

## LEXIS AND STYLE IN TANURE OJAIDE'S *DELTA BLUES AND HOME SONGS*

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### **Abstract**

This paper, lexis and style in Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, examined how meaning is negotiated through the use of cohesive devices and other stylistic features in the text. Previous studies have concentrated on phoric relations in the text as well as on the text's treatment of environmental issues without much attention paid to how cohesive devices coalesce in the text to produce meaning. Data for the study comprised five poems purposively selected from Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*. Also, the study undertook a qualitative research procedure. Equally, since the paper focused attention on the use of language (lexical choices) to address social situations, the theoretical base adopted was Halliday and Hasan's (1976) Cohesion Theory. The research discovered that style and meaning are inseparably linked. This was revealed through the assessment of the author's deployment of cohesive devices like reiteration, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy as well as the stylistic features of hypotaxis and parataxis. The paper was concluded with the notion that by the author's placement of cohesive and stylistic features in the foreground, meaning in the text became more pronounced and clearly underlined.

### **Introduction**

Language, which is a purely human attribute, is a primary instrument of communication between people in the society. It is a means by which humans carry out activities, exchange shared beliefs and thoughts and as well ponder on their individual and collective experiences. Etuk and Urujzian (2018: 87) support this view when they acknowledge that,

“humans use language, in a distinct way, to communicate their feelings, desires and beliefs. This is to say that humans can use language to create what they think and feel”. Similarly, Etuk and Akpan (2023) aver that language reveals the thought pattern, beliefs and consciousness of an individual or a community of people. One of the functions of a literati is to employ the tools of language in a creative manner to document history, tell stories that reflect societal experiences, and above all, educate, inform and give aesthetic pleasure to readers. Nathaniel and Akung (2022:7) corroborate this view when they avow that “Language is the basic material for literature” Writers, in the process of displaying creativity, craft a new taste in language by introducing, creating or forming new words, colouring and flouting rules of grammar in order to make it more potent for an intended result.

While writing a text, writers also employ various linguistic devices to effectively organise the different parts of their work in order to achieve unity, clarity and meaning. According to Ezeife (2016: 50), “by writing literature, people communicate ideas and feelings. By reading literature, people share in and assess these ideas and feelings”. Ideas and feelings incorporated into works of art by a writer can be best interpreted by a reader if the writer has been able to effectively utilise linguistic devices that give shape to a text and enhance the interpretation of meaning inherent in a text. Thus, a study of written texts reveals features of language used in the development of a text. Such features, which could be cohesive devices, are usually employed in a way that ensures that words, phrases, clauses and sentences achieve coherence in a text. Halliday and Hasan (1976) submit that it is the texture a text possesses that differentiates it from an arbitrarily assemblage of sentences; a text with texture is that whose parts are connected by cohesive devices within the text. The thrust of this paper is to examine how cohesive devices as well as the stylistic features of parataxis and hypotaxis employed in the text under study have assisted in the explication of meaning. Data for this study comprise the poems: “My drum beats itself”, “When green was the lingua franca”, “Delta blues”, “Dream love”, and “Dirge” retrieved from Ojaide’s *Delta blues and home songs*.

### **Cohesion and Discourse**

Textual analysis has since had its focus shifted “from sentence-based perspectives to more of a discourse-based perspective” (Paltridge, 2006: 127). This is in line with the views of Hughes and Mccarthy (1998) who

assert that in the analysis of longer texts, including any of the genres of literature, traditional rules of grammar are largely inadequate. The emergence of cohesion theory from *Cohesion in English* by Halliday and Hasan (1976) has resulted in research bothering on the examination of the different situations of cohesion and coherence in texts. Halliday and Hasan (1976) have devoted interest to the study of how grammatical patterns are organised to trigger meaning and as well link the text to the social context in which it springs out from; that is, grammatical items which form a network to ensure a text is cohesive and has unity of texture. For instance, lexical items like “there” and “those” which refer to things outside of the text, could have their meaning fully recoverable when placed in the social context in which the text is established. Therefore, patterns of cohesion in texts are an aspect of language in which grammar and discourse are closely connected.

Akpan (2013) notes that cohesion could be realised at two levels: grammatical and lexical. Grammatical cohesion has to do with “the structural content” while lexical cohesion “refers to the language content of the piece” (31). Several factors aid the identification of a cohesive text. These general classes, as identified by Halliday and Hasan, (1976) are: reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion. This paper concentrates only on how a selection of vocabulary creates coherence in the text under study. Hence, focus shall be on lexical cohesion as well as on the stylistic devices of parataxis and hypotaxis.

Lexical cohesion involves the deployment of lexical items with the intent of creating unity of text and discourse. Lexical cohesion is achieved when a speaker or writer deliberately or unintentionally employs certain words that meet their communicative needs. When the words used in the text have associative meanings with one another, the text is said to be coherent as a result of lexical cohesion. Several scholars have classified different items as kinds of lexical cohesion. This paper ignores extensive classifications such as that postulated by Hoey (1998) but agrees with the submissions of Halliday and Hasan (1976) supported by Paltridge (2006) that lexical cohesion has the following as its main kinds: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy and collocation.

Repetition, sometimes known as reiteration, is a reoccurrence of a lexical item previously used in a text. For instance, in the expressions: “Dr Udoette

has a cat. The cat is troublesome”, the ‘cat’ in the second sentence has a referential link with that of the first, establishing a cohesive tie and indicating that it is one cat that is talked about. Repetition also accommodates words whose form has been changed to account for number and tense and words retrieved from particular lexical items such as Veronica and Vero used in a certain text to refer to the same person.

Synonymy is a cohesive device which refers to the use of two or more different words in a text, where the meaning of these words is similar. For instance, in the expression “I love ladies. Those daughters of Eve give me delight”, “ladies” and “daughters of Eve” refer to one item. This device enhances coherence in a text; for in writing, it is a poor style to continuously use the same lexical item in a text. Antonymy is a system of association between two lexical items with opposite or contrastive meanings. “Pain” and “pleasure” or “church” and “mosque” could establish contrastive meanings and, in a way, depict the relationship that exists between the lexical items. These meanings become noticeable as the terms are used in the text. A part of the meaning of these words is deduced from this oppositeness.

Hyponymy is the establishment of a semantic relation of ‘general-specific’, ‘an example of’ or ‘class to member’ between lexical items. For instance, “hibiscus” and “rose” are co-hyponyms of the superordinate term “flower”. Meronymy is also the establishment of a semantic relation of “whole to part” between lexical items. For instance, the items “crown” and “throne” are co-meronyms of the superordinate term “rulership”.

Collocation is another kind of lexical cohesion. Collocation describes the relationship between lexical items which habitually co-occur. McCarthy (1991: 4) supports this assertion when he describes collocation as “a natural combination of words; it refers to the way English words are closely associated with each other”. Collocation could involve the combinations of adjectives and nouns, as in the “best move” and “real-estate agent”. It could equally include the combinations of verbs and nouns such as “suck” and “breast” and “lick” and “ice-cream”. It can, as well, involve lexical items which naturally co-occur such as “boys” and “girls” and “law” and “crime”. In fact, collocation is “one of the factors on which we build our expectations of what is to come next” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 333). As

a result of the use of these words, there is unity of text or discourse. This is in accordance with the fact that,

each occurrence of a lexical item carries with it its own textual history, a particular collocational environment that has been built up in the course of the creation of the text and that will provide the context within which the item will be incarnated on this particular occasion (Halliday, 1994: 289).

In this case, collocation is not confined to a single text but is a component of textual knowledge as a whole. It is expected of every speaker and writer of a language to fall back on this knowledge of collocations as they encode. Owing to the fact that it is not all lexical items that collocate, it behoves on every writer and speaker to know that while, for instance, “bright” and “morning” collocate, “bright” and “evening” do not. This idea of collocation is one of the means by which a text achieves texture.

Another type of association connected to collocation, is expectancy relations (Paltridge, 2006). This takes place where there is a link between a verb and either the subject or the object of the verb. This association establishes a bridge between nominal elements and verbal elements (example, plait/hair, cast/a vote or a spell). They can also associate an action with an agent (example, ask/guy) or an activity with a place or location (example, sporting/club). Expectancy relations can also refer to the association between single words and the resultant nominal group that they build (example, life/lessons, online/dating).

Interestingly, Halliday (1994) and Zhou (2007) label collocation the most elusive kind of lexical cohesion because almost all lexical items have an associative relationship with one another. Zhou (2007) refuses to include collocation as a part of an academic curriculum because of its complex nature. The elusiveness and complexity of collocation become obvious when examining lexical items. This is where their boundaries and association could become fuzzy. In this case, examination of the role of collocation to lexical cohesion seems less objective. However, Halliday (1994: 289) notes thus: “it is the occurrence of the item in the context of related lexical items that provides cohesion and gives to the passage the quality of text. The relatedness is a matter of more or less, there is no

clearly cut-off point”. Schmitt (2002) has attempted to clear the bickering over collocation by stating that the co-occurrence of words may not be interpreted in terms of their extra-linguistic reference but rather the contextual relationship of the words. This assertion resolves the numerous queries over collocation as it suggests that there is some sort of lexico-semantic association between collocates or a connectedness in the system of linguistics.

### **Style and stylistics**

“Style”, from the Latin word “stillus”, refers to a manner of carrying out an activity with further consciousness (Chapman, 1974). Holman (1979) views style as the conscious placement of words in a way that suggests the linguistic thumbprint of the author as well as the message and purpose of the text. In this case, Holman (1976) sees style as a collection of two items: the content or idea expressed and the author’s manner of writing or speaking. Schor (1980) and Enkvist (1987) both define style as recurrent items in a text intentionally used by the author in achieving a purpose. Kane and Peters (1980) are of the opinion that art is intricately interwoven with style. They aver that irrespective of the subject of discussion, an artist must make do with a specific style that supports his/her purpose. In line with this assertion, Leech and Short (1985: 13) enthuse that:

style is rarely undertaken for its own sake, simply as an exercise in discussing what use is made of language. We normally study style because we want to explain something, and in general, stylistics has implicitly or explicitly the goal of explaining the relation between language and the writer’s purpose.

From the foregoing, therefore, style is a combination of the manner and purpose of expressing an idea by an author or a group of authors.

Quite noticeable in the data under study is the author’s recurring use of the stylistic features of parataxis and hypotaxis to achieve his intended aim. Both parataxis and hypotaxis refer to sentence structures and especially the way different sentence structures associate with one another. Through the deployment of these style techniques, readers get the opportunity to detect the hint concerning the writer’s tone, mood and seriousness. In parataxis, the sentence structures are all equal. Even when the clauses are not many,

the important point is that the clauses are not subordinated to another. Thus, parataxis refers to the employment of only alpha clauses in sentence construction, where in this case, all sentence parts are equal and important. Here is an example of parataxis: “there were no vacant offices in the department. The lecturers were asked to make their cars their offices. Lecturers without cars were to stay under trees. These lecturers without cars prayed against rain on daily basis. One day it rained. They were all very disappointed”. Since these structures are all equal, it is difficult to ascertain the most part of the discourse. This equality in the sentence structures makes the tone of the writing flat and uncompromising and also leaves these set of utterances direct and declarative.

On the other hand, hypotaxis has to do with the subordination of some clauses to others in a text. Since the sentence structures are not of equal parts, in hypotaxis there is a clear indication of the clause that deserves attention as well as the emotional angle of the piece of writing. Here is an example of hypotaxis: “Because she did not want to marry him, she terminated her pregnancy. While he perceived the stomach was protruding, she knew she had played a fast one on him. As days went by, she kept rehearsing what she would tell him”. The effect of subordination, in this example, provides an emotional atmosphere and a signal of the important clauses. While none of the stylistic choices is better than the other, the device of parataxis and hypotaxis arms the writer with two styles which could be used to tell either the same or different stories.

### **The poet: Tanure Ojaide**

Tanure Ojaide is a creative writer and literary critic known for his biting criticism of imperialism and environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. He is best known as a socio-political and eco-critical poet. Ojaide is a Nigerian who was born to Urhobo parents from Okpara inland in Agbon Kingdom of Delta State. Ojaide had his secondary education at Federal Government College, Warri before acquiring his degree in English from the University of Ibadan. His M.A. degree in Creative Writing as well as his PhD were acquired from Syracuse University. He has taught at several universities in the world.

Tanure Ojaide has published several poems and critical works, some of which are: *Children of Iroko and Other Poems*, *Labyrinths of the Delta*, *When It No Longer Matters Where You Live and Other Poems*, *The Fate of*

*Vultures* and *Endless Songs*. The Data under study, *Delta Songs and Home Songs*, beams its searchlight on the Niger Delta, a region from which the writer hails. In the anthology, Ojaide employs imagery to mirror the miasma of death and decay that characterise the Niger Delta environment, society and also the lives of the people. Taking the reader down memory lane when at his childhood there was fecundity: the tall, green trees beautified and protected the ecosystem, the fishes in the river were for the peoples' daily bread and the fertile land was for cultivation, Ojaide contrasts this verdure with the aridity that best describes the present Niger Delta. The author presents the people of the Niger Delta as those who are denied their land, their livelihoods, and their culture by the oil companies and successive dictatorial regimes. In an interview with Sarah Osborne published online on 5/3/2016, Ojaide who now lives outside Nigeria asserts:

sometimes it is easier to ignore a problem because it is not right before our eyes. Due to a distance by land, we excuse the distance by heart. People who are struggling become numbers and statistics that we glance over, consider for a moment, and then forget about. Humanity is lost somewhere in the calculation of numbers. It is often in poetry that we manage to capture the human soul. That which cannot be quantified or simplified becomes exemplified and immortalized in the written word.

It is this theme of environmental degradation and dearth that resonates in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide.

### **Data Analysis**

Lexical cohesion occurs when there is an established connection between words which possess meaning: verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives. The following kinds of lexical cohesion: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and collocation, will be examined in the text under study to ascertain the writer's intent or purpose.

### **Hyponymy**

This is a semantic relation holding between lexical items and denoting that there is a superordinate word catering for subordinate items. In "My Drum Beats Itself", the poet employs this device to foreground his motivation for



writing the poetry. The superordinate term, “music”, revealed in the second stanza of the poem has the following co-hyponyms, “drum”, “beats”, “sound”, “lines”, “chant”, “griot”, “bird song”, “carnival” and “sing”, which assist in establishing a semantic relation with it. This “music”, which refers to the motivation behind the poet’s creativity, is performed by invisible forces that overwhelm the poet. Again, it is through the device of hyponymy that this is revealed. Thus, the superordinate term, “underworld” or “world beyond” has a relationship with the following co-hyponyms: “dead” and “spirit” as found in the poem.

The device of hyponymy is also used in the poem, “When green was the lingua franca” to celebrate the beauty of nature which had bestowed on the people of the Niger Delta both flora and fauna before “explosions of shells to under/mine grease-black gold/drove the seasons mental/and to walk on their heads” (lines 53-6; stanza 6). Here, the superordinate terms identified are: “animals” and “plants” while their co-hyponyms are: “fish”, “earthworm”, “snail”, “froglets” and “grapes”, “apple”, “cherries”, “breadfruit”, “cotton”, “gum” respectively. These examples of hyponymy as used in the data depict relationship of inclusion where small items are a part of the larger set thereby achieving cohesion.

### **Synonymy**

The term denotes words with a similar or almost similar meaning which can be used in place of another in a text. The following are some of the instances of synonymy as used in the poem “Delta blues”: “paradise/home”, interchangeably used in the data to describe the Niger Delta region before the degradation of the environment by foreign oil companies; “Delta/hurt”, to show how “delta” which the poet calls his home and paradise has become a place that causes hurt, where the term “hurt” is a play on the word, “hut”; and “river/course” to signify one of the treasures of the region. In “Dream love”, the poet also employs synonymic pairs to describe a stranger who lies that she is related to the persona but later turns out to be the one that betrays the poet persona. In the poem, this “stranger/ false relative” is referred to as “lady/she” and “girl/she”. From the examples above, it is glaring that these synonymic pairs are guided by context; that is, the meaning of a lexical item as gleaned from how the item is used in the text.

### **Antonymy**

Antonymy expresses oppositeness in meaning. It is a semantic relation that occurs between words that can (in a given context) present contrasting meanings. In “Delta blues”, the semantic relation of oppositeness is expressed in terms of participants, location, natural habitats/phenomena, circumstances and experience. For participants, the following antonymic pairs are employed: “hosts/guests”, “aborigines/prospectors” referring to the Niger Delta people and the imperialists; “dogs/protesters”, referring to the Nigerian law enforcement officers and the people of the Niger Delta who regularly protest over the degradation of their environment; “me/others” referring to the poet persona who represents his people versus the exploiters who work against the interest of his people. For location, the lexical items in a relation of oppositeness are: “paradise/wound” referring to the Niger Delta before and after oil was discovered in the region; “north/south, east/west” referring to the entire nation’s dependence on the proceeds of oil from the Niger Delta region.

Other lexical items in a relation of oppositeness referring to natural habitats/phenomena, circumstances and that summing the experiences of the Niger Delta people are: “plants/birds”, “waters/sunstroke”, “air/soil”, “sea/bush”; “evergreen/youthful”; and “pain/fortune” respectively. The examples above confirm that in the data antonyms are employed in complementary relationships. This semantic relationship of antonymic items, enhance cohesion and as well trigger comprehension and interpretation.

### **Repetition**

Repetition is the consistent use of words to achieve a particular aim. As a cohesive device, repetition involves the use of the same word or phrase for emphasis or embellishment. Function words may be repeated in many instances but they may not be as relevant as content words which play a big role in making a text coherent. In the data under study, the poet makes multiple use of this rhetorical device. For instance, the item, “*iyé*” is repeated twenty-four times in the poem “My drum beats itself”. “*iyé*” which is an imitation of the sound that fills the poet persona’s ear in line with the Urhobo folkloric tradition, is repeatedly used to achieve musicality and mellifluousness:

If I can wait and listen

Iye iye  
Brothers and sisters, if my ears will open wide  
Iye iye  
If I will sleep awake every season  
Iye iye  
My people, if I keep my ears primed  
Iye iye  
I say this because there's another music  
That fills the air but cannot be heard without effort  
Iye iye  
("My drum beats itself")

Similarly, in the second part of the poem "When green was the lingua franca", after the poet persona relishes his childhood memories of a lovely environment flourishing in nature's flora and fauna, emphasis shifts to the destruction of the persona's environment. The most important lexical item repeated is "shell" to account for the role the oil company played in the degradation of the persona's environment:

Then Shell broke the bond  
with quakes and a hell  
of flares. Stoking a hearth  
...  
Explosions of shells to under  
mine grease-black gold  
("When green was the lingua franca")

The data show that the key lexical items repeated serve a particular purpose, especially that which aligns with the intention of the poet. In other words, repeated items become foregrounded in order to re-echo in the minds of the readers that peculiar idea in tune with the subject matter of the poem.

### **Collocation**

Collocation is a paradigmatic relationship which exists among words with the tendency to habitually co-occur in a text. These lexical items likely to co-occur together in a text are known as collocates and can be said to be mutually inclusive. For instance, in the poem "When green was the lingua franca", the poet paints the picture of cruelty by associating "shell", the oil

company with the following collocates: “broke”, “quakes”, “hell”, “flares”, “hearth”, “explosions”, “execution”, “ogre”. The collocates present imagery of devastation and desolation, and very importantly, create texture in the text.

Equally, in “Dream love”, the collocates situate the context of discussion as the poet persona recounts his dream of a supposed stranger-friend who is later seen to be against the interest of the persona and his people. In this case, the following lexical items, as used in the poem, collocate: “house”, “bed”, “far-end room”, “sleep”, and “wake”. These collocates are not used indiscriminately but to elucidate the theme of discourse. Through the use of these collocates, the text achieves cohesion as important lexical items become tied to a unit of discourse for unity of text and easy comprehension.

### **Stylistic features**

In this research, emphasis is on the poet’s use of the stylistic devices of parataxis and hypotaxis in his creation of sentence structures which define the atmosphere and set the tone of the poems.

### **Parataxis**

This device, which has to do with the construction of sentences comprising only independent clauses, has been effectively used by the poet to communicate his message. A noticeable example of such usage can be found in the last stanza of the poem “My drum beats itself”:

The air ripples with birdsong,  
The tapster’s gourd brims over with fresh wine,  
And the hunter’s god blesses him with a bristling game.  
The little from beyond will make abundance in my hands.  
My drum beats itself  
& I await the carnival the drum divines.  
Sing with me... (“My drum beats itself”).

As can be deduced from this example, only independent clauses are used in the construction, thus, making every part of the sentence seem equally important. Equally, the tone feels flat but also spare and uncompromising. The discourse is declarative and direct. The poet persona does not mince words as he chants these incantatory words detailing the support he expects

to get from the gods. Despite these effects, the structure leaves it a little mysterious about what the most important part of the discourse is.

### **Hypotaxis**

Hypotaxis which involves the subordination of a clause to another in a discourse is also a stylistic device employed by the poet in the data. However, while the poet could use only independent clauses to construct a whole stanza of sentences, the stylistic device of hypotaxis is only a handful in the data. This, however, has not limited the effect of hypotaxis when used in specific stanzas in the data. In stanza five of the poem, “Dirge”, this stylistic device is employed:

Now, after he crossed  
Seven rivers in one stroke  
And no more hears daily rattle,  
I hear the goodbye... (“Dirge”).

The text makes it clear the central idea that deserves to be focused on as well as the emotional angle of the writing. With the added coloration of subordination, the writing is more of a scene, more of an emotional background of a comrade who fought for the preservation of his environment but who was unjustly killed by an oppressive regime.

### **Conclusion**

Language system is a combination of symbol, meaning and use. Much has been written about the dynamism of human language and the importance of creativity in its usage. The recurring point is that excellent usage projects an enormous amount of aesthetics, experience and knowledge on the part of the user. In this case, knowledge of stylo-discourse devices and how they can be employed in a text is important in order to accentuate meaning realization within discourse. As Ojaide reacts to a grossly unfair and incongruous condition of violence and decadence spreading wildly in the Niger Delta at large, and specifically to the gruesome murder of Ken Saro Wiwa and his kinsmen, the poet succeeds overwhelmingly in creating a stylistic identity which has already infected many.

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