

A Linguistic Examination of Different Narrative Structures in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*

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Abstract— This paper examines the different narrative structures used by the popular Nigerian literary artist, Wole Soyinka in his novel, *The Interpreters*. The choice of this topic is prompted by the opinion of many critics that Wole Soyinka is a difficult writer and that this particular novel is difficult to understand on account of its language. Thus the paper using an eclectic linguistic approach selected some texts for analysis. The result shows that the author uses narrative structures that task the linguistic knowledge of the readers. It discovers that Soyinka's background as a poet and playwright impacts much on the narrative structure of his novel. The paper thus concludes that the three literary genres: narrative fiction, drama and poetry can find expressions in one another within the hands of a skillful writer. It thus recommends that readers and critics alike should not rush into passing judgments on writers without exhausting the linguistic backgrounds that gave rise to such literary creations.

Keywords— Linguistics, Examination, Narrative, Structures.

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is the pivot on which literature revolves. It has been said (Person 2001 cited in Khattak, Mehnaz and Khattak 2012) that there could be language without literature but definitely, there can be no literature without language. This informs the opinion of Okonkwo (1990) who posits that all literature exists in the form of language: either as spoken utterance or in writing. Language is therefore the most important element of fiction, since it is language which gives existence to all the other fictional elements—theme, plot, setting and characterization. A writer's first task, in any literary work, is to make himself understood by his intended audience so that he may stimulate and motivate them into intellectual, social or political action. To do this, the writer must be committed to his subject of discourse to the extent of producing literature that is engaging. Soyinka's *The Interpreters* fires the imagination both intellectually and politically by exposing the socio-cultural seepage, the colonial decadence and the post-colonial moral decay in modern Nigeria. His prose style reflects the growing rift between the past and present, between action and inaction, between abandonment of social responsibilities

and commitment to progress and change finally between individualism and group solidarity, (Goddard 1997).

A discussion of the narrative technique of a literary product like Soyinka's *The Interpreters* will involve an examination of the linguistic and stylistic implications of the entire work. This is what informs the opinion of Maduakor (1986) who declared that *The Interpreters* has acquired a reputation as a difficult work. It was probably the first modernist novel published in English by a West African writer. Osundare (1983) refers to Soyinka as a "rugged wordsmith" whose forge casts words with cryptic hardness packed into sentences whose compactness strikes like a thunderbolt." Soyinka's manipulation of language shows the malleability of language and demonstrates how best the writer can use language to unravel and reveal his deepest mysteries and most private philosophy, (Goddard 1997).

Soyinka's experiments with time, his preference for a nonlinear narrative approach, the frequent interruptions in the storyline, all recall the changes in British fiction in the first decades of the present century...the structure of the novel gradually underwent a change: from the structure of a ladder to the structure of a cobweb, (Agu, 2008)

The structure of any work cannot be discussed outside the particular linguistic theory that gave birth to it. As Abrams (1981) puts it: '... almost all literary theorists since Aristotle have emphasized the importance of structure, conceived in diverse ways'. Accordingly, Abrams (1981) argues that structuralist criticism designates the practice of critics who analyse literature on the explicit model of modern linguistic theory. But a whole lot of critics notably Chinweizu, Jamie and Madubuike (1980) have criticized Soyinka of using what they referred to as 'Soyinka's obscurantism' which deliberately sets out to baffle his readers and which 'would seem more readily explainable in terms of his fidelity to Hopkins' butchery of English syntax and semantics, and to his deliberate choice of Shakespearean and other archaisms as models for his poetic diction.' When confronted with the criticism of his use of language, Soyinka (2001) has this to say:

Language is a tool and therefore I manipulate language anyway I like, anyway that seems to me appropriate to the very theme which I am concentrating on that particular

moment. Yes, I agree that I use language in a complex way sometimes. I agree that I use it in a complex way as, in the same way, it is obvious, that in certain writings, I use it in a far more straightforward manner. It depends on the burden which that language is supposed to carry at any given time.

This paper, therefore, examines some of the narrative techniques which Soyinka has used in the novel with a view to making language bear a particular burden. Thus the following texts have been chosen under the appropriate and corresponding sub-themes for the purpose of analysis.

Use of Hyper-poetic Narrative Structure

Events which ordinarily are considered common in the everyday life of a character are narrated in such a poetic manner that they assume other dimensions. For instance, instead of stating that Egbo's teacher beat him ceaselessly, Soyinka writes: "**The School-teacher, his first guardian, wore out canes on him**" (P. 16). The same could be said of expressions like: "**Bandeled fitted himself, well-gecko, into a corner**" (P. 16) "**The beer reversed direction and Lasunwon's nostrils were twin nozzles of a fireman's nose**" (P. 15). Sekoni, instead of simply electrifying Ijioha, would **rather bathe Ijioha maidens on neon glow**' (P. 26). Nothing illustrates this elaborate periphrasis better than Soyinka's description of the first sexual encounter between Egbo and Simi:

And a lone pod strode the baobab on the tapering thigh, leaf-shorn, and high mists swirl him, haze-splitting storms, but the stalk stayed him... parting low mists in a dark cave...in darkness let me lie, in darkness cry...(P. 60).

Going by the position of Jones (1976), Soyinka indulges in this oracular hightalk in order to avoid 'obviousness or prurience. This is Soyinka's style and it must be studied as such. The point is that every work of art must have a level of complexity manifested in the profundity of the language and the uniqueness of the style (Sule 2006). This paper is in total agreement with the above postulation. Consequently it can be seen from the above extract that the only lexical item that directly refers to coitus in the above passage is '**thigh**'. The reader has to sweat and possibly guess his way through the others: "a lone pod" may be referring to the penis, while the 'baobab...leaf-shorn' stands for Simi's naked body. Soyinka moves from one level of metaphor to another. The virginal now becomes a 'dark cave' with 'low mist'.

Fragmented Syntactic Structure

The opaqueness that characterizes Soyinka's lexical items naturally affects his syntax: the structure in which those lexical items are ordered and arranged. Soyinka exerts great economy on structure, Osundare (1983) opines that some of

his sentences are graphological rather than grammatical, a device he shares with a good number of modern writers. The typical Soyinka sentences remind one of a dry pod whose seeds are so closely packed that they cannot shake or move about.

One of his strategies for achieving such tightness of structure is what may be called narrative ellipsis. This is most prominent in the dialogue sections of the narrative.

a.) Sagoe was moaning: 'I must lie down flat on, my belly.'

Dehinwa wearily: 'Oh Sagoe...? (P. 21)

b.) Kola laughed, "You want him to do that right now?"

And Bandele, "when we leave here we'll go to the office..." (P. 208).

In both examples, the illocutionary – narrative cue 'Said' has been omitted, replaced by a cataphoric colon in (a) and the anticipatory comma in (b). The result is a lexico – syntactic compression that portrays Soyinka as a writer who is as stingy with words as he is with structure.

In a number of places, Soyinka mentions the names of speakers at the beginning of a dialogue and omits them in subsequent exchanges:

Egbo moved his head gently... as if he meant to clear it

I am confused, he admitted.

'Why?'

'I cannot accept this view of life...'

'I think it is very clever'

'I said nothing about that'

'It works ...' (PP. 232-3)

Narrative economy makes comprehension a bit difficult here. Towards the end of the dialogue, the reader does not know who says what. He has to flip back the pages to retrieve the speakers as it were, and this puts a strain on his reading attention.

Because of the way words and ideas seem to throng Soyinka's consciousness; he sometimes piles up a series of sentence fragments (the type referred to above as graphological sentences).

It does appear that poets who turned novelists never detach themselves completely from the muses that inspire their poetic genre. Rather they find ways of fusing the poetic syntactic structure into their narratives to produce very compact narrative styles. Here two texts are examined: one from Kofi Awoonor, a great poet who has also written a novel that is very similar to Soyinka's, then the second from

The Interpreters.

a.) she said she smelled me from far away.

Was it a busy day?

Yes.

Silence. Silence

Was it a busy day?

No

Silence.

No?

No.

Are you hungry?

No.

No?

No.

Silence (P 1)

(From: Awoonor's **This Earth my**

Brother...Heinemann: London 1981).

b.) 'I say so, Mathias, Silence. That was it. Silence. To have opened it at silence, that was the genius of it...

'Silence, Mathias. Silence. I have known all kinds of silence, but it's time to learn some more.

'And the vows of silence. Above all else, the vows of silence must be kept. (P. 28: *The Interpreters 1965*)

Looking at the above texts (a& b) one may be tempted to conclude that the two poet-turned novelists conspired to write on the theme of silence. The fact is that their poetries have influenced the narrative techniques of their fictions. Here 'silence' is given the dimension of not just a metaphor but it does appear that 'silence' seems to have been personified. It is a verbless structure, a fragment.

Use of Enjambents

One other poetic device which seems to obscure the smooth flow of Soyinka's syntactic structure is the run-on nature of many of his sentences. Many of the sentences are rather psychological. They flow directly from the emotions of the author, sometimes not guided by what Osundare (1983) calls "... The grammar book's rubric on punctuation with its rigid commas and full stops, but directed by the pulses of the mind and the rhythms of consciousness." The following sentence serves for illustration:

And Kola, who tried to see it all, who tried to clarify the pieces within the accommodation habit of time, felt, much later, in a well-ordered and tranquil moment, that it was a moment of frustration, that what was lacking that night was the power to shake out events one by one, to space them in intervening standstills of the period of creation (P. 244).

This sentence which is web-like structurally is made primarily of rank shifted clauses. Skeletally its structure falls into the SVAC pattern thus:

Subject (S) = Kola

Verb (V) = Felt

Adjunct (A) = Much later, in a well-ordered and tranquil moment.

Complement (C) = That it was a moment of frustration...

A closer examination reveals that between the clause elements abound some interruptions. For instance, between the real subject (Kola) and the main verb (Felt), there are two relative clauses.

a.) 'Who tried to see it all'

b.) 'who tried to clarify the pieces...'

(it is also noted that both are noun clauses which point back to the main subject of the entire sentence (Kola).

Between the verb and the complement, there are also interruptions.

c.) a modified temporal adjunct: 'Much later'

d.) A prepositional group functioning as Adjunct in main clauses: 'in a well-ordered and tranquil moment'.

The Direct complement is a couple of rank-shifted noun clauses.

e.) 'That it was a moment of frustration'

f.) 'That what was lacking... was the power to shake out events

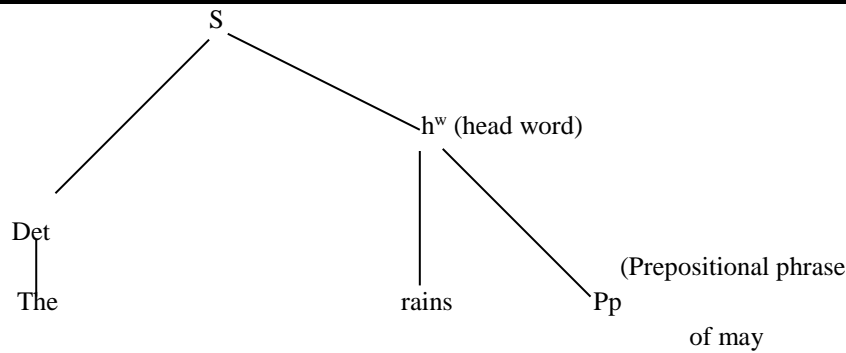
As must be evident from this syntactic analysis, most of Soyinka's sentences are hypotactic (complexly subordinated). They are characterized by highly interrupted structures that slow down the way and makes comprehension a bit difficult. Because the predicator, which is supposed to reveal what the subject is or does, is placed so far away from it, the actor tends to slip away before the mind reaches the action. In actual fact, the average reader who is used to the oversimplified language of most African novelists, feels tortured and is forced into yawning in despair. Another example will, perhaps, lend credence to this assertion.

A careful examination of Soyinka's description of Sekoni's death (in terms of the elements of the clause structure) reveals the narrative structure of the novel. The sentences are numbered to make the analysis less cumbersome. Same goes with some elements of the clause structure (i.e. when more than one of the same kind is used in a sentence:

1. S V A1 C1
The rains of May / become /in July / slit arteries of the sacrificial bull / a
C2
million bleeding punctures of the sky-bull/
A2
hidden in convulsive cloud humps/ black /
A3 V2 A4
overfed for this one event/ nourished/ on horizon tops of endless choice
grazing distant beyond giraffe reach.///(p.155).
2. S A V& S V C1
///Some competition / there / is / below / as / bridges / yield / right of way/
V C2 & S
to lorries/ parked /to the running board // and // the wet tar /
V C A & S
Spins / mirages of unspeed-limits / to heroic cars // and / their cargoes /
V C A
find / a heaven / below the precipice. /// (p.155)
3. S V A
/// The blood of earth dwellers/ mingles/ with blanceched streams of the mocking
& V A1 A2 A3
bull // and // flows / into currents / eternally / below earth. /// (p.155)
4. S V A1
/// The dome / cracked / above Sekoni's short
A2
sighted head / one messy night/// (p.155)
5. A S V C
/// Too late / he / saw / the insanity of a lorry parked right in his path //
S V C
a swerve / turned/ into / a skid and cruel arabesque of tyres. ///(p.155)
6. C & S V C A1
///A futile heap of metal // and // Sekoni's body / lay / surprised / across the
A2
open door / showers of laminated glass around him //
S C
// his beard / one fastness of blood and wet earth. /// (p.155)

What the extract above illustrates is that Soyinka does not necessarily restrict his narrative structure to one predictable pattern (SVCA),for instance. Rather he mixes up the syntactic structure of his sentences. A closer look at the first sentence alone reveals complexities of some sort.

The Subject: 'The rains of May', can be further subdivided diagrammatically into.



The verb-element here is a linking verb ‘become’ which can be substituted by the corresponding member of the ‘verb be’ family – are. Thus between S and V, the structure, could read: the rains of May are...’

The element here traditionally would be referred to as adverbial phrase of time. And since the V-element as noted earlier is a link verb, the C₁ – element is traditionally a subject complement which anaphorically points back to the rains of May. Thus instead of saying that the rains of May are like the slit arteries of the sacrificial bull, Soyinka said that they “became the slit arteries of the ...bull. This literarily is called a metaphor.

The C₂ – element reinforces C₁. It further compares the rains of May to

“a million bleeding punctures...”, while A₁ is an adverbial clause. This clause actually begins with the verb ‘hidden’ while its traditional subject should have been ‘the sky-bull’ in the C₂ – element. The A₁ – element ends with the phrase ‘cloud humps’. It is this ‘cloud humps’ that is described as ‘black’ in the A₂ element. Thus A₂ – element traditionally is an adjective since it describes the noun phrase ‘cloud humps’. This dove-tails into the A₃ – element which further describes the cloud. And in A₄, the placement of the cloud is described thus:... nourished on horizon tops...’ Thus this is classified traditionally as an adverbial clause (of place).

Sketchy, as the above analysis may be, it tasks the grammatical knowledge of the reader. Consequently, a full enjoyment and appreciation of Soyinka’s narrative style can only be complete when the reader is armed linguistically.

The Use of Parallel Structures

In expounding the philosophy of his voidancy, Sagoe, who has been identified as the author’s mask and mouthpiece makes parallel statements. In introducing this philosophy, he says:.

...of – isms I dirge this day, from homeopathic Marxism to existentialism... I do neither more nor less than uncover the mystery of my philosophical development...(P. 71).

In the parallel construction, Soyinka writes: (tabulation may make the parallelisms more apt.)

1.	Voidancy is not a movement of protest	But it protests
2.	It is non-revolutionary	But it revolts
3.	If I was angry	My stomach revolted
4.	If I was hungry	It rioted
5.	If I was rebuked,	It reacted
6.	And when I was frustrated	It was routed

(P. 71)

Here , there are six sequences of clauses with parallels in the elements of clause structure. On the left-hand side of the table are S + V + C structures while the right-side is made up of mainly S + V structures. It is of interest to note also that the predicators for clauses 3 to 6 uniformly indicate past time.It is also interesting to note that there exists a kind of phonological parallelisms in the above structures:

- Angry and hungry
- Revolted and roited
- Frustrated and routed.

The above marks the depth of Soyinka’s stylistic devices which can only be appreciated fully by a reader or critic who is well versed in linguistics.

The Use of Officialese

It has been pointed out earlier in this study that Sekoni’s frustrations emanate from the rigidity of the civil service bureaucracy. This rigidity and frustrations could be traced to the linguistic components of that institution. An examination of the register of the civil service, especially as it concerns Sekoni reveals some of the boring nature of the system. The following are examples of the variety.

- i.) Letters for signature sir,...
- If you would just look over these applications for leave and put up a roster...
- Bicycles advance...bicycles advance...let me see now, that should be file c/s 429. I’ll
- Check among the B.U’s in the S.M.E.K’s office. In the mean time will you also take charge of...
- Can I have your contribution Sir,...

- Please join a preliminary committee of five to sort out application for the post of a third class clerk (P. 27)
- ii.) Interdict him shall we? Bring me form S2/7 interdiction of Senior Civil Servants and Confidential File, Sekoni Chief Engineer in charge of Ijioha (P. 28)

Linguistically, two features are prominently noticeable in the language variety of the civil service (officialese). These are the use of acronyms and imperative sentences. But then the lexical items that mark out the above extracts as officialese include:

File, office, preliminary, committee, applications, interdictions, confidential, roaster, and signature

Use of Acronyms

In the civil service the use of acronyms is the order of the day. This makes communication easy and helps them to sustain the official oath of secrecy as non-members hardly would decode these acronyms. Some of the acronyms used above include

- C/S 429
- B.U's
- S.M.E.K's
- Form S2/7

The Use of Imperatives

The nature of inter-personal relationship in the civil service is usually polarized between the subordinates and their superiors. Consequently, when the superiors speak to their Junior or subordinate officers, the language is laden with imperatives. Some of the imperatives from the extracts above include:

- i.) Check among the...
- ii.) Interdict him shall we?
- iii.) Bring me form S2/7

The major feature of the imperatives is the overt absence of the agentive (subject) element. This is because, the subject (you) is always implied since this kind of construction occurs in a person to person dialogue. For instance in (1) the subject is commanded to check among the files. Thus the P-element usually begins the imperative.

In (ii)

'Interdict him shall we', the structure is V + C + V + S where

V	=	Interdict
C	=	Him
V	=	Shall
S	=	we

Here the focus of the clause is on 'shall we'. Obviously, contextually, the chairman inquires if Sekoni shall be interdicted. But this inquiry comes in the form of absolute imperative. If he had wanted to make it an open or optional case, then the sentence would have read "shall we interdict him" where 'shall' serves as a modal auxiliary and interdict, the principal verb, while the subject intrudes between the verbal phrase and 'him' remaining as the complement.

On the other hand, when the statements emanate from the subordinates to their superior officers, there are, usually the conditional clause markers or modal auxiliaries that imply a sense of politeness or respect. Here are a few examples from the extract above.

- i.) If you would just look..
- ii.) Letters for your signature sir.
- iii.) Can I have ...sir?
- iv.) Please join...

The items: 'if', 'Sir', 'Can', 'please' indicate that the speakers of such sentences must be subordinates to the addressee. Thus, to avoid sounding rude, those words have to be affixed to the imperatives.

In summary what this paper has done is to examine some linguistic narrative or stylistic devices which Soyinka has employed in the story. They are not exhausted here. There are a whole lot of other items left out. The ones examined are a sample which if a reader follows carefully; he will definitely enjoy the novel better.

II. CONCLUSION

To begin then, it has been established that language is a multi-purpose tool in society and that its primary function is affording a means of communication among the members of that social entity. Language also provides a group with an identity and a sense of solidarity. People who do not belong to a particular linguistic community, but who acquire its speech, gain acceptance and are able to function with a degree of ease. These people are said to have the 'common touch.' Language is classified according to its usage, by linguists and others, as standard, dialect, idiolect, register, slang, vulgar, colloquial, regional, local, international, and the classification goes on. Language is also used to distinguish social class, status and even racial and cultural backgrounds. The writer's choice of language for his writings creates a situation for an interesting analysis. At any given point in his/her career, the writer might use some or all of the above forms of language. However, no matter what linguistic form is appropriated in a piece of writing, the writer has a commitment and a social responsibility to facilitate the comprehension of his/her works, (Kenneth 1983). The analysis of linguistic narrative structures of Soyinka's *The Interpreters* done

above is just one example of the uses of language. It is thus recommended that readers and critics should take time to study the language of a literary work before passing judgments on such literary products.

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