

A LEXICO-SEMANTIC EXPLICATION OF J.P. CLARK'S "NIGHT RAIN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the lexico-semantic choices in J.P. Clark's "Night Rain". The researchers attempt to approach the interpretation of 'Night Rain' from the stylistic point of view and also to make its meaning explicit using the tool of linguistics. The fact, that stylistics as a scientific study is beneficial to both the teachers and students of English studies cannot be overemphasized. This paper, therefore, examines the lexical semantic choices in J.P. Clark's poem 'Night Rain' using M.A.K. Halliday's systemic functional Grammar as the analytical framework. It is important to note at this point that one of the key purposes for explaining the language of a literary text is to determine the extent to which a given author organized and deployed its potentials to relate the intended message. Night Rain is a unique literary piece by J.P. Clark in that it presents not only a description of a rainstorm in a small village but also a vivid description of the poor living conditions of the poorest of the poor in the land. Previous studies on the poet's work have been concerned (majorly) about the literary and thematic features of the texts. In so much as the poetry of J.P. Clark has not been extensively studied from a linguistic point of view, this study, therefore investigates aspects of lexico-semantic patterning in 'Night Rain' to establish their connotative implications and how they cohere in the text in order to foreground the poet's intended message. This paper reveals that the construction of a literary text is a linguistically conscious activity. This assertion is evident in the way Clark's text explored the lexico-semantic nuances and dynamics which explored the lexico-semantic nuances which are critical and strategic both in stylo-rhetorics and in message delivery.

INTRODUCTION

In studying language, which happens to be the subject matter of linguistics, Siyal and Jindal, (2010:18) posit that "we mark or sub-divide the area in order to study it in the analytical or systematic way". This position of Siyal and Jindal is further expanded by Alo (1995:13) thus; language is a complex phenomenon and to be studied effectively, it is broken into major levels or areas. Within modern descriptive linguistics, a language is studied from the following angles: phonetics, phonology, grammar (comprising of morphology and syntax), lexis and semantics". Interestingly, stylistics, the study of linguistic style, focuses on all the dimensions of language use, which are deployed by users of language in various distinctive ways to communicate textual messages to achieve aesthetic effects.

The import of the views canvassed above is that Lexis and semantics are distinctive aspects of language which integrate with other aspects of human communication. Lexis, according to Alabi (2008:252), is "... a general term which is used to refer to the vocabulary or diction of a language. The term 'lexis' originated from Greek and became popularized within linguistic circles in the



1960's. It was used by the British linguists, particularly, for the vocabulary of language especially of its stock of lexemes. Lexis describes the storage of language, in our mental lexicon, as ready-made patterns that can be recalled and sorted into meaningful speech and writing. Lexis as a concept, therefore, has a distinct identity from other traditional levels of linguistic study. This is because it refers to the word stock of a language from which writers and speakers make choices for expression in accordance with their specific purpose and intended meaning.

A writer exploits the vast resources of language which are abundantly provided by lexis for his imaginative creation. To this extent, writers depend on lexical items and their connotations to convey their intended messages as well as achieve aesthetic beauty. Wales (2001:54), not only supports the above position but also adds that a language user is free to select features from available resources of language at his/her disposal. This choice is partly conditioned by the demands of genre, form, or theme of discourse. The position by Wales, explains why writers make lexical choices with such care to achieve the delicate target of fusing words, meaning, and imaginativeness in language use.

It becomes apparent, from the argument above, that the rationale for studying the nature and functioning of the vocabulary of a text is to decode the meaning of the text which is at the very heart of language study and use. The view is supported by Adedimeji (2006:181), who opines that "the engine of language is meaning. Without meaning, there is no language. In fact, the essence of language is to generate or convey meaning". The focus on lexical semantics is significant in the sense that it underpins their functional relationship. The relationship of these two notions (lexis and semantics) were succinctly put by Esan (2005:91-92) when he posits that "...lexis and semantics are so intricately linked to each other that they cannot be separated in the description of texts".

In spite of the fact, that lexical semantics is very critical to language analysis, it is, however, imperative to underscore the fact, that lexical choices become meaningful only in concrete or pragmatic situations or contexts. This is one of the cardinal areas of emphasis of the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar, which we have adopted for this study.

This paper, against the preceding background, explores the strategic importance and relevance of lexico-semantic elements to the overall understanding and interpretation of the linguistic style of J.P. Clark's "Night Rain". What this means is that this paper critically looks at (or better still, foregrounds) some of the rhetorical patterning employed in Clark's text with particular reference to both lexical meaning and context of the situation.

Lexico-semantic analysis is a blend of linguistic choice with linguistic meaning. The question is: how does text mean? To interpret this, both the linguistic choices and semantic interpretations are exploited to unearth the concerns of a writer/text.



THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

In as much as this study is on a functional use of language, we adopted M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar as a theoretical model of analysis. This decision is based on its correlation between form and function especially in the three 'metafunctions' of language which the model espouses. These metafunctions include: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The textual 'metafunction' is specifically relevant for the present study because it is concerned with the mode which deals with the internal organization and communicative nature of a text. According to Leech and Short (1985:209), Halliday's textual functions of language are "... ways of using language to express, organize, and understand information for effective communication". Adeyanju, (2008:87), views it as "...the availability of an internal structure which makes it possible for the writer or speaker to construct texts that are not only coherent but also situationally appropriate". The point made by these scholars is that the textual metafunction relates textual messages in a text to ideas which are outside the discourse. Systemic functional linguistics relates structural analysis to the meaning and social context. See (Oyeleye, 1998 and Opara, 2005).

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE POET

John Pepper Clark was born on the 6th day of December 1933, in Kiagbodo in the Ijaw area of present-day Delta State of Nigeria. His father was Ijaw and his mother Urhobo. He had his primary education at Okrika (1940-1948) and Jeremi (1948 before proceeding to Government College, Ughelli for his secondary education between 1948 and 1953. Having finished his secondary school, he then proceeded to the University of Ibadan between 1955 and 1960. While studying in Ibadan as a student, he played a prominent role alongside a handful of other writers, in establishing Nigeria and in fact the entire continent of Africa as one of the major centers of Literature in English in the twentieth century. He had worked as an information officer, a journalist and a University Professor. Of great interest, here, is the fact that many of his admirers do not still know that J.P. Clark, apart from his poetry, is also a frontline African dramatist and scholar. He has also written a novel showing a personal account of his sojourn in America as a Parvin fellow at Princeton University between 1962 and 1963.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Following the preliminary discussion so far, it is obvious that lexico-semantics deal with the study of word meaning, whereas lexeme is the unit of meaning. At this point, it becomes apparent therefore to point out, that the study goes beyond the explication of the meaning and stylistic value of individual lexical choices. The study also analyses multi-word language units as contained within the context of the text. In this section, therefore, this study examines how Clark's words are selected and manipulated to make meaning in "Night Rain" under the following sub-headings.



Collocation

Collocation is the grouping of words by the company they keep. According to Crystal (1992:71), collocation means the “habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items” and this refers broadly to the grammatical combination of lexemes. Obviously, this explains why words occur in the sequence in which they appear in Clark’s ‘Night Rain’. It has been observed from the text (poem) that significant item of the meaning of a word is derived from the syntactic relationship in which it enters. Some of the examples of collocation as used in the poem include:

Cocks crow, prayer beads, wooden bowls, earthenware, scurry in, loosening mats, insistent ardor, roll over, soothing hand, barbed up, thatch roof, etc.

A look at the words above shows that they obviously collocate in an associative bond to foreground specific subject matters.

Semantic Fields

This study is such that extends to clusters of keywords which correlate within a particular area of discourse. According to Brinton,(2000:112), ‘semantic field’, or ‘semantic domain,’ denotes a segment of reality symbolized by a set of related words. The words in a semantic field share a common meaning property”. Here, in this study, we shall embark on a consideration of the semantic fields as contained in the poem by accounting for such words that are appropriate for specific situations.

- The first in this area include words that are associated with aquatic lives. These include **fish, dope, deep, bobbed up, water, sea, stream,** etc.
- The second (in the sequence) involves words that are associated with the building. These include **thatch roof, sheaves, rafters, room, floor, shed,** etc.
- Household items: **wooden bowls, earthenware, bins, bags, vats, mat,** etc.
- Those words associated with musical sounds include: **drumming, droning**

The Use of Metaphor

This is the imaginative use of words/phrases to describe something or show that two items have the same qualities. It involves a direct comparison of two things. It is as opposed to simile which uses ‘as’ or ‘like’. It is, “the metaphoric meaning of a word in most cases derived from usage and association” (Abrams, 1981:58). By this definition, it is apparent that metaphor has no precise definition because of its complex nature. What it does is that it identifies two things and compares them by transferring the quality of one to another. Clark makes use of this implied comparison in which he equates two unrelated things indicating a similarity or comparison between certain qualities found in the two things.

‘We have drunk tonight of a spell’

‘Deeper than the owls or bats’ (lines 34-35)

‘... we will settle to sleep of the innocent and free...(47)

‘... so let us roll over on our back and again roll to the beat, of drumming all over the land’(42-47)

The poet's persona, in the example above, makes a direct comparison of their experiences of the rainfall to drinking a spell that is being deeper than the ones the owls or bats drink. They, by this token, have become nocturnal and stuck as the owls and bats, with nowhere to run, as their wings have become wet in the rain, for a good sleep which is the result of a resignation of some sort to that of the innocent and free.

The Use of Onomatopoeia

The onomatopoeia is one of the elements of sounds employed in the poem by J.P. Clark. Onomatopoeia is said to be the formation of a word by using sounds that resemble or suggest objects or actions be named. It is employed for its sound effects in the poem. Some of the examples appear in the following lines:

'doped out of the deep'.

'I have bobbed up bellywise' (lines 4-5)

'It is drumming hard here...'

'Of drumming all over the land' (lines 8 and 44)

'Droning with insistent ardor...' (line 10)

'... they must scurry in to hide ...' (line 41)

The onomatopoeic choices, **bob**, **dope drum**, **drone**, and **scurry** are made to achieve sound effects and enlarge the meaning intended by the poet.

The Use of Hyperbole

Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration or overstatement to foreground aspects of meaning in a text. Clark employs deliberately exaggerated statements in the 'Night Rain'. Examples of this are:

'We have drunk tonight of a spell',

'Deeper than the owls or bats',

'That wet wings may not fly...' (Lines 34-36)

'Great water drops are dribbling

Falling like orange or mango

Fruits showered forth in the wind' (15-17)

'It is drumming hand here

...Droning with insistent ardor... (8-10)

The poet has employed the use of this poetic technique of hyperbole (exaggeration) as a way of drawing attention to their misery. The implication, of this statement, is that his household has been soaked by the rain more than the bats or owls which have been out in the trees all night. Hence, the condition of these nocturnal creatures is an indication of how heavy the rain has been.

The Use of Imagery

Imagery is the use of language to represent mental pictures. It is a poetic technique used by poets to paint vivid pictures with words in the minds of their readers/listeners. They are mental pictures and impressions created by words in a manner that can perceive sensations, without actually experiencing them. It appeals to the senses through sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Imagery is another strategic quality of language in the poem which is created by Clark's predilection (for the use of language) that appeals to the senses. Some examples are seen below:

"drumming" (lines 8 and 44)

"Droning" (line 10)

"Doped out of the deep" (line 4)

"Bob up" (line 5)

We have drunk tonight of a spell

Deeper than the owls or bats, ...

Bedraggled up on the iroko, they stand

Emptied of hearts, and (34-37)

Therefore will not stir, no, not

Even at dawn for then

They must scurry in to hide (39-41)

Great water drops are dribbling

Falling like orange or mango

Fruits showered forth in the wind (15-17)

'...Much like beads, I could in prayer tell

Them on string as they break

In modern bowls and earthenware. (19-21)

These lexical items are used to paint a clear picture of the havoc or disturbances caused by the rain. The image of "Dope" out of the deep creates a picture of an emergency.

The Use of Simile

A simile is another powerful poetic technique used in the poem. It is a figure of speech used for comparison to make the writer's statement vivid and concrete. It compares two things or pictures with the use of 'as' or 'like'.

'Except that like some fish',

...I have bobbed up bellywise

... from the stream of sleep (line 3-6)

'Great water drops are

Falling like Orange and mango

Fruits showered forth in the wind' (line 15-17)

'...much like beads ...' (line 19)

Out of the run of water

That like ants filing out the wood....(28)

From the excerpt above, the poet likens the sudden manner he has woken from sleep to the way ‘fishes’ jump up and down the water. This is an unnatural way of waking up. Also, the expression *much like beads* compares the sound of the raindrops in the vessels to that of the scattered beads on the floor. The raindrops are likened to the uncontrollable manner in which mango or orange fruits fall in a storm.

The Use of Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of similar consonants at the beginning of words that are close together. Poets usually call the readers’ attention to certain words in a line of poetry with the use of alliteration. Alliteration is used to create a pleasant rhythmic effect in a poem. It is an element of sound. Some of the examples alliteration in the poem include:

‘Doped out of the deep...’ (line 4)

‘...drops and dribbling...’ (line 15)

‘Stream of sleep ...’ (line 6)

‘Cocks crow ...’ (line 7)

‘Bobbed up bellywise’ (line5)

All the first letters such as ‘d’ in *dope* and *deep*; *drops*, and *dribbling*, ‘s’ in *stream* and *sleep*, ‘c’ in *cocks* and *crow*, all contribute in making the poem pleasantly rhythmic.

The Use of Assonance

Assonance refers to the repetition of vowel sounds to stress words or ideas in a line of poetry. It is used not only to add a musical quality but in setting the mood of a poem. The use of this element of sound and rhythm is not in scarce supply in the poem. Some example of assonance used in “Night Rain” include:

Bags and vats (line 25)

From stream of sleep(6)

From the example above, we see the rhythmic effects the poet created with the use of the vowels sounds |a| and |I| in *bags* and *vats*; of line 25 and *stream of sleep* in line 6. It is important, at this point, to note that both alliteration and assonance are elements/figures of sound and that the poet employed their use to add some musical flavor to the poem.

Lexical Choices

A closer look at the poem reveals Clark’s stylistic techniques for the use of simple and appropriate words to address the thematic preoccupations and social issues in the poem. What this means is that J.P. Clark’s lexical choices consist of simple vocabulary and these were consciously selected to clearly and unambiguously reflect the mood and sentiments of the societal predicaments as pictured in the poem. Some of such lexical items include:

Night, fish, doped, deep, cocks crow, droning, roof thatch, sheaves, lightening, rafters, water drops, orange or mango, prayer beads; wooden bowls, earthenware, iroko, sea, sheep, innocent, etc.



It should be noted, at this point, that the lexical items presented above, cannot make meaning in isolation except within the context of use to express experiences, feelings, and perceptions.

CONCLUSION

This study, from the preceding discourse, demonstrates the fact that lexis constitutes the bits and pieces of language which are combined meaningfully for the realization of linguistic expression and human communication to be realized. The point, being made here, is that Lexis and meaning play a strategic role in the production of the literary text as a form of human communication. This point is evident in the fact that the lexico-semantic devices we explored above are very strategic, both in poet's style of presentation and in the foregrounding of his message which, as a matter of fact, constitute the essence of textual or verbal communication.

The explication of selected lexico-semantic choices in 'Night Rain' is significant as each aspect exposes a certain level of a continuum in the poet's message. From the lexical plains, we see a conscious and pragmatic presentation and application of collocation, semantic fields, and the simplicity of lexical choices in the poem. Others include metaphor, onomatopoeia, simile, alliteration, assonance, hyperbole, and imagery. These aspects of language were consciously and carefully applied with the intention of achieving the desired effects in the poem. It is safe, therefore, to conclude that the construction of a literary text is a deliberate and conscious process to such an extent that, any meaningful linguistic construct is a product of deliberate arrangement of lexical choices within a specific contextual framework.

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APPENDIX

Night Rain (J.P. Clark)

*What time of night it is
I do not know
Except that like some fish
Doped out of the deep
I have bobbed up bellywise 5
From stream of sleep
And no cocks crow.
It is drumming hard here
And I suppose everywhere 10
Droning with insistent ardor upon
Our roof thatch and shed
And thro' sheaves slit open
To lightning and rafters
I cannot quite make out overhead 15
Great water drops are dribbling
Falling like orange or mango
Fruits showered forth in the wind
Or perhaps I should say so
Much like beads I could in prayer tell 20
Them on string as they break
In wooden bowls and earthenware
Mother is busy now deploying
About our room let and floor.
Although it is so dark
I know her practiced step as 25
She moves her bins, bags, and vats
Out of the run of water
That like ants filing out of the wood
Will scatter and gain possession
Of the floor. Do not tremble then 30
But turn, brothers, turn upon your side
Of the loosening mats
To where the others lie.
We have drunk tonight of a spell
Deeper than the owl's or bat's 35
That wet of wing may not fly
Bedraggled up on the iroko, they stand
Emptied of hearts, and
Therefore will not stir, no, not
Even at dawn for then 40
They must scurry in to hide.
So let us roll over on our back
And again roll to the beat
Of drumming all over the land
And under is ample soothing hand 45
Joined to that of the sea
We will settle to sleep of the innocent and free*

