



Investigating the Interaction between Language and Theme in Literary Writing: A Multi-text Study

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Abstract

Given the fact that language use is an intentional act, several studies abound on the discrete functions of literary techniques in literary texts. In this study, we examine passages taken from different texts and genres to show that language takes certain dimensions to effectively convey themes. When writers use language skillfully to convey themes, it is not only of writer-reader importance, but also accentuates the goal-driven function of language use. The study hinges on the Text Analysis Theory. Within the framework of the theory, specific rule-governed linguistic structures and choice of words perform discrete communicative functions in written and spoken discourses. This study concludes that in literary writings, language interacts with themes as writers use theme-revealing expressions and message-laden word patterning to pungently convey themes.

Keywords: language, theme, literary writing, interaction, Text Analysis Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a conventional means of communication. In literary texts, “theme” is simply “message”. It can either be central theme or sub theme. Both are immersed in the psychological context of literary texts. For this reason, appropriate use of language is indispensable in the presentation of writers’ thematic concerns. Fowler (1981) opines that “linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs.” A cross-text study of language use in literary text – such as this study – implies that there are common underlying principles of linguistic structuring deployed by literary writers for discrete communicative goals. For the purpose of the study, the few samples (of language use) and literary texts examined will suffice for a postulation on how language interacts with theme in literary writings.

2. LITERATURE AS LITERARY WRITING

Viewed from the perspective of literary writing, literature is verbal artistry expressed via the three basic genres: drama, prose and poetry. It is a creative and imaginative representation of life in any language. As a domain of scholarship, literature is guided by conventions, theories and traditions. Commenting on literary conventions, Hayes and Flower (1980 cited in Gokhan Cetinkaya 2015, p. 111) identify four major writing processes:

- i) Planning takes the writing assignment and long-term memory as input, which then produces a conceptual plan, for the document output. Planning includes sub-activities of generating (coming up with ideas), organizing (arranging those ideas logically in one’s head), and goal setting (determining what effects one wants to achieve and modifying one’s generating and organizing activities to achieve local or global goals).
- ii) Translating takes the conceptual plan for the document and produces text expressing the planned content.
- iii) In reviewing, the text produced so far is read, with modifications to improve it (revise) or correct errors (proof read).
- iv) Monitoring includes metacognitive processes that link and coordinate planning, translating, and reviewing.

Literary writings do not merely entertain readers, but also perform the crucial functions of social sensitization and reform. Writers explore first-hand knowledge of societal vices to communicate themes to society with a great deal of aesthetic matrix. Literary writings afford writers opportunity of demonstrating freedom of expression and idiosyncratic

competence. Poetry is written in verses and stanzas. The language is uniquely elevated and sensational. Sean O' Brien (2007, p. 187) states that "the Greek root of the word poem – *poiesia* – means making, an act dependent on artistry, skill, practice and let it be said – a capacity not merely for taking endless pains but for enduring perpetual dissatisfaction."

Prose is a narrative text in which ample description is used instead of dialogue. In this regard, characters, phenomena, places, events and objects are made concrete in readers' minds through the skillful use of adjectives and adverbs.

Drama uses dialogue to present writers' thematic preoccupations. The intra-text characters convey the dialogue. According to Mike Harris (2007, p. 252), "drama explores character and ideas through the medium of events generally in the following way: when characters confront obstacles they have to act (or not act) in one way or another. The choice they make reveals them. We think Macbeth is a loyal subordinate but when ambition overcomes the obstacle of his conscience, he kills the king and we realize he's not so loyal after all." Acts and scenes constitute the structure of a drama text.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study hinges on the Text Analysis Theory which is presented below:

3.1 The Text Analysis Theory

Marjory Meechan (2004) provides insight on the Text Analysis Theory:

Text analysis, both written and oral, concentrates on the linguistic structure of discourse, both within and between utterances. These kinds of studies include analysis of pragmatics and speech act theory ... A prominent sociolinguistic approach to text analysis uses variationist methodology. The variationist approach to discourse operates under the assumption that although a variety of structures may be used to fulfill any one discourse function, patterns in the variation found in natural conversational speech show that there is structure in discourse...

Besides examining the use of certain word-class categories as referring expressions, the theory explains the use of discrete clauses for specific communicative goals. It also captures the idea that meaning is based on the choice of words used in a linguistic stretch. See Marjory Meechan (ibid.) for tips on the theory.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In this section, we briefly make analytical comments on language use in passages (a)-(f), as it relates to writers' thematic concerns.

4.1 Interaction between Language and Theme in Literary Writing

In this section of the paper, we examine different passages to elucidate how language interacts with them in literary writing.

Passage (a)

...my grandmother felt that after walking from Kouroussa, the first thing to do was to give myself a bath. She wanted me at least to start my visit clean, though she had no illusions about how long such cleanliness would last; so she would take me straight way to the wash-place, a small enclosure near the hut, surrounded by a reed fence and paved with large stones. Then she would go back to the hut, take the pot from the fire, and pour the hot water into a calabash. After she had cooled it to the right temperature, she would carry it into the wash-place. There she would soap me from head to foot with black soap, then rub me roughly down with a sponge made of tow from the dried stems of pulpy plants. I would leave the hut, all shinning ...

(From *The African Child* by Camara Laye, p. 39-40)

In passage (a), the persona recalls the past to contextualize parental care and African socio-cultural practices, as depicted in the setting of the novel. The topic relevance is clear. People cherish the tender love and care they enjoy as they grow from childhood to become teenagers. Irrespective of the "new world" they find themselves in pursuit of education and progress, there is always that sweet memory of home and family bond, nourished and graced by traditions. The expressions "tow", "dried stems of pulpy plants", "hut", "black soap" and "calabash" depict African elements in the text. Adegbija (1999) posits that "language use is not incidental. It is of credit."

Passage (b)

Strange things happened at midday. The glittering sea rose up, moved apart in planes of blatant impossibility; the coral reef and the few, stunted palms that clung to the more elevated parts would float up into the sky, would quiver, be plucked apart, run like rain-drops on a wire or be repeated as in an odd succession of mirrors. Sometimes land loaned where there was no land and flicked out like a bubble as the children watched. Piggy discounted all this

learnedly as a “mirage”; and since no boy could reach even the reef over the stretch of water where the snapping sharks waited, they grew accustomed to these mysteries and ignored them, just as they ignored the miraculous, throbbing stars. At midday the illusions merged into the sky and there the sun gazed down like an angry eye.

(From *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (p.74))

As a reflection of the communion between language and theme, passage (b) shows the use of skillfully selected expressions to capture the mystery, fear, uncertainty and intrigues experienced by the boys in *Lord of the Flies*: “glittering sea rose up”, moved apart in planes of blatant impossibility”; “land loaned where there was no land and flicked out like a bubble”; “the snapping sharks waited”; “throbbing stars”; and “the sun gazed down like an angry eye”. The topic relevance of a text is essentially its theme. In passage (b), the plight of the boys can be compared to the situation of human beings in a world of uncertainties, adventures, challenges, obstacles, intrigues and problem-solving. Verbal artistry is utilitarian in the sense that it proffers solutions to problems that readers encounter in the real world. This is the Functionalism perspective of literature as literary writing.

Passage (c)

The conductor walks away down the road. In a few moments, the waiters can hear the sound of his urine hitting the clean-your-city can. He must be aiming high. Everyone relaxes visibly. The poor are rich in patience. The driver in his turn jumps down and follows the conductor to the heap. His sound is much feeble.

(From *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah, p. 39)

In Passage (c), the writer relies on well-chosen and patterned expressions to convey themes of rebellion, frustration, inordinate ambition (corruption) and disgust occasioned by state-of-affairs in Ghana during the post-colonial era. The expression include: “sound of his urine hitting the clean-your-city can”; “aiming high” and “the poor are rich in patience”. Themes in literary writings are comparable to what Allan (1986) refers to as world-spoken-of. The referent “clean-your-city can” is comic as it an object of mockery. Citizens (like the conductor) are aware of the fact that unclean, corrupt politicians should not be talking about outward cleanliness. It is thematic that the conductor directs his urine towards the object. In the larger society (by extension), policies and activities of unpopular government are condemned by the populace and satirized via literary writings. Passage (c) reminds readers of the hypocrisy of political leaders who evolve schemes, programmes, activities and structures as disguise, to cover up their misdemeanor.

Passage (d)

The man walks into the hall, meeting the eyes of his waiting wife ... the eyes of a person who has come to a decision not to say anything...the children begin to come out of the room within... They are not asleep, not even the third little one... as if their mother’s message needs their confirmation.

(From *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* by Ayi Kwei Armah, p. 41)

In Passage (d), the writer uses language to capture the psychological context; that is, the corruption-informed economic hardships in post-colonial Ghana. The readers are reminded of the scheme of things in the universe of discourse (the real world) where there is a very wide gap between the rich and the poor. A pauperized family is the direct result of a failed economy informed by bad governance. The masses suffer lack to the extent that they cannot provide food for their families. Passage (d) resonates this as a component of realism, which is a core element of fiction.

Passage (e)

...The road has been tarred and, across the big river, which made travelling by road, during raining season an almost impossible task, was now built one of those modern bridges.

Trees were planted by the roadside. What was interesting to Talle was that in most of the villages they passed, the houses seem to be perpetually coming closer to the side of the road. You often passed groups of people where before you only passed herds of animal, cows and goats ...

(From the novel, *From Fatika with Love* (p. 26)

In passage (e), language clearly relates with theme. The passage conveys the theme of development via appropriate use of urbanization-suggestive expressions in linguistic stretches: “... road has been tarred”; “... built one of those modern bridges”; “trees were planted by the roadside”; and “... you often passed groups of people where before you only passed herds of animal, cows and goats...” In the passage, the theme of development is appropriately depicted via clear description of physical setting. There is thematic relevance with the development in the physical features with ordeal of the major character of the nove, Talle, who develops physically, cognitively and spiritually as she journeys through the intrigues of life. In her nostalgia, she remarks that the road is not what it used to be during her last journey with her late father.

Passage (f)**Niger Delta Militias**

The Nigeria soil is the victim
 The oil-producing regions are the preys
 Those pipelines are the targets
 The militias take up the course of their kinsmen
 They fight against the endless terror
 Unleashed on their land
 Blessed with oil
 The sap of the Nigerian economy
 Yet bereaved of the dividends of Federation
 Their waters are sick
 Their soils are impoverished
 By the activities of oil companies
 Time and time again
 Efforts were made by the government
 To solve their problems
 But time and time again
 Those efforts seem to be unreal, political antics
 That is why the Niger Delta Militias continue
 To hold Nigeria to ransom
 In versions too numerous and dreadful to ignore.

In Passage (f), the expressions “victim”, “preys”, “targets”, “take up the course of their kinsmen”, “fight against the endless terror”, “unleashed”, “waters are sick”, “soils are impoverished” and “bereaved of the dividends of Federation” convey the themes of exploitation, revolt and solidarity. The writer’s choice of words (diction) makes the message pungent. The use of the word “prey” gives intensity to the phenomena being addressed. Aristotle (1998, pp. 109-110) cited in Lauri Ramey (2007, p. 48) submits that “perfect use of diction presupposes the use of ordinary clear words (which make writing understandable) and strange words (which make writing unique).” The topic relevance of the poem is the horrible environmental pollution caused by foreign petroleum companies in host communities. The consequences are enormous because lands and rivers could not be explored by locals for economic gains. Given the insensitivity of relevant authorities to the plight of the host communities, a common front was formed to agitate: referred to as the “Niger Delata Militias” in the above poem.

5. CONCLUSION

Language use in each of the passages (micro-structure), reveal language-theme interaction. Themes in each passage are noticeable in its macro-structure (the text), as argued by the Projection Principle (cf. Adejare 1992 cited in Emuchay 1999, p. 26). To reveal themes across an entire literary text, writers, use language accordingly in specific contextual structures (discourse domains) across the entire text. For example, the physical settings of the passages examined in this study are not only different, but also align with theme and language use. Adebija (1982) notes that there is pragmatic interaction between the Master Speech Act and other speech acts performed in literary texts. According to Adebija (ibid.), the Master Speech Act is the overall message (theme) in a literary text. Through the sequencing of speech acts (a literary technique), the relationship that a Master Speech Act has with other speech acts in a literary text is established. Speech acts are essentially about language use. Interestingly, Adebija (ibid.) contends that literary writers rely on the use of indirect speech acts when messages are difficult to convey with the use of literal language. This study reveals that in using language, to communicate with themes, literary writers deploy modifiers (adverbs) and qualifiers (adjectives) for the main purpose of clarifying and amplifying themes. The effectiveness of this device depends on each writer’s linguistic prowess.

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