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**Language, Colonial Attitude and War in Emecheta's  
*Destination Biafra: A Stylistic Critical Approach***

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**Abstract**

This study aims at examining the relevance of Sociolinguistic Functional Stylistics (SFS) in supplying a methodical structure upon which Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* can be appreciated. Much of the critical attention on Emecheta has been centred on issues of gender and sexuality to the extent that ideological implications of language in her fiction have almost been ignored. This study applies as its theoretical framework Halliday's Social Semiotic Structure with special reference to the context of situation discourse which not only interpretes relevant linguistic data but also establishes a link

between people and the linguistic items used to describe them. This study adopts a qualitative research methodology for its data analysis which entails interpretative and definitive data analysis techniques. The study observes the presence of linguistic items such as *verba sentiendi*, lexical, syntactic negation, contextual use of language and paralinguistic devices such as figures of speech and so on in the novel under review. These linguistic choices determine the relationship between characters as they interact and also depict the specific function of language in operation. This study, therefore, recommends that the eclectic approach of Sociolinguistic Functional Stylistics should be applied to other sub-genres of prose, and other literary genres in order to open up a new vista in the appreciation of Emecheta's works.

### Introduction

As a war novel, it moves away from the usual issues of motherhood, polygamy, preference for male children, slavery and marriage that have taken up a greater portion of Emecheta's fiction. In other words, the dilemma of heroines battered by the harsh dictates of both racial and cultural hegemonic practices that rob them of their personal identities, on one hand, and, on the other, their fight for self-assertion, self-identity and self-actualization, dominate the plot of the compelling stories. In *Destination Biafra*, there is a clear departure from the lives and times of poorly educated heroines in the rural or urban centres who also suffer from patriarchal restrictions that impede their personal development, to a well exposed and highly educated heroine whose personal development and good qualities enable her to undertake tasks as huge and as intimidating as national reconciliation in a war-torn and devastated country between 1967 to 1970 in history.

*Destination Biafra* is, therefore, Emecheta's response to the war that decimated the population of her people, caused a lot of social upheavals, and that threatened the very existence of the country called Nigeria. It is an emotion-laden piece of prose fiction by one who feels personally affected by the loss and suffering of real relatives. The author creates a female protagonist in the mould of an intelligent, well educated and enlightened Debbie Ogedemgbe, a military officer. She is the beautiful daughter of one of the rich business men whose fraudulent activities have contributed in no small measure to the plundering of the post-independence Nigerian economy.

The major theme that dominates the plot of *Destination Biafra* is the unsuitable system of government which the British colonists left behind at independence in 1960. It was aimed at protecting the economic interests of Britain in Nigeria. Administrative competence, patriotism, vision and general acceptability, for post-colonial leaders of Nigeria, were never considered. In the beginning of the novel, we see Governor MacDonald very ill at ease at the reluctance of Sardauna of Sokoto to abandon his age-long abode in the north to co-habit with the so-called 'Karferis', that is the ungodly in

the south (Lagos). For Macdonald, the most appropriate decision to make is to support the Hausas.

Emecheta's narrative reveals the immediate cause of the war. A coup has just taken place and, while no politician of the Igbo ethnic group is executed, several non-Igbo politicians lose their lives. They include the Federal Minister of Finance, Chief Samuel Ogedemgbe, the Prime Minister, Nguru Kano, the Sardauna among others. Next, Brigadier Onyemere and Chief Oladapo, the fictional Yoruba Commissioner for the Western Region become victims of a second coup. What ensues is anarchy.

Several scenes that portray the themes of politics, war, ethnicity and even the role of women in times of conflict adorn the pages of the work under review. It behoves us in this study, at this stage, to select some scenes of social interaction between or among characters. The essence is to see the varieties of linguistic choices or language items at the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical levels that Emecheta ascribes to each of the characters or participants in the verbal exchange. This will further reveal the effects or meanings that are contained in these linguistic items and, finally, how they coher with Emecheta's ideology or worldview in *Destination Biafra*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on Sociolinguistic Functional Stylistics (SFS) which is a blend of Bakhtin's dialogic (cultural) structure, Fowler's ideological structure, and Halliday's social semiotic structure. Propounded in the 1980's, it considers language from the eclectic or flexible social, cultural, and ideological angles. SFS emphasizes the following:

- (i) Bahktin's (1981) dialogic structure which recognises the presence of divergent voices in a text – (assenting or dissenting); monologic when only the author's voice dominates in the text, and phonologic when it competes with the voices of the characters,
- (ii) the revelation, through linguistic features of the kind of social relationship among voices or characters in a text,
- (iii) Halliday's (1989) social semiotic context-bound structure comprising field, tenor, and mode of discourse (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) in which language reveals the attitude or worldview of characters,
- (iv) Fowler's (1981) ideological structure which is a combination of Bahktin's divergent voices and Haliday's social semiotic characteristics which is then linked to the writer's overall artistic vision, and
- (v) the revelation of meanings in a text at the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical levels of discourse.

Halliday's (1989) framework on language, context and text constitutes the specific structure upon which our analysis of data for this study shall depend. This is with a view to determining how the effects or meanings revealed by the various linguistic items cohere with Emecheta's vision of society in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

### Analysis of Applied Linguistic Choices

Governor McDonald's and Alan Greg's attitude to the prospect of Nigeria becoming independent in 1960 is not only cynical, but one that is inconsistent with global standard practice. It also exposes the insincerity of the entire colonial enterprise in Nigeria. Significantly, their opinions have been highlighted through a series of rhetorical questions, cognitive assertiveness, shared knowledge, sarcasm, metaphors and so on that express their values. These linguistic choices constitute Emecheta's assessment of the participants' values and those of the British government back home whom they represent:

**1.** "I don't want Nigeria to go Communist. **2.** That would mean gaining independence from us and becoming dependent on another power. **3.** And I do not pray for the kind of situation we now have in the Congo." **4.** "Ah," drawled MacDonald, furrowing his brow, "I'm not thinking about the moral side of anything, but I think it's about time we let them go, but not completely... **5.** All independence will give them is the right to govern themselves. **6.** That has nothing to do with whom they trade with." **7.** "The situation is not as simple as that," Alan Greg began. **8.** "It would be easy if we had only the Hausa to cope with. **9.** But there are the other tribes – the Yorubas have been dealing with us for decades. **10.** And then there are the Ibos. **11.** They are ambition personified. **12.** Every beggar boy in Enugu or Owerri wants to be a doctor." **13.** "A witch doctor?" MacDonat asked trying unsuccessfully to inject some lightness into Alan's seriousness. **14.** The Ibos, I have heard so much about them," he went on. **15.** One of their leaders was that tall, well-spoken delegate with glasses. **16.** He impressed me very much, I must say." **17.** "There is no doubt that they are extremely intelligent. **18.** But they are greedy as well, and their arrogance could lead them into trouble. **19.** Also, the greater portion of the oil areas are in their region; so one has to be very careful how the country is divided constitutionally." Sir Fergus observed. **20.** "But are the Hausas not greater in number?" MacDonald asked. **21.** Alan Greg nodded. **23.** Introduce democracy and let the Hausas rule forever. **24.** You did say that they are not so ambitious, and that they are happy in the Moslem faith?" Macdonald felt triumphant. **25.** "We must show the Hausas that we are their friends, and that the country will be divided in such a way

that they will be the rulers of Nigeria, and that there will be little interference with their religion.” 26. “... Tribe, tribe, tribe. How that word can consolidate and yet still divide,” Alan Greg said. (p. 8, ch.1)

Sentence 1 opens with an expressive pronoun ‘I’ which draws emphasis to the first person singular speaker. This implies that it is not yet a shared opinion. This is followed by a negative lexical item ‘do not’ preceding a *verba sentiendi* ‘want’. The same pattern is repeated in sentence 3. Sentence 1-3 have a logical connection, that is, a kind of modality asserting a sequence of idea that begins in a negative proposition in sentence 1, then runs through the extension of premise in sentence 2. It is then logically concluded in sentence 3. Note that there is a subtle sense of comparison in “the kind of situation” and “to go Communist”. The attitude of the speaker is one of pessimism. In sentence 4, we notice the kind of antithetical use of the *verba sentiendi* “I don’t think” and “but I think” that implicates the existence of conflicting values within the speaker. The same pattern of conflict is further underscored by “let them go...” and “but not completely”. The repeated use of the contrasting co-ordinating conjunction ‘but’ enhances it the more. This reflects the kind of double standard practice symptomatic of colonialists in Nigeria when it comes to matters relating to ‘tribes’. The implication here is that the colonial enterprise was one fraught with gross inconsistencies and blatant double standards that bordered on selfish economic and political interests.

In sentences 5-6, there is a preponderance of various pronouns. They include: “them”, “themselves”, “that”, “they”, “whom”. They are used in the anaphoric sense, that is, to refer to antecedents. In the case of “that” in sentence 6 is “the right” in sentence 5, that is, “the right to govern themselves”. There is also the personification of the lexical item, ‘independence’. For instance, “...independence will give them...” The implication of this personification is a kind of distancing by the speaker from the subject or field of discourse. He does not want to be part of it. In other words, he and the colonial administration, which he and other agents symbolize, either do not or reluctantly wish it to happen. The preponderance of pronouns with antecedents that relate to the tribes implicates a condescending attitude towards the colonised by the colonialist, in this case, the speaker. The fact is that these tribes, have now become buried in the colonial discriminatory grave of partial anonymity, having forfeited their culture; their mark of identity to that of the intruding colonial forces.

Sentence 7, “It is not as easy as that...” denotes negative cognitive assertiveness that is contingent upon uncertain assumptions. Sentence 8 is structurally complex but stylistically loose. The two clauses are linked by the subordinating conjunction ‘if’. It is rhetorically an *ad hominem* or overgeneralization based on little or no accurate premise. Sentences 9-12 constitute a justification of sentence 8. Sentence 12 begins with a generic reference ‘every’ that nullifies the claim. It is, therefore, a fallacious assumption. Sentence 11 is a metaphoric hyperbole, “They are

ambition personified". Its beauty lies in its cognitive assertiveness. Its substantiation in sentence 12, "Every beggar boy in Enugu or Owerri wants to be a doctor" makes it even more assertively beautiful. But its characteristic over-generalisation highlights its sarcastic undertone which punctures its objectivity. It therefore, implicates colonial cynicism on the ambitions and aspirations of the colonized one of which is to become experts in relevant fields of human endeavour.

Sentence 20, "But are the Hausas not greater in number?" is a negative question. It assumes an elliptical form with authorial input in sentence 21. It leads and sentence 21, "Alan Greg nodded" affirms. Negative interrogative syntactic structures naturally beg for affirmation. This exposes the thought pattern of the speaker. This underscores the partiality of the colonial administration in Nigeria in favour of the Hausas whom they consider gullible and therefore, usable in terms of achieving self-serving economic and political interests. Sentences 20-25 have logical connection whose conclusion is the perceived preference of the colonists for the Hausas. It begins with the premise in sentence 20 and culminates in the conclusion in sentence 25, "We must show the Hausas that we are their friends..." In sentence 26, note the repetitive structure of the lexical item 'tribe' and its description as the colonial tool for construction or destruction. Note that tribe dominates the above discourse. It signifies a veritable instrument in the divide-and-rule administrative system that has become the mantra of the colonial government in Africa. There is, therefore, too much emphasis on the numerical strength of the Hausas as a 'tribe' and as the basis for recommending democracy. To the colonialists, "intelligence" is a negative attribute while it is the other way round for gullibility and low ambition.

Sentences 20-25 cover all the functions or purposes that written or spoken sentences perform except the subjunctive function. Sentence 20 is an interrogation or quiz. It seeks affirmation or negation as the basis for action or the lack of it. As has been stated before, it is a leading declarative function that borders on the body language. It implicates in an informal, but assured manner, the unity of purpose or the collectivity of similar views. Sentence 22 is verbally declarative. It serves as a re-declaration in support of its non-verbal form in sentence 21. Note the use of double negative lexical items: "no" and "problem". This signifies emphasis which draws its strength and justification from preceding constructions. Note also the existence of the logical conclusive marker "then" which forms the basis, in sentences, for opinions, perception or action. Sentence 23 is, therefore, imperative: "Introduce democracy and let the Hausas rule forever." This syntactic construction betrays the hegemonic arrangement between the colonialist and the colonized. It is also ironical that 'democracy', a friendly term, should be 'introduced' amidst such surrounding harshness. Furthermore, to "rule forever" is eternally undemocratic. This exposes the inconsistency of the kind of government bequeathed to the anxious power-drunk indigenous political pace-setters in Nigeria. In sentence 24, the first person plural

subjective pronoun, “we”, when combined with the imperative modal auxiliary verb, “must” denotes collective obligation. But where there is in existence, a hegemonic arrangement, the use of “we” dismisses as the ‘royal we’ which is not inclusive in the real sense.

In another scene, the reader comes across a twist in the plot *Destination Biafra*. The involvement of the heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe and other women like Mrs Uzoma and Dorothy in the war efforts is depicted by Emecheta in the following verbal interaction. Note that Emecheta has meticulously developed the characters of these women to suit those of freedom fighters for both their gender and nation. It is through the lexical selection of words, syntactic constructions and rhetorical devices that the author portrays the horrors of war. The meanings and effects which are conveyed consist of a combination of verbal exchange among the various characters or participants in this discourse and the authorial stance.

**1.** “I am sorry about your husband. **2.** He was a good man. **3.** He talked to me as if he had known me all my life, I’m so sorry.” **4.** The woman nodded. **5.** “Thank you. I will blame myself for allowing us leave Benin. **6.** We could have hidden somewhere. **7.** Hmm, maybe he is luckier than the rest of us. **8.** I wish Abosi would call it a day. **9.** What difference does it make to us who rules up there? **10.** We still have to work, pay our taxes – why make us suffer like this? **11.** Now I have to bring up two boys and a girl alone...if we survive, that is.” **12.** “I’m sure we will all survive. **13.** With people starting to starve, Abosi would be stupid not to give in. **14.** I’m sure he’ll give in.” **15.** “Hmm,” sighed Mrs Madako, “You don’t know our people. **16.** “Do you think those at the top will starve? **17.** No, they are probably there drinking champagne. **18.** And as for the business men, they don’t want this war to end. **19.** You see that driver who brought us to the Benin-Agbo road? **20.** Well, he used to be an ordinary poor lorry driver, now, he’s a very wealthy man. **21.** He got a contract from the army to take his people across to Asaba.” **22.** “But he must have known that most of the people he was carrying were going to be killed,” Debbie said. **23.** Mrs Madako shrugged her shoulders. **24.** “Who can tell? **25.** He probably didn’t. **26.** Even if he did, he would convince himself that since he did not kill them he had nothing to worry about.” She sighed.... **27.** “I don’t know if that old lady will be able to make it,” breathed Mrs Madako, dragging her unwilling eight-year-old along. **28.** “I doubt it, but what are we to do? **29.** If we wait for them to catch up, those Nigerian soldiers will kill us all,” Debbie replied. **30.** “They won’t kill you.” Mrs Madako said. ... **31.** “How do you mean? **32.** Why do you think I am going to the East?” **33.** Mrs Madako smiled wryly,

“You over-educated people. who knows why you do anything?” (pp. 191-192, ch. 14)

Speech introducing devices, cognitive assertiveness, rhetorical questions, cognitive assertiveness, third person pronouns, *verba sentiendi*, repetitive structure, *ad hominem*, expressive, conative and representational use of pronouns, evaluative adjectives, nouns and words of perception remain the dominant linguistic items that adorn the excerpt above. A combined usage of possessive adjective and evaluative adjective in conjunction with representational pronouns are used by the speaker to pay tribute to the deceased – a victim of war. They include: “He was...”, “He talked...”, “...he had known...”. These pronouns refer to the antecedent “your husband”. The resort to the representational application of the third person singular is, perhaps, to make light the mournful circumstance of painful bereavement in time of war. It is, therefore, euphemistic. There is the presence of the repetitive structure “I am sorry” and “I’m so sorry” used to convey deep condolences. Sentences 5-7 embark on the use of the first person pronouns. Their usage is grammatically conative in that they draw attention to the speaker in her self-blame: “I will blame ...”, “*myself*”, “*us*”, “*We* could have....” Self-blame is an outcome of a confused state of mind brought about by the brutal emergency situations symptomatic of wars and blood shed. This trend continues in sentences 8-14.

The repetitive structure: “I am sure” in sentences 12 and 14 depict cognitive assertiveness used to express hope and optimism. Other lexical items in this regard include: “survive” (11-12), “I wish” (line 8) and so on. The two opposing forces of war leave in their wake opposing feelings in the minds of victims. On the contrary, there are language items that express doubt, despair and pessimism. They include: “...if we survive, that is”, “...starting to starve”, “...he’ll give in”, “call it a day”, “suffer like this....” These are imageries that Emecheta has ascribed to characters in the above interaction that make the reader feel the tension and the full impact of war right there in the comfort of his home. These severities of words and phrases convey a mixture of hope and despair in the face of excruciating hardship. What is revealed so far is a genuine act of rhetoric. This is owing to the preponderance of the expressive pronoun, ‘I’, the conative ‘you’ and the representational ‘he’ and ‘they’. Their presence underscores the existence of dialogue. This kind of dialogue implicates camaraderie; a feeling of oneness in suffering and sorrow.

Sentences 15-22 contain a lot of lexical, syntactic and semantic structures that express values and ideologies. Sentence 15 opens with Mrs Madako shrugging her shoulder. This is a non-verbal rhetorical device that borders on body language which Emecheta uses to depict near-complete frustration and resignation to a particular or set ideology. This is followed by a cognitive negative assertiveness “...you don’t know our people.” Sentences 16-17 contain a universal claim ushered in by a rhetorical



question. The question: “Do you think...? And “No, they are...” emanate from the same participant, Mrs Madako. It is, therefore, an intra-personal elliptical form. This is so because both the question asked and the response supplied emanate from the same source or participant. It is an attention-catching linguistic device. It is then followed by a series of logical connections that culminates in sentence 22. This portrays the different ideologies of war held by various characters. Sentences 16-17 paint a picture of leisure: “...drinking champagne” in the time of war by those at the top. Sentences 18-22 portray a business or economic ideology ushered in by a controversial assumption in sentence 18. “...they don’t want the war to end.” Mrs Madako’s rhetoric is one whose conclusion or assumption precedes the premise and its extension. In sentence 23, Debbie ushers in another ideology about war which is mass killings and death. It begins with a cognitive assertiveness: “But he must have known that...” Through the use of the pattern of Adj + Noun: “business men”, and the double use of adjectives plus noun: “ordinary poor lorry driver”, “very wealthy man” underscores the deepening sense of conflict in values among victims in a war situation.

Sentences 22-26 contain fallacious assumptions influenced by the pervading sense of pessimism which the negative incidents taking place in a war environment. Sentences 27-30 are littered with words and expressions that evoke pity, desperation and suffering. In sentence 28, the rhetorical expression “but what can we do?” depicts hopelessness. There are others such as: ‘kill you’, “kill us all”, “...dragging her unwilling eight-year-old” and “she sighed”. The issue Debbie Ogedemgbe’s reconciliation mission to the East is also captured in sentence 32 in a rhetorical tone: “Why do you think I am going to the East?” Through all the above language devices, Emecheta is able to paint a vivid picture of a terrifying war situation in the novel.

### **Summary of Findings**

For the above social interaction, the field of discourse is a dinner conversation involving Macdonald, the colonial governor of Nigeria, Alan Grey, a military attaché and Sir Fergus. It centres on how best the British administration in Nigeria should handle the issue of independence for the young Nigeria. The tenor of discourse involves three participants of almost equal social standing. The relationship that emerges from this interaction is a closer bond among friends and administrative colleagues. The mode of discourse is an interpersonal face to face interaction that is non-formulaic. It is delivered on the spur of the moment. It is persuasive and performative in that the aim is well achieved.

In order to interpret the social context of the above interaction, we shall look at Halliday’s three features of the context of situation under the sub-sections of the field, tenor and mode of discourse. The field of discourse is a conversation among some women passengers in an overcrowded mammy wagon that was helping them to escape from the approaching federal troops to Agbo from Benin in the night. The

conversation is on their sorrows at the loss of dear ones; their fears for their lives; their frustration against those at the top who do not appreciate the plight of the masses; and those who are benefiting economically from the war. The tenor of discourse, that is, the participants in the discourse or the parties in the interaction include Debbie, the heroine, the lady that has just lost her husband in the Benin massacre, Mrs Madako, dragging two toddlers along and Mrs Uzoma. Their relationship for now is temporary but has the potential of transforming into a solid camaraderie. It is an interpersonal or face to face exchange of feelings, experience and cognition with no one in particular taking control. In other words, it is members addressing one another. The mode of discourse is a social act verbally delivered with accompanying non-verbal acts like “shrugging of shoulders”, “smiling wryly”, and “sighing” (192). It is general (not formulaic) and versatile; allowing participants to relate to particular examples in their own personal manners of delivery. It is persuasive in that the discourse is geared towards persuading Abosi to end the war. The conversation also contains aspects in which the characters persuade one another to persevere.

### Conclusion

In fact, it is through the various linguistic devices applied by the participants in the above discourse that the hypocrisy of the ruling class is exposed. They are carried away both by leisure and power drunkenness. The linguistic items also reveal suffering and death among the masses – the real victims of the war. Emecheta carefully chooses some rhetorical devices to create special effects in the discourse. Note that the participants are mostly women dragging or carrying children, while the business men reaping from the war are mostly men. Also, the heroine is a woman. She is working with others like Dorothy and Mrs Uzoma for the emancipation of both their gender and the nation. All these meanings cohere with Emecheta’s worldview. It should be noted that the self-serving government which the colonial masters set up for Nigeria at independence in 1960 had the economic interest of Britain top on its agenda. Administrative incompetence, lack of vision and sectional interest was the order of the day among the Nigerian post-colonial leaders. By the adept maneuvering of linguistic structures and items at the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical devices, Emecheta is able to infuse meanings, effects which contain her vision of society which is peace, reconciliation and unity as opposed to war.

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