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A Stylistic Exploration of Tanure Ojaides' *Narrow Escapes*, A Poetic Diary of the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

*Stylistic analysis deals with the art of using linguistic rules and regulations to characterise a genre of language use. Critical stylistics sets out to uncover how social meanings are manifested through language. This research work elucidates how language is part of creating world views by poets to convey social meanings. This research project focuses on the critical stylistic features identifiable in selected Tanure Ojaides' collection, *Narrow Escapes*. The data for the study were three randomly and purposively selected poems from Tanure Ojaides' poetic diary of the coronavirus pandemic, "Narrow Escapes". The poems were analysed using three tenets of the conceptual approach of Critical Stylistics—naming and describing, equating and contrasting, as well as syntactic frames. The study found that the poet uses proper nouns among other features for analogical creation, and other noun types for creating mental images in the minds of the readers and for accurate and precise description of the Covid-19 phenomenon. The poet also made use of spatio-temporal deixis, synonyms, antonyms, borrowing and specific figures of speech to achieve linguistic variation, and reflect his sociolinguistic background. In conclusion, the use of the critical stylistic approach to the analysis of the poems has helped to unravel the underlying poetic intents as well as the hidden meaning in the lines of the poems.*

Key words: Stylistics, Language Variation, Social Meanings, Covid-19 pandemic



Introduction

Language and style are the basic modes of communication and information. They center on words and utterances. The linguistic choice and pattern of a writer determines his style of language use especially in written and spoken text. Also, English is the second language of Nigerians and not everyone will be able to interpret and understand it according to the information they possess or rather, the linguistic knowledge they possess. The language of poetry is not direct, therefore, understanding poems is considered difficult. Over the years, stylistics, a linguistic approach which interprets texts of different categories from linguistic and literary perspectives, has been deployed for the analysis of poetic texts in quest of meaning simplification.

The core of any given stylistic study is the style of language use, especially language variation. As a discipline, it links literary criticism and linguistics, but has no autonomous domain on its own. Stylistics also attempts to establish principles capable of explaining the particular choices made by individuals and social groups with their use of language, such as

socialization, the production and reception of meaning, critical discourse analysis and literary criticism. Different individuals and groups of linguists, literary critics, anthropologists, and psychologists have diverse and peculiar ways of using language. Stylistics is therefore the art of using linguistic rules and regulations to characterise a genre of language use.

This study investigates the uniqueness of stylistics as it combines linguistic and literary elements. It is evident that there have been avalanche of literature in the area of stylistics over the years both literary and non-literary texts using both literary and linguistic approaches. For example, Gobir (2019), as well as Gobir and Ajepe (2019), examined the lyrics of songs of a Nigerian artiste, Innocent Idibia; and a transitional radio programme on Sobi FM through the lens of stylistics. Also, Olugbodi (2013), and Olugbodi and Oyedele (2024) studied soccer commentaries, UEFA final matches commentaries and Tweets from a stylistic perspective. These authors deployed different stylistic tools and approaches to evaluate language variation in diverse linguistic texts. In the same vein, there has been a dearth of



studies on Ojaide's poems. For instance, Zakariyah and Gobir (2019) as well as Zakariyah and Olugbodi (2023) evaluated selected Ojaide's poems in different poetry collections, "The Eagles' Vision" and "Songs of Myself" through the lenses of Socio-stylistics and Ecolinguistics.

Contrary to previous studies, the present study centers on the stylistic analysis of ten poems of Tanure Ojaide which are selected from his poetry collection, "Narrow Escapes". The researchers' set out to examine how different stylistic tools and triggers have been deployed in selected poems from Ojaide's poetry collection, to convey the intentions of the poet to potential audience in a simplified manner. More specifically, the objectives are to explore ways in which the poets' linguistic background has been integrated in the lines of the selected poems; and examine the significances of the stylistic elements as used in the poems towards meaning explication by potential readers.

Stylistics and Poetry

Stylistics simply aims at analysing the use of language to see how a writer's choice and arrangement of words have successfully communicated the intended message. The choice and

arrangement of words to express the desired meaning is therefore style and the study of this is stylistics. According to Simpson (2014), stylistics explores language and creativity in language use and its contribution towards meaning construction.

Stylistics communicates the rules of language because it often explores texts where those rules expanded to breaking point. Thus, doing stylistic analysis thereby enriches peoples' ways of thinking about language and exploring language offers a considerable purchase on peoples' understanding of literary texts. Norgaard, Busse, and Montoro (2010) are of the notion that stylistics is a linguistic approach to literature. As such, stylisticians have currently expanded the scope of their work considerably to include non-fictional pieces such as Advertising, Academic writing, News Reports as well as non-printed forms such as Television and Pictorial advertising, Film, multimodal publications, etc. in addition to fictional works, drama, prose and poetry.

Wordsworth (1979) defines poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The uniqueness of human experience is largely responsible for the varied and often



controversial responses or reactions to poetry. Dasyuva & Jegede (2005) explains that what distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature is its exploitation of the resources of language and music. In other words, the distinguishing features of poetry are both intrinsic. The exploitation is intense, more frequent and more discriminate than we have in other forms of literature (p.5).

Poetry, as a form of literature, often mirrors the social, political, economic or cultural context which produces it. Poetry is a form of literature that uses language in a special way. It is the expression of intense feelings in a very imaginative way. There are endless varieties of forms of human culture which have given rise to different poetic cultures among which are the narrative culture which gives birth to narrative poetry, a type of poem which tells a tale in verse, and usually from an omniscient point of view. Another is satire, from which satirical poem emanates, this type of poem comments on human experiences. They lampoon the follies or vices of men by the use of exaggeration, ridicule, sarcasm, irony, and humor for the purpose of reducing the subject to absurdity. Next is a lyric, from which lyrical poetry emerges.

Lyrical poems are composed with the mind to produce songs or music with a relatively fixed form. Lyrics are normally short, and between eight and hundred lines. Education is another aspect of the human life, hence, the emergence of didactic poetry. The purpose of a didactic poem is principally to teach a lesson. This can take the form of very precise instructions. Lastly is the dramatic way of life of humans which gives birth to dramatic poetry. According to Dasyuva (2005), dramatic poetry is usually written in dramatic monologue. Monologue as opposed to dialogue involves only the poetic voice (persona) presumed to be addressing, or responding to someone else (unseen). It is done in such a way that only the poetic voice is heard, and through whose address, response or reaction, it is possible for the audience to imagine what the unseen addressee might likely be saying.

The highlighted forms of poetry which emanate from the ways of life of humans as described in the foregoing have specific styles (both structure and language) which are peculiar to them. These distinct attributes constitute the description of each of the poetic forms and types. To this end, one can say that



stylistics and poetry shares a special boundary as poetry deploys stylistic resources to convey underlying senses. Both stylistics and poetry deploy both linguistic and literary resources to function and achieve their goals.

Critical Stylistics

In stylistics, Fowler (1986), was one of the first and most prominent proponents of linguistic criticism, an extension of which is critical stylistics. In linguistic criticism, he explores phenomena such as the representation of experience through language, meaning and world view, the role of the reader as well as the relations between text and context. Critical Stylistics is a term used to refer to Stylistic work investigating the ways in which social meanings are manifested through language. The stylistic tendency is largely inspired and informed by critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) further posits that stylistics puts text at the center of its activity. This is true of Critical Stylistics as an approach to stylistics. Critical stylistics, according to Jeffries (2010), analyses texts in terms of textual conceptual meaning to uncover the ideological aspects of

a text. It aims to analyse both literary and non-literary texts to reveal how texts show the reality to the reader or the hearer.

Jeffries (2016), in *The Bloomsbury companion to Stylistics*, demonstrates that critical stylistics depends on textual conceptual functions that reveal a level of meaning between linguistic structure and its use in context. The scope of Jeffries' Critical Stylistics is the achievement of what Halliday describes as the ideational meta-functions of language. It elucidates how language is part of creating world views. Critical stylistics which is inspired and informed by insights from Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is described by Norgaard et al (2010) as a term used to refer to stylistic work which investigates the ways in which social meanings are manifested through language. However, both Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is set out to uncover how social meanings such as power, ideology are expressed through language and how language and how language in this respect may impact on the way we perceive the world.

The tools of critical stylistics include Naming and Describing,



Representing Actions/Events/States, Equating and Contrasting, Exemplifying and Enumerating, Prioritising, Implying and Assuming, Negating, Hypothesising, Presenting the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants, and Representing Time, Space and Society. These tools attempt to uncover ideologies implied by the linguistic choices that text producers make (Tabbert, 2013, p.77).

Methodology

This essay focuses on a stylistic analysis of selected poems in Tanure Ojaides' collection, "Narrow Escapes" from a stylistic perspective. The study adopted a qualitative research method. The poems were selected randomly and purposively as they relate to the topic of Covid-19 pandemic and its trend. The idea was that the selected poems would give a purview of what the poet is trying to communicate and the world created by the poet through the depictions of characters and situations in the poem, "Narrow Escapes". The study adopted the Critical Stylistic Approach and the poems were analysed using the tenets of Critical Stylistics which are: naming and describing, exemplifying and enumerating, equating and

contrasting, implying and assuming, representing time, space and society.

Data Synopsis

This section presents and highlights the data collected for this research work from Tanure Ojaides' "Narrow Escapes". Three poems have been chosen from this collection and they are: *Baba and Nene*, *What They Said*, and *Narrow Escapes*. In *Baba and Nene*, the poet paints scenery of the situations and circumstances in different domains during the Covid-19 pandemic. *What They Said* centers on how large gatherings like the Dunamis church, a mega church in Abuja was closed for worship and also the traditional market and *Agbarhos'* biweekly main market were shut down as a preventive measure from the spread of corona virus. "What They Said" reflects on the possibility of lack of control over the convergence of the group of market dwellers. Lastly, *Narrow Escapes* thematically explores of the effect of Covid-19 Pandemic. It captures the whole events during the pandemic as a "narrow escape".

Data Analysis

In datum one, entitled, *Baba and Nene*, the poet described



situations and circumstances in different domains through the tools of CSA, naming and describing. The use of nominals in the poem is for analogical variation. Different types of nouns are used, especially proper nouns, common nouns and abstract nouns. Each of these nouns types are exemplified as follows:

Proper Nouns: *Baba, Nene, China, America, Ovu, Okpara, Milan, Madrid, London, New York.*

Common Nouns: *twin, world*

Abstract Nouns:
Playground, workplace, space, convergence, world, ogre, hoax,

season

Apart from nouns, here and there, which are spatio-temporal deixis are used as nominals. Baba and Nene refer to two different tribes of the Nigerian origin which are Hausa and Igbo. There is the use of *China and America* also for analogy. The use of *Ogre* and *Hoax* is Euphemistic. These are all exemplified in the lines of the poem as follows:

*Understandably, here and there
but what touches Baba there
will inevitably befall Nene here*

China is far from here

but what started there wouldn't end

Until in America I witness firsthand

that the ogre isn't the hoax from afar

There and here have collapsed into one ***space***

Baba is here, Nene is there

The road that runs through Ovu inevitably affects Okpara:

What lands in Milan, Madrid, and London flies to New York!

but what afflicts Nene in a distant world

We aren't the same but stranded in one ***season***

Season, in the line above simply describes the covid-19 pandemic. *Playground* and *workplace* have different purposes, they are hyponymy of places. Similarly, *boiled or roasted* are hyponyms, they are also used for analogy of food items. *Corn* represents the one nation, despite the variation in color, culture, background, etc of the Africans, covid-19 pandemic affect every nation the same way. This is exemplified in the lines below:

*The playground
and workplace of
one experience
Boiled or roasted,*



*corn gets heated to
be done*

The features of equating and contrasting that abound in the poem, *Baba and Nene*, include synonymy, antonymy and the use of figurative expressions such as personification. Antonyms in the poem include: “today and tomorrow”, “far and near”, “boiled or roasted”, “here and there”, *Baba and Nene*, “and started and end”, which are converse and reverse opposites, while *here and there*, *far and near*, refer to the antonyms of place and “Playground and workplace” are contextual synonyms.

*but
today and tomorrow are bound to be
different*

*There’s
convergence of far and near*

*Undeniably,
here and there aren’t the same
measure*

*Boiled or
roasted, corn gets heated to be done*

Personification is another device for equating deployed by the poet in *Baba and Nene*. The poet uses this device to show that the corona virus pandemic has its own way of affecting human beings, e.g., “The sun exercises suzerainty over every day”. Apart from personification, specific

syntactic frames such as sentence types are also deployed. Simple sentence, compound sentence, and compound-complex sentences were used in the lines of the poem.

Simple sentence-

*Understandably, here and there aren’t
the same measure*

Compound sentence-

*China is far from here but what
started there wouldn’t end*

*- We aren’t the same but
stranded in one season*

Complex sentence-

Until in America, I witness firsthand

*Compound-
complex sentence- “The sun exercises
suzerainty over every day but*

*today and tomorrow
are bound to be different”*

The significance of simple sentence is to express the simplicity and completeness of thought and perspective towards the situation of the pandemic. The significance of the compound sentence is for specifications, “China is far from here but what started there wouldn’t end”. The use of varying sentence types is meant to indicate flow of thoughts; it relates the poets’ experiences. Another lexico-syntactic frame used in the poem, *Baba and Nene* is



borrowing. Words are borrowed from two different tribes, Hausa and Igbo languages.

But what touches

Baba* *there*

will inevitably befall

Nene* *here*

The second poem under consideration in this study is *What They Said*. The poem centers on how large gatherings like the Dunamis church, a mega church in Abuja was closed for worship and also the traditional market and *Agbarhos'* biweekly main market were shut down as a preventive measure from the spread of corona virus. "What They Said" reflects on the possibility of lack of control over the convergence of the group of market dwellers.

In *What They Said*, elements of naming and describing used by the poet include common nouns, proper nouns and abstract nouns for accurate and specific descriptions. *Congregation* is used to classify humans according to their act, while *Sunday* is used to contextualise one of the meeting days. *Dunamis Church* as used in the line of the poem explains further the name of the place of worship. *Agbarho*, the name of a popular market in Abuja, Nigeria is also exemplified for the

justification of the claims of the poet. The common nouns used in the poem include: *power, congregation, Sunday, folks, market, and evening*. The proper nouns are *Dunamis, Church, Agbarho*, while the abstract nouns is *prayers*.

No **power** could keep the millennial **congregation** out, they said.

Today is **Sunday** and **Dunamis Church** is never closed for worship.

Folks said the traditional **market** never closes or gets postponed.

I wondered when I didn't hear the call for **evening prayers**.

The features of equating and contrasting are deployed in the poem to create symbolism through parallel structures. The features of equating and contrasting as used in the poem are as follows:

Intensive relational equivalence- *never closes or gets postponed*

Negated Opposition- *I now know established order cannot always remain*

sacrosanct.

From the lines of the poem, intensive relational equivalence as



well as negated opposition are used to convey equating and contrasting views. In the first instance, postponement or closing down is the two situations that can stop the market from its buying and selling, but the people had already predicted that none of it can happen. The syntactic frames used in the poem, *What They Said* are compound and complex sentences. The implication of these types of sentences as used in the poem is to create continuous flow of thoughts, hence, the use and lack of use of the conjunction, "and" as the case may be.

*Today is Sunday and
Dunamis Church is closed for worship
Those who see
tomorrow know why they aren't easily
surprised*

*...An unimagined
catastrophe can happen and disrupt
so*

Like in the first two poems, *Baba and Nene* and *What They Said*, in the poem, *Narrow Escapes*, the stylistic features used for naming and describing are common nouns, proper nouns, collective nouns and abstract nouns. These noun categories are used for the purpose of accuracy and precision in the poem. They describe the persona the poet represents in his image in terms

of family, friends and relatives that got infected with the coronavirus. Most of these nouns constitute the lexicons/ registers of the Covid-19 pandemic. The nouns are exemplified as follows:

Proper Nouns- *Son,*

Child, Charlotte, Covid-19, New York

Common Nouns-

*Cousin, colleague, ward, circle,
relative, litany, sliver,*

ventilator, respirator.

Collective Nouns-

Survivors, relatives, family

Abstract Nouns-

*Week, test. *

Most of the nouns used in the poem as exemplified above are registers associated with Covid-19. The terms are commonly used to resuscitate the victims e.g., respirator, ventilator and ward.

My first cousin lived a week on a ventilator in New York where

My colleagues only child fought to remain alive in his deadly ward.

My friends' family racked with his sons' positive test in Potomac

and another kinsman just came out of a respirator in Charlotte.



Covid-19 has
breached my circle of close friends
and relatives

Features of equating and contrasting that abound in the data include antonyms, most of which are comparative oppositions, which are meant to create words of strong lexical qualities. An example is “*alive in his deadly ward*”. *Alive* and *dead* are antonyms but the poet depicted the isolation ward as deadly. The Syntactic Frames used in the poem, *Narrow Escapes* include rhetorical question. Rhetorical question is used in the poem to create meanings through comparison

*“Who says this litany
of survivors does not hit me enough
with them escaping
narrowly than almost
caught by a*

Other syntactic frames used in the line of the poem are compound-complex sentences. The poet made use of compound-complex to indicate his mood and pour his mind towards the justification of his assertion.

*-My first friends’
family racked with his sons’ positive
test in Potomac and
another kinsman just came
out of a respirator.*

-Who says this litany

*of survivors does not hit me enough
with them escaping
narrowly than almost caught
by a sliver?*

Results and Discussion

Critical Stylistic features have been used by the poet in the selected poems under evaluation to reveal ideologies behind the phenomenon of Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the poet used the equating and contrasting tool to construct meaning textually. Also, this fulfilled part of the first research question. To make a striking impression on the readers and stir their emotions, nothing else could be done to achieve this purpose than employing the right and appropriate use of language. Both of equating and contrasting have certain syntactic triggers or linguistic realizations that identify them. Ojaide made use of spatio-temporal deixis, synonyms, antonyms, borrowing and specific figures of speech to achieve linguistic variation, reflect his sociolinguistic background and stir the emotions of readers.

This study has shown that there is more to poetry in terms of message and content than what obtains when a piece of writing is merely written by the poet and read



by the reader responsively. It was found out that the poet made use of simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, and compound-complex sentences. From the analysis, it was discovered that most of the sentences used by the poet were to point to and reprimand issues that deals with the society, the country, and the continents of the world at large. It is not stylistics that is radical, what is radical is the one reading one can make out of the text. Critical stylistics elucidates how part of creating world views. Critical linguistics is set out to uncover how social meanings such as power, ideologies are expressed through language and how language in this respect may impact on the way we perceive the world.

Conclusion

This work has been able to subject the selected three poems from Tanure Ojaides' "Narrow Escapes- A poetic diary of the Coronavirus pandemic" using the tools of Jeffries' (2010) Critical Stylistics including elements of naming and describing, equating and contrasting, and syntactic frames to bring out the ideological imprints to the goal of the poems. This study has explored what constitutes the style

of poetry. An examination of poetry emphasises the interdependence and inseparability of language and its context of use, just like stylistics and poetry. On account of the data analysis, the following submissions are made: that the language to relate human experiences, create beauty out of the terrible experiences during the coronavirus pandemic and keep readers memory alive post pandemic. The choice of words by the poet plays a very important role in this case. It helps the reader to understand the message the poet is trying to pass across. Stylistics, as the conceptual basis for this study has shown that there is a distinction between poetic and non-poetic language as a means of defining literature, language manipulated in ways that signal it as different from "ordinary" language.

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