. In (Fig. ix.b) *warthog*, *porcupine*, *deer*, and *dozens of games* are co-hyponyms to animals that are chased out of their natural habitat by army of developers, while in (Fig ix.c) the co-hyponyms *green*

leaves, grass and undergrowth shield are destroyed by the toxic flames of the arsonists. Other contextual lexical hyponyms of the flora and fauna of the destroyed environment as presented in the context of this poem are *river bird, fish population, soil, rains, night, residents of the divine gardens and the ruminant population of the abused land*. The *air* which is a source of oxygen that sustains human life is polluted by raging gas flares just as the soil is assaulted by same gas flares from the multinational oil companies in their cooperate headquarters in Abuja and Lagos. The night is in flames from gas flares while the residents and the remnant population of the region are exploited and decimated.

In “Market day” (*Tales of the Harmattan*, 2007:25), Ojaide offers prayer to the gods and spirits of the market in a nostalgic mood to bring back the good old wares (*needs*) which the Niger Delta markets and its people were known for. He states that now the people can no longer get their needs from the same market as their forbears did. The poet’s *needs* are food items peculiar to the region. Thus, “food” functions as the super-ordinate term and the components of the needs as the co-hyponyms in organising the lexical structure of the poem thus:

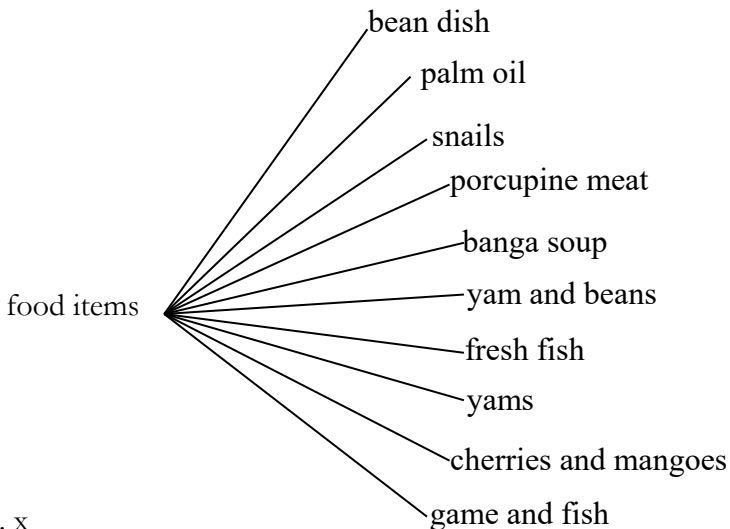


Fig. x

Figure x above shows the food items (the poet’s needs) found in the Niger Delta market which have now become nonexistent to the people of the region as they now *daydream and live in a world that is gone* as a result

of the activities of *the poachers, arsonists and robbers*. This has resulted in perennial hunger and famine to the inhabitants of the land.

The gods and spirits which the poet prays to are also hyponymously organised as shown below:

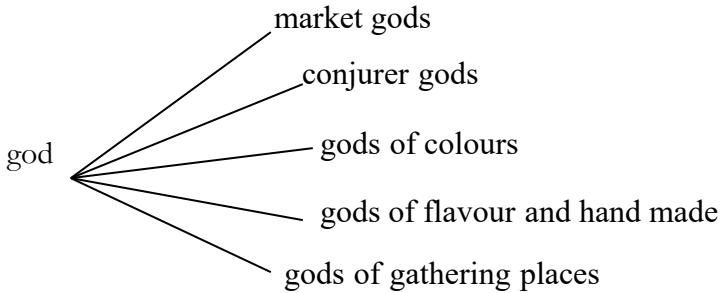


Fig. xi

As can be seen in Figure xi above, *market gods, conjurer gods, god of colours, god of flavour and handmade, and god of gathering places* are all co-hyponyms with *god* as the super-ordinate term. These gods have been debased from their *pre-eminent status* to wandering beggars from new and foreign gods. Thus, Ojaide's prayer is that these gods should extricate themselves from the strangle-holds of these new gods and bring back the produce and products of the region which the gods were credited for.

Conclusion

The lexical analysis done in this study has shown the extent to which Ojaide explores lexical sense relations of hyponymy to conceptualise the realities of the Niger Delta issues. The selected poems have shown that at the lexical level, the poet reveals his world view and the realities facing the Niger Delta region. Hyponymy is used to delineate the primordial Niger Delta environment which attracts the poet home in "Correspondence: From Home" and to show the poached features of the region by the European merchants in "Transplant". From the study, it is obvious that both the flora and fauna of the region and the human and non-human inhabitants of the region are destroyed by oil exploration activities. The lexical field in "Without the trees" projects the twin lexical sets of the destruction of the environment and the human capacity of the Niger Delta region through hyponymy. In this poem, Ojaide presents his

conceptual view of environmental destructions through the use of lexical hyponymy. Hyponymy is a means of outlining the purposes and functions of Ojaide's poetry in "Invocation" where he sees *songs* as the super-ordinate term. To project and organise the different features of the environment which has been destroyed in "So many questions", hyponymy also comes handy. In the first instance here, *Bird* is the subordinate term while the different types of birds are co-hyponyms; while in the second instance *music* is the super-ordinate term while the different types of music form the co-hyponyms.

Apart from the above findings, this study also reveals that hyponymy is a means of realising the textual meta-functions of language. This is the language function which enables language users to create cohesion within text and the context of text's situation. As shown in the selected poems, lexical items which are hyponymously related within a poem make the poem cohesive as a unit of discourse. This is because sense relations between lexical items are means of tying up and relating the different parts of a text to one another. In the second sense, the lexical items so related equally create coherence within the text and the social context of the poems. This language function, in particular, enables the poet to depict appropriate semantic domain in the real world. Hyponymy thus, enables the poet to make dominant impressions on the memory of the readers as regards the ecological issues facing the Niger Delta.

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