

A LINGUO-PRAGMATIC STUDY OF KOFI AWOONOR'S 'SONGS OF SORROW'

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the linguistic elements that enhance the meaning of Kofi Awoonor's poem, "Song of Sorrow," using the linguo-pragmatic approach. The approach adopted here involves foregrounding at various levels of word group, clauses, morphemes and sentences. In addition, the paper examines the linguistic and pragma-social clues inherent in the text under study. In the course of the analysis, it also highlights certain foregrounded elements such as repetition, dominance, and deviation, which add to the appreciation of the literary meaning of the text. The poem (text) is situated within the pragmatic context of its production to project its intended meaning carefully.

Keywords: deviation, dominance, linguo-pragmatics, Song of Sorrow, repetition,

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The present paper presents a linguo-Pragmatic approach as an instrument in decoding the meaning of a poetic piece in a particular and literary text in general. This approach involves foregrounding at various levels of morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence (see Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). According to Awonuga (1988), Foregrounding also manifests in other forms such as dominance (prominence) and deviance of linguistic items or norms. (see also Daramola 2009). Believing that the linguistic-stylistic method of interpretation is not enough to decode the meaning of the poem, being a product of the (Ewe) society, where it is created. A result is surrounded by various pragmatic clues which enhance the shedding of more light of their meanings besides the linguistic elements, which include the participant and the context of production (the factors that enable the readers to interpret the texts and the clues in the surrounding texts that are significant to the meaning of the texts being examined (see Qatey and Zegarac, 2002). In other words, this paper uses the linguistic proof/evidence provided in the poem understudy to lend credence to the literary judgment earlier aimed at by critics and justify the meaning with the evidence made available by the prama-social-cultural environment in the poem "Song of Sorrow."

1.1.1 About the Poet

Kofi Awoonor is a name that appears with some frequency in discussions and various anthologies of contemporary African literature. Born in 1935 near Keta in Ghana, he attended Achimota School and the University of Ghana. He later worked as a specialist in Vernacular poetry at the Institute of African Studies. Though relatively slight in volume, his poetic works are a substantial

achievement in Africa writing in English and contributed to its development and versatility (African writing).

Awoonor's diversity of interest, occasioned by his pattern of life, has produced poetry that is rich and anchored on African Oral tradition (especially his Ewe traditions). While he shows deep love and interest in African oral poetry, he also enriched his works through interaction and understanding Western literature. Patches and instances of these abound in some of the poems, like "This Earth, My Brother" and "Night of my Blood." These show a kind of contact with Dante Shakespeare through T.S Eliot. His poetry is exciting because it offers the creative fusion of two cultures. His work achieves an extraordinary fusion of traditional African and modern English techniques and themes. Sadly, the poet's life was cut short in the 2013 Kenyan Mall bomb blast that occurred in front of the science campus of the University of Nairobi.

1.1.2 Synopsis

The theme of "Song of Sorrow" revolves around the poet's protagonist's poverty and loss (of household matters and the dispossession of extended family land). A poem is a form of elegy (a poem that mourns the death of a person or group of persons). It laments not only about the death of some people but also the dispossession of people's properties (which includes ancestral land). "Song of Sorrow" is divided into two parts of three (3) stanzas each. The first part deals with the lamentation over the poverty that bedevils the poet's protagonist. At the same time, the second part laments the demise of the poet's family members and the dispossession of their ancestral land.

The theme of poverty is explored in the first part of the poem. The personage accused of being responsible for the poverty happens to be a deity known by the Ewe-speaking people of Togo land and Dahomey (the present-day Republic of Benin) as Dzogbese Lisa. The deity's name represents the male and female attributes of the deity. This deity is likened to the personal god (chi) in Igbo land, which is responsible for the destinies of his adherents. The concept of the two deities rolled into one, though relating to the biblical Adam and Eve in the Old Testament, is not alien to Africa as instances of its existence abound in part of Nigeria and Kenya in West and East Africa. Thus, Dzogbese Lisa plays the role of protection, provider and controller of destinies. African cultures are deeply rooted in the belief that whatever happens to a man is simply the result of what their god destines for them. This is called predestination or, better still, fatalistic determination. It is a situation where a man does not have control over his destiny but depends on their "chi" to chart the course for him to follow. This is the state of mind of the poet's protagonist as he laments the reckless abandonment of the deity who is supposed to provide a shield over him but fails to do so. 'Song of Sorrow' is an explication of the concept of destiny and the belief in the god or goddess that controls destiny or luck in Africa.

1.2 Theoretical framework

This paper employs the systemic functional linguistics of Scott et al. (1973) and Halliday and Mathiessen (2004), which was developed in their attempt to describe the elements in the grammatical rank scale as morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. It examines the extent of

foregrounding these elements in the systemic rank scale of the song of sorrow to arrive at the total meaning of the poem. According to Awonuga (1988), foregrounding is a generic term in linguistic stylistics to denote linguistic items significant for textual meaning. Whereas foregrounding can occur in a text at various linguistic levels as lexical, morphological, orthographical, phonetic, phonological and syntactic levels, it can also occur at such sub-levels as morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. This paper, however, focuses on the lexical and syntactic foregrounding in the poem under study alongside their socio-pragmatic interpretation.

In applying the linguistic, stylistic approach to Jared Angra's "If" interpretation, Anonuga (1988) presents three types of foregrounding. These include deviation, dominance and non-deviation of linguistic items. According to Mukarovsky (1970, in Anonuga, 1988), "deviation... Constitutes a deautomatisation of familiar linguistic and literary patterns". It, therefore, becomes evident that foregrounding, from the perspective of Mukarovsky, is the opposite of automatization. Automatisation objectively speaking schematizes an event, whereas foregrounding is the violation or deautomatisation of the scheme. This means that foregrounding does violence or defamiliarizes linguistic items at various levels of sentences, clauses, groups and morphemes. Thus, the use of language in unusual ways characterizes the literary styles as seen in the use of metaphor, simile, alliteration, irony, and onomatopoeia.

Non-deviation as another type of foregrounding is mentioned in Awonuga (1988). According to him, non-deviation refers to that type of "foregrounding in which the structure acquires significance in the text as a result of the fact that it makes use of the certain aspect of language or literary norms in such a consistent and systematic manner that it thrust itself, as it were, on the reader" (40). From this definition by Awonuga, two types of foregrounding stand out: repetition and syntactic parallelism. These appeals of the foreground are meant to emphasize specific issues in the text. For instance, they employ repetition to emphasize an aspect (if not the whole) of the theme of a text itself. As a foregrounding, repetition also manifests at various linguistic levels of morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. Syntactic parallelism, on the other hand, refers to a kind of repetition of syntactic patterns that can be significant to the meaning of a text.

Also included in the non-deviation type of foregrounding is the writer's use of subordination and superordination in literary texts. Subordination and superordination represent the systematic foregrounding of components in a work of poetry which involves the gradation of interrelationships of these components in their mutual (hypotaxis and parataxis) subordination and superordination. Finally, the dominance or predominance of linguistic items is treated as the most crucial aspect (type) of foregrounding. As in the case of other aspects of foregrounding, dominance/predominance works at various levels of morpheme, word, group, clause and sentence. It is believed that the interpretation of the functions of such linguistic items portrays the overall meaning of a literary text. For convenience, this paper collapses both instances of non-deviation and dominance of predominance as they appear to share certain features in common. Thus, Kofi Awoonor's song of sorrow will be discussed by examining the various levels of foregrounding

with a particular interest in deviation, dominance/prominence, repetition and syntactic parallelism as manifested at the linguistic sub-levels of the word, group, clause and sentence.

1.3 Previous Studies

David S. Miall and Don Kuiken (1994:389-407) examined how stylistic features of literary texts deautomatize perception. They're central to a tradition of literary theory from Coleridge through Mukarovsky to Van Peer. They found that hypothetically stylistic variation (foregrounding) prompts defamiliarization, evokes feelings, and provokes reading time. They tested these possibilities in four (4) studies in which segment by segment reading times and ratings were associated with increased reading times, more excellent 'strikingness' ratings and more fantastic affect ratings. They observed that response to foregrounding appeared to be independent of literary competence or experience even as they discussed the reasons for considering readers' response to foregrounding as a distinctive aspect of interaction with literary texts.

In another study, Omoniyi (2016:55-74) looked at the pragma-stylo-semantics of Proverbs 26, verses 4 and 5. The researcher demonstrates that a pragma-stylo-semantic interpretation of these verses of the bible cancels out the overt contradictions that may arise from reading that chapter of scripture from verses one (1) through to twelve (12). It is the author's view that both the semantic and pragmatic presuppositions, as well as the stylistic features of the verses of scripture, are unraveled to arrive at the underlying connections that unify their interpretations. He also considered time-lapses (gap) as fundamental and further analyzed the concept of "appropriateness" in terms of possible compliance with the instruction in two verses by a single agent. Therefore, his paper proposes a schematic diagram that supports the concept of "appropriateness." The essence of the diagram is to arrive at a "global" or "total" meaning. The result of the analysis shows a non-contradictory context-determined phenomenon.

Similarly, Ayodele (2012: 85-93) examined the pragma-stylistics of John 3:16. The paper aims to examine the possibility of a significant stylistic meaning-inducing technique in text composition manifesting at the graphological level based on the rearrangement of the text (John 3:16), which gave it a lot of stylistic significance. The author focused on the graphological features of the text in line with the consideration of the use of gothic printed letters, rearrangement (verse paragraph), capitalization and punctuation marks. Here, gothic printed letters and capitalization were graphically fused together to coin VALENTINE out of this scripture verse. Furthermore, the author interpreted the meaning of the text with the application of such linguistic elements as speech acts, presupposition, inference, implicature and mutual contextual beliefs. As a result, his work validates the thesis, which states that both style/form and content contribute in equal measures to any knowledge gained in reading a text.

Daramola's (2006: 469-487) linguistic analysis of Wole Soyinka's "Abiku was carried out using Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) with particular attention to structure and reference. The author explains how Soyinka constructed meaning in his version of "Abiku." The paper reveals the usage of the concept relevance, especially the concept of semiotics, to establish its socio-cultural relevance, especially anti-language. The anti-language was used to explain "Abiku's

obvious strange behavior. The paper demonstrated the text's means of meaning inherent in the choices that Soyinka made of both structural and referential modes of meaning. The paper also revealed Abiku's meaning potential as being more evident in the grammar of processes than in referential relations. In another paper, Daramola (2009: 86-102) contrasts JP Clark and Soyinka's concept of 'Abiku.' For instance, in Soyinka's 'Abiku,' the abiku child is the one talking, boasting with their clenched fist and beating their chest. Still, in Clark's 'Abiku,' somebody addresses, pleading with the spirit child to pity their suffering mother and stay. Clark's abiku subsequently becomes attentive, passive, and patiently listens to an appeal "to stay" to alleviate its mother's suffering. The author employs the systemic Functional Theory (F.T.) as a theoretical foundation in examining his text.

From the preceding examination of previous related studies, Daramola's work seems the closest to the current study. It employs the application of the Systemic Functional Theory (SFT) in the analysis of his text. In the same vein, this paper uses linguistic proofs to arrive at the poem's overall meaning- 'Song of Sorrow.' Aside from the stylistic examination, the paper will gain insights from pragmatic and discourse-analytical clues and other social structures that are significant to the poem's meaning under review.

1.4 Textual analysis

In this section, we will present a linguo-pragmatic analysis of Kofi Awoonor's "Song of Sorrow" using the three levels of foregrounding: deviation, dominance, and non-deviation of linguistic items. In addition, we will also consider other pragmatic clues that enhance the actual appreciation and interpretation of the text as a poem rooted in African tradition, culture and beliefs. In what follows, therefore, we shall undertake the analysis beginning with deviation, dominance and non-deviation of linguistic items followed by an exegesis of the minor pragmatic clues.

1.4.1 Deviation

A careful look at Kofi Awoonor's 'Song of Sorrow' reveals certain deviations culminating in unsystematic or unusual language use. These unusual use of language (defamiliarisation) are more evident in metaphors, simile, personification, symbolism and run-on-line (enjambment). It has become more accessible for the readers to understand the poet's viewpoint through these devices. For example, the excerpt below presents a deviation from linguistic norms in the poem through similes in lines 5-7.

The affairs of this world	----	5
Are like the chameleon faeces	----	6
Into which I have stepped	----	7
When I clean it cannot go	----	8

The poet uses this kind of Homeric simile to compare his problem in life to that of chameleon feces that are indelible. The import is that the kind of poverty experienced by the poet's household is indelible. In other words, no matter how much the poet tries to hide his poverty or

(like the chameleon) change his physical location, the 'mark' of lack and impoverishment that his condition has placed on him makes him not just an object of ridicule but a victim of psychological and emotional molestation.

Also, in lines 30 to 31,

The rain has beaten me ----- 30

And the sharp stumps cut as keen as knives ----- 31

The rain is metaphorically used to represent the consistent, unabated disaster that has befallen the poet. Therefore, it is not surprising for the reader to read of 'sharp stumps' as they are some of the things that obtain in the wilderness that the poet earlier mentioned. The poet's usage of the image of himself stepping (barefooted) on sharp stumps that cut as keen as knives are deliberate. It conveys a direct message of the complex experience that has characterized his life. Beyond that, the sharp stumps are indirectly compared to the keenest of knives. The 'rain' also in line 30 plays the role of a person beating another. This is a deliberate deployment of personification. Another form of deviation noticeable in the poem is the poet's deliberate treatment of an inanimate object as though it were animate (reification). For instance;

"Death has made war upon our household."

Death, a phenomenon in the line above, is defamiliarized as a man who can wage war on people. This kind of defamiliarization of language is necessitated by the situation in which people die in their numbers in the poet's household, as revealed in the poem. However, the language that can also pass for an exaggeration captures the context of the poet's horrible experience.

The poet also presents another deviation from the ordinary use of language. This manifests in the use of symbols. Symbols as used in language suggest and extend the implications of meaning. The poem's excerpt below highlights examples of the symbolic use of language.

- i. And Kpeti's great household is no more 12
Only the **broken fence** stands 13
- ii. And those who dared not look in his face 14
Have come out as **men** 15
- iii. And the **trees** in the **fence**, 28
Have been eaten by termites 29
- iv. And the **crows** and the **vultures** 33
Hover always above our broken fences 34
- v. And strangers **walk over** our portion 35

The theme of dispossession of one's precious property (in this case, ancestral land) revolves around the poem's lines as presented above. For example, item (i) presents a "broken fence," which symbolizes the destruction of the remains of the dispossessed land while the other properties have been ruined. Item (ii) refers to "men" who were total strangers and had taken over their land. The same theme of destruction is published in item (iii), as termites ravage the trees in the fence. Also, crows and vultures suggest the presence of death in the environment. These birds of evil omen (harbingers of misery and death) only congregate where there are bodies of animals (and human



beings too). Finally, item (v) paints a picture of total dispossession of one's ancestral property as strangers "walk over" their portion. Like a football match, the poet's use of the verb 'walk over' could also mean that the dispossession of their ancestral land was done without any resistance and opposition.

1.4.2 Dominance and Non-Deviance

Kofi Awoonor's "Song of Sorrow" equally has dominant linguistic items. These items are significant in adding both to the meaning of the text and its understanding. One of the elements so foregrounded in the poem is 'something' as seen in lines 1 and 2 of part II

Something has happened to me	1
The things so great that I cannot weep	2

The word "something" and its proform "things" in lines 1 and 2 of stanza one of the poem suggest the death of the protagonist's children and relatives. The two lines open the floodgate of tales of woe about the protagonist's people and the desolation/dispossession of his ancestral land.

Another instance of dominance in the poem is shown in the first two lines of the poem:

Dzogbese Lisa has treated me thus:	1
It has led me among the sharps of the forest	2

Dzogbese Lisa, the ancestral deity blamed by the protagonist as being responsible for the misfortune that befalls him, has a proform "it" in line 2, representing Dzogbese Lisa. Also, 'thus' in line 1 is a substitute for difficulty, hard time, extreme corner, and poverty experienced by the protagonist. The poet deliberately foregrounds these words to enhance the poem's overall meaning. It is pertinent to mention here that the poet deliberately couches lines 2-23 of the poem to explain the poet's protagonist's horrible experiences. Thus, these lines are cataphoric references to the substitute or proform ('thus') mentioned in line 1.

Non-Deviance of linguistic items, on the other hand, involves the foregrounding of certain linguistic items that manifest as repetitions. Repetition here refers to the deliberate representation of particular linguistic work. Repetition occurs at various linguistic levels of word, group, clause and sentence in the poem. A perfect example of repetition in the poem is the word "beyond," which is used twice in the entire work.

I can only go beyond and forget	13
I shall go beyond and rest	32

The lines above portray a kind of resignation by the poet's protagonist, who seems unable to bear the frustration of life. Hence, the poet resort to dying as a sure solace to him.

Another instance of repetition at the word level is wilderness seen in lines 28 and 29 of the poem. It is also a synonym of "forest" earlier used in line 2. The poet uses the words' forest' and 'wilderness' to depict the protagonist's world full of death, desolation, frustration, helplessness, destruction, poverty, and the dispossession of landed properties. The effect of this stylistic element of repetition is the emphasis on the degree of the poet's harrowing life experience. Also, at the sentence level, the repetition of lines 8 and 12, as seen in the excerpt below, shows the poet's revelation of the protagonist's lowly position, who has no place in the middle and upper classes,

and who has no hope of any form of social climbing. Hence, a resort to dying to forget the pain and frustration associated with this life:

I am on the world's extreme corner	8
I am not sitting in the row with the eminent	9
But those who are lucky sit in the middle and	10
Forget	11
I am on the world's extreme corner	12
I can only go beyond and forget	13

1.4.3 Pragmatic clues

"Song of Sorrow" is deeply rooted in African culture, beliefs, and tradition. Here, predestination or fatalistic determinism is fully enshrined in the tradition and culture of the African man. Predestination is the belief that what one will do in life has been destined by the gods and goddesses of their people. This is the only reason the protagonist blames Dzobgese Lisa, his ancestral god, for being responsible for his calamities in life. We also see the premium Africans' place or children because they live after them and therefore perform the funeral rites reflected in the following excerpt:

"I have no sons to fire the gun when I die and no daughter to wail when I close
my mouth."

The import of the above excerpt is that if a man has no son or daughter, no one will perform the funeral rites meant to be performed by the deceased children. Such is the frustration of the poet's protagonist as all his sons and daughters have died. The implication of this is that the poet's spirit upon death will continue to wander, disturbing the living. It was a deliberate classification of what genders are expected to do when one dies. Despite his painful state and disillusionment, the poet was careful to inform his readers that African men are not supposed to wail or cry when they die. African culture presents a man as being very strong and emotionally unmoved in most cases (as in the poet's).

On the other hand, the women (daughters) are considered the weaker vessels and are expected to weep or wail. In many African cultures, if a woman refuses to wail when someone very dear to her dies, she may be seen as the killer of the dead. The poet's stratification of these responsibilities further revealed the strength of his belief in African culture.

Another traditional African belief, as reflected in the poem, is that the dead (ancestors) must keep watch over those they left behind in the world. However, the reverse seems to be the case of the poet's protagonist. Hence, his frustrations became heightened as the calamity of those alive increased.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This paper examines the lamentations of Kofi Awoonor in his "Song of Sorrow" using linguistic stylistic and pragmatic approaches. To achieve this, we used the Systemic Function Linguistic (SFL) theory to examine elements in the grammatical rank scale such as word, group, clause, and

sentence as foregrounds for literary meaning at the deviation levels, dominance non-deviation of linguistic items. In addition, we used certain linguistic clues inherent in the poem as proofs of evidence to unravel their literary meaning, implications and deeper understanding of the poet's perspective. The poem presented a clear picture of the socio-economic and political situations in the protagonist's society and, by extension. In this present African society, poverty, suffering and frustrations have become close neighbors of citizens.

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