

LITERATURE



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Peculiarity in the Coinages, Collocations and Allusions in Wole Soyinka's *the Interpreters*

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ABSTRACT

Soyinka has often been labelled as an 'obscure' and 'difficult' writer. One text which helps in giving him this reputation is *The Interpreters* which has not enjoyed as wide a readership as other texts published at the same period. This paper is an attempt to delineate the peculiarities in the way Soyinka uses familiar literary devices and by so doing the paper argues that an understanding of these peculiar usage goes a long way in demystifying the text under study and to a large extent may serve as a clue to studying other works of the author. The paper uses the lexico-semantic approach in conjunction with the concept of the context of situation to examine samples of texts drawn from the novel. The analysis shows the language in the novel is characterised by peculiar collocations, coinages distorted idioms and some syntactic gymnastics. The paper demonstrates that the so-called obscurity could be erased if one understood Soyinka's pattern of gymnastics with words and sentence structure.

INTRODUCTION

No matter how relevant and important a written a message is, if it is not read, it cannot be communicated, and can, therefore, not achieve its purpose. The novel, *The Interpreters* written by Wole Soyinka is purported to be "obscure" and, therefore, 'difficult', consequently, it may not have been read by as many people as would be the case and its message may also not be as widespread. Many agree that Wole Soyinka's language is obscure, but in actual fact, he uses rare and personalized collocations, sometimes over-refined language, which, according to Olaniyan, makes the reader to shuttle 'between' the text and the dictionary with its accompanying loss of concentration' (p.101). Though one can identify with Olaniyan's view, the truth is that the dictionary may not solve the problem of incomprehension as he would want us to believe. This is because Soyinka's coinages, irregular collocations and phrases often break the rule of selectional restriction. It may

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be necessary to ruminate about what inspires Soyinka's choice of words and at times peculiar expressions.

Theoretical Framework

The systemic model of linguistics chosen for the analysis in this paper approaches language in terms of its functional usage. Secondly, it considers the context of situation which allows language use to be assessed in relation to the sociolinguistic factors surrounding its creation. The model also approaches language study descriptively and so would provide the tools to be used in describing and explaining the peculiarities in the language of the text. This is used in conjunction with the lexical semantics approach. Insights from lexical semantics help in highlighting lexical items based on their peculiarity. Such lexical items are placed under the lexico-semantic screen of selectional restriction, collocational expectations as well as sub-categorisation rules. The morphological constituents of peculiar lexical items are examined in order to determine their meaning and peculiarity in patterning.

This analysis is carried out using the context of situation as a backdrop within which the message becomes clearer and the meaning of lexical choices better appreciated. This is necessary because social forces inescapably form and condition the novelist and his work. No work of art, as it is often said, exists in a vacuum. The analysis is therefore carried out by a combination of insights from lexical semantics, context of situation with systemic linguistics providing the theoretical model. The analysis is carried out under the labels: coinages, irregular collocations and biblical allusions.

Coinages

There are two types of coinages in *The Interpreters* (Adejare 1992: p29). Type "A" are new items created from existing lexical structures in English and the manner in which they are constructed makes them unique. Type "B" is a product of a dislocation of fixed collocations. In describing Sekoni's (one of the characters in the text) mindset of hope and aspirations during his voyage home from his studies abroad, the idiom 'If Mohammed will not go to the mountain, then let the mountain come to Mohammed' was rearranged to 'If the mountain won't come, then let us to the mountain now, in the name of Mohammed'.

Type 'A' coinage is used here, 'In the name of Mohammed' is a Muslim equivalent of the Christian 'in the name of Jesus' that is used at the end of every Christian declaration or prayer. But Sekoni is born of Muslim parents so he uses 'in the name of Mohammed' instead.

Also on page 27, the coinage 'too-knows' was used in the sentence 'why do we employ these too-knows? This is derived from the original English, 'know -it- all'. The meaning of these two usages is the same. Whereas 'know -it- all' is a derogatory English name for a person who thinks he knows

everything, the expression, 'you-too-know' is used in Nigeria to refer to the same kind of person. This is also a type 'A' coinage. The writer exploits the local variety of English. This local variety is referred to as Nigerian English (NE). Sometimes NE is a translation of expressions in indigenous language into English. The following paragraph is an example of such expressions.

In explaining the meaning of kindred spirits to his messenger, Sagoe says it means we 'don't see eye to eye' which is a direct translation of the Igbo Expression, 'anya-anya' meaning 'reason alike'. (Anya means eye). The choice of which variety to use is governed by the context of situation. In the case, Mathias, Sagoe's messenger is not as educated as Sagoe and this necessitated the explanation.

Other examples are of peculiar collocations such as: missed nominations, thug recruitment, financial backing, ministerial in-lawfulness, ministerial poncing, general ass-licking, ministerial concubinage...' (p.77). 'Ministerial in-lawfulness' and 'concubinage' are coinages of the writer. These expressions give the reason people receive favours are being only the fact they have a relationship with those in positions of power, for instance, being made members of a board they have nothing to contribute to. The issue of god-fatherism in Nigeria is highlighted here. The writer is concerned about people occupying positions on the basis of who they know.

A coinage the meaning of which pervades the novel and helps in delineating the theme is the word 'voidante' and its derivatives: 'voidancy' and 'voidatory' (p.7).

'Voidante, voidancy and voidatory' are superfluous coinages whose meaning may be related to the word "void". These words are used throughout the text by Sagoe and on page 71 he attempts a not-so-clear definition of the terms. 'Voidante' can be understood to mean the person who 'voidates' or passes waste, 'voidancy' could mean the act of passing waste whereas 'voidatory could mean the place where it takes place. From the root word 'void' the following suffixes; -ante, -ancy; and -atory are attached. Within the context of the overall message or theme of the text, void takes on a philosophical meaning. It means corruption. Sagoe mentions that 'voiding' is not limited to his country alone but is also found overseas where, according to him, he had had some disciples (p.97). 'Voiding', therefore, is a universal philosophy.

Closely related to this concept of 'voiding' is the coinage, 'To shit is human but to voidate divine' (p. 156), a parody of 'To err is human to forgive, divine'. Here the writer not only involves human beings all over the world but includes divinities as well. The word 'Apostasy' discussed in the next paragraph further highlights this.

'Apostasy' is a word with roots in early Christian lexicon. It was used to refer to a change in religious faith, from one to another. Usually, it was used to refer to a conversion from Christianity to paganism. All through the text, the underlying message is that men and gods alike, like apostates, know the truth but fail to abide by it whether in respect of social, religious, political or economic norms. Sagoe knew the truth about Sekoni's case but failed to

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press further to publish the knowledge to secure Sekoni's vindication for fear of losing his job.

Another character, Egbo, despite his critical pose with respect to his society's decadence, seduces a young undergraduate and gets her pregnant. Professor Oguazor, who condemns the undergraduate student in question, has an illegitimate daughter 'tucked away' in England, away from public eye. Even the pantheon gods are not exempt. Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and creativity, leads his men to war but also slaughters them when he is in a bloodthirsty mood. This explains why Egbo is painted as Ogun. Egbo turns his back on the polygamy practised in his home in the creeks and refuses to be their chief but does not hesitate to take advantage of the student mentioned above.

Apostasy takes on a grander scale in the character of judge Derinola, otherwise called the Morgue. A man who is supposed to be a symbol of justice behind the bench does not fail to collect bribes from job seekers as the chairman of the board. In essence, both men and divinities have contributed to the filth called void or corruption. Soyinka uses the rude word 'shit' to refer to human filth and 'voidate' for that of the gods to underscore the fact that, the gods are also corrupt but theirs is shrouded in esotericism.

A picture of this universal phenomenon called 'void' is elaborately described in the following words: 'over fifty yards were spread huge potage mounds, twenty yards solid and running, plebian and political, indigenious and foreign shit. Right on the main road'(p.108).

It is characteristic of the author to address very important issues in a humorous manner but at the same time to draw attention to it. This satire pervades the novel, It reads like a satirical commentary on the author's society. This is only one of the several devices Soyinka uses to convey his message. Another significant one is the writers gymnastics with collocation.

Irregular collocation

No other statement in the text has the ability to confuse the first time reader of *The Interpreters* than the opening sentence of the novel: 'Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes'. Only a determined reader would brace up for the expected tumultuous ride while reading the text. The writer could have more have been more explicit but he chose not to be. 'Metal' should have been used to qualify chairs, for instance, 'metal chairs'. 'On' should have been 'dragged on' and 'concrete' should have been 'concrete floor. As it is, anyone who reads, 'Metal chairs dragged on concrete floor...' would understand without much mental exercise. In addition, 'drink lobes' has no literal equivalent in the human anatomy. One can only infer that 'lobes' which is the head-word of that nominal group is a part of the ear. And since it is the ear that is most likely to be affected by a metal chair being dragged on concrete, the inference seems in order. The problem now lies in the company 'lobes' is keeping. 'Drink' is a verb and a noun that may collocate with mouth and water, but the words 'mouth' and 'water' do not appear in the

above construction. It appears therefore to be out of place except if another interpretation is given. Just as the mouth drinks water, the ear drinks sound. When looked at from this angle, the utterance makes sense.

Another example of irregular collocation is the expression: 'Next to death, shit is the most vernacular atmosphere of the country' (p.108). The word "shit" in *The Interpreters* means literally, human waste matter or faeces. 'Vernacular', on the other hand, is a word or term meaning a language that is most widely used in a country. Putting the word together then appears to make no sense. One may be tempted to ask what the relationship between faeces and language is. The writer implies that corruption is as embedded in the society as the vernacular of a country can be.

Condensed language is a predominant feature of the writer's works probably, because of his background as a poet. An example of this is; 'Faceless janitors, pail-surmounted silences, short broomed swathing, flitting dust to dawn, the cherished emblems of a vintage air (p.108). The above words describe the actions of night-soil-men which the writer first calls janitors. Why? The purpose is possibly, to draw attention to secrecy. They come out at night. Secondly, they are not seen, only heard and most of the time their faces are hooded. They are unrecognized, therefore, 'faceless'. 'Pail-surmounted silences' analysed using the systemic grammatical rankscale is a nominal group with mh elements. The head word is 'silences' and the modifier is 'pail-surmounted'. This collocation is irregular as 'pail-surmounted'. Is not an adjective and does not co-occur with silences. It is used to refer to the silence that is induced by the smell of the waste matter being carried on the head. The holding of one's breath and silence are natural reactions to bad smell. 'Short-broomed swathing' is also a nominal group with 'swathing' as head. Short-broomed swathing is onomatopoeic and is got from the sound made by the broom used to sweep up split waste. This activity is said to be producing 'emblems of a vintage air'. This is sarcastic because 'vintage means the best kind of anything' but the air referred to here is anything but the best kind. On the other hand, these faceless janitors could also symbolize cleaners of society's corruption. It is in this regard that they can be perceived as 'cherished emblems of vintage air'.

Biblical allusion

Soyinka's references to the Bible are also peculiar. One example is Joe Golder, one of the minor characters in the text, who thinks he ought to be black because his progenitor is black but feels helpless because he has white skin which he detests very much. He practises all forms of mishap on his skin in a bid to make it dark but rather ends up being sun-burned. He confesses: 'I feel like Esau cheated of my birthright' (p.102), but Kola refuses to see Golder as Esau, the cheated one but as Jacob the deceiver who tries to impersonate Esau when he says: 'You look like Jacob with shop-soiled fur on his face'(p.102).

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Another example is 'Pontius Pilate on point duty.... continued to wash his hands in the stream of traffic' (p.144). This reminds the writer of the trials of Jesus in Matthew 27:24 of the Bible. Jesus had been brought before Pilate for judgement but though Pilate found him innocent, he failed to use his authority to set Jesus free. Rather, for fear of a public revolt, symbolically washes his hands in water in order to disassociate himself from the murder that was to be committed. The writer compares the attitude of the traffic warden at the scene of a mob action to this. He represents the authorities and has the power to save the thief who was about to be lynched by other thieves. The policeman, rather than do this, pretends to be very engrossed in his traffic control duties. In other words, he washes his hands in the stream of traffic.

Sometimes, the allusions used in the text seem to have little in common with the action within which they are inserted. For example, Egbo says; 'Who touched me?some goodness has gone forth from me' (p.123). These words were used by Jesus when he healed a woman who had had a haemorrhage for twelve years. She touched Jesus from behind and got healed instantly. Jesus, who had not seen her, knew that virtue had gone out of him so he turned round and asked the crowd the question. Egbo in the aftermath of the lovemaking with Simi felt he had lost his innocence. He was a virgin before that night. He likened his loss of innocence to the loss of virtue Jesus felt. Egbo later confesses that that line of 'thought was as sinful as the deed'.

Another example is: 'If this be sin. So-let come the wages, death' (p.127) is an allusion to Romans 6:23 which says 'The wages of sin is death...' Egbo expects instant chastisement from God for his act with Simi in accordance with his moral up-bringing. He waits for this with resignation ready to face whatever would be the outcome.

Human relationships in the Bible are compared to some relationships in the text. For instance the 'Plastic apple of his eye' (p.149) was used to describe Professor Oguazor's relationship with his daughter whom he got out of wedlock. This is an allusion to the Israel-God relationship. Oguazor delights in his daughter so she must be the apple of his eye. However, his home is decorated with plastic flowers and fruits to highlight his superficiality. And because of this taste for artificial fruits and flowers, his daughter is creatively described as the plastic apple of his eye. The modifier 'plastic' somehow detracts from the value the Professor places on his daughter and further emphasizes the insincerity in his character.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, it was stated that the lexical choices made by Soyinka are believed to be dense and difficult to understand. This paper has highlighted some lexical features that account for the supposed difficulty to include: coinages, irregular collocation and personalized biblical allusions.

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Soyinka's major characters are always involved in verbal exercises even when there is no immediate audience. Coinages were found to have evolved from two patterns: the forming of new words from existing lexemes and dislocation of existing collocational pairs. The religion the author has been exposed to provide most of the allusions which the writer uses in his peculiar way.

Soyinka tells his story through the words of his characters; the words are therefore, part of the character's portrait. The nature and depth of the character affects the language which the author imbues him with. Therefore, critics who accuse him of exerting too much linguistic manipulation should take into cognizance the characters in the novel. The major characters are well-read and accomplished in their field of endeavour and their language should naturally depict this.

In addition, the language used is a function of the theme, setting and context of situation. The theme of the novel is corruption, so the linguistic items are expressive of filth and decay. Soyinka's language may be difficult but it is not unreachable. It is justified within the context of its use.

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