Breaking the iron curtain: Decoding poetry via linguistics

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Abstract
This paper holds that the phobia many students and teachers of literature have for poetry is a result of their being ill-equipped with the tools for poetry analysis and appreciation. It then posits that a good background in linguistics will help address this problem. In doing this, the paper first reviews the nature of the poetry genre; then it highlights the various ways knowledge of linguistics can be applied to poetry analysis and appreciation. This approach will go a long way in stimulating and sustaining interests in the poetry genre.
Keywords: poetry, stylistics, linguistics,

1.0 Introduction

Poetry is one literary genre that has remained to many students a hard nut to crack. These students see poetic language as impenetrable and have, over the years, developed a phobia for it. This explains the passion they have for prose and drama as against their hatred for poetry. Apart from texts recommended for study, students are hardly found with poetry anthologies how much more reading them for pleasure. In an interview with Uchenna Oyali, Cecilia Kato decried this ugly situation thus:

> Nobody likes poetry. You may find people picking a text – a novel or a play – while travelling; they read it or when they are idle, they can be entertained by the text. [But] you won't find anybody reading a poetry collection for entertainment! No! There are very few people that will pick a poem to read if not for exams purposes.

Incidentally, these students are only reflecting what they learnt from their teachers. Indeed, many teachers of literature shy away from the poetry genre.

This paper then attempts a review of the nature of the genre. It posits that the problem might be that the teachers are ill-equipped with the tools for poetry analysis and appreciation. It then suggests that teachers apply linguistic principles to literary analysis. Stylistics is the discipline borne out of this application.

2.0 What is poetry?

Many people are discouraged from appreciating poetry apparently because of the nature of the genre. This problem is seen even in the definition of poetry itself. Hudson (2006:63) points at this difficulty in defining poetry when he comments,

> Were we challenged to answer off-hand the question, what is poetry? Most of us would probably be inclined to evade it with the words which St. Augustine once used in reference to other matters – "If not asked, I know; if you ask me, I know not." A certain instinctive sense of what constitutes poetry we all have; but to translate this into exact language seems difficult, if not impossible.

Talking in the same manner Ojaide (2005:14) says that the definition of poetry 'could be as subjective and varied as the attitude or ideology of a particular poet or critic'. Indeed, poets and critics of poetry have given variegated definitions of poetry. Hudson (*op sit* 64- 65) presents some of these definitions of poetry as 'metrical composition' (Johnson); 'the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously embodies itself' (Mill); 'the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination, the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colours' (Macaulay); 'the rhythmic creation of beauty' (Edgar Allan Poe); 'a vent for overcharged feeling or a full imagination.' (Keble); 'nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth' (Mathew Arnold).

A careful study of these definitions will reveal that their approach to poetry from these variegated viewpoints is distracting, reflecting the difficulty inherent in reducing the dynamic force of poetry to some logical formula. In the first place, some of them are not definitions of poetry per se, but expressions of what is poetical irrespective of where it is found, be it drama, prose or even non-literary discourse. Some reflect only the kind of poetry the writer is interested in. However, as Hudson (2006:65) puts it, 'all are necessarily so abstract in statement that, whatever may be their philosophic value, they leave us in a region very remote from that world of concrete reality in which we move when we are reading poetry itself'. Thus, it seems safer to highlight those fairly general and constant characteristics of poetry, a stance taken by many scholars of poetry and poets alike.

According to Griffith (1982:12), 'all works of literature are "functional" in the sense that the reader sets them apart from the facts of real life'. First, the writer makes up some of the materials. Second, the writer exercises a lot of artistic control over the work. But that notwithstanding, literature (of which poetry is a genre) is

born out of a society's or person's experience. Thus, Ojaide (2005:7) sees poetry as 'not just language but also experience.' He adds that the rightful fusion of experience and expression makes for a successful poem. If the writer employs an unusually fresh and creative way to express an experience, then the reader will relish the poem. However appealing this view might be, it fails to capture what makes poetry different from other literary genres, if not other genres of writing like good persuasive essays, market surveys and even technical reports. Egudu's (1979:4) view of poetry as 'a method of literary expression which, suggests by means of imagery, rhythm and sound' seems more distinguishing. Unlike Ojaide, Egudu recognises that poetry relies a lot on the connotative meanings of expressions and should be musical. Griffith makes these distinctions clearer in these words:

> Poetry is usually different from prose drama and fiction in several key ways. In general, it is more concentrated – that is, poetry says more in fewer words. Poets achieve this concentration by selecting details more carefully, by relying heavily on implication (through figurative language, connotation, and sensuous imagery), and by more carefully organising the form of their poetry (through rhythmic speech patterns and "musical" qualities, like rhyme), (p. 53)

Hudson sums up these by appealing to the emotional and imaginative characteristics of poetry. In his words,

> Whatever [poetry] touches in life, it relates to our feelings and passions, while at the same time by the exercise of imaginative power it both transfigures existing realities and "gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name." (p. 66).

Though not as explicit as Griffith's view, Hudson's assertion is poignant and stresses the driving force behind poetry: a passion to share experience with society.

3.0 The question of form

Another source of controversy among scholars of poetry is the question of form: must poetry be written in verse? On one side of the divide is the group that insists that poetry need be written in verse. Leigh Hunt, one of the adherents to this view, comments that metrical excitement makes all the difference between a poetical and prosaical subject; and the reason why verse is necessary to the form of poetry is that

the perfection of the poetical spirit demands it – that the circle of its enthusiasm, beauty, and power, is incomplete without it (cf. Hudson 2006:68). Moreover, Hudson sees metre as 'no mere accessory or conventional ornament of poetry, but ... a distinctive and fundamental characteristic of poetry as a form of art' (p. 74). These are obviously overstating the case for form because many great works of art there are that are not versified. Shakespeare's plays are illustrative. In Nigeria, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* are seen as poetic prose because of the peculiar use of language in them. Thus, Sir Philip Sidney sees verse as a garb, 'an ornament and no cause to poetry'. (cf. Hudson, 2006: 68). Ojaide op cit agrees with Sidney when he declares that poetry 'has to do with the use of language and not necessarily because a work is in verse form' (p. 14). Jeyifo (1988) demonstrates this in his criticism of Mamman J. Vatsa's poetry, which he sees as being essentially prose versified. Niyi Osundare also demonstrates this in *The Eye of the Earth* where 'Dawncall' is presented partly in verse and partly in prose. But the language remains poetic.

Furthermore, the insistence on metrical structure by Hudson seems fundamental only to English poetry, for African poets writing in English do not subscribe to the same view. These see the insistence on metre as restraining thereby limiting the poet's liberty at using language to break new frontiers. Thus Nwanmuo (1986:243) recommends that Nigerian poets write in free verse; as:

> This will not only help poetry enthusiasts understand at least what is said literally in a poem (even though what happens on the surface is only the beginning of discovering possibilities of meaning beneath the surface), it can also ensure the enjoyment of poetry through the discovery of paradoxes and planned ambiguities of any poem.

Jeyifo (1983:ix) sees this trend as part of the move by African poets to take 'the language of poetry, the diction of figurative expression' to the market-place.

In all, the beauty of poetry lies in the interplay between imagery, rhythm and sound and the infinite meanings inherent in the poem owing to the unique use of language. So, for poetry to be truly appreciated, it has to be viewed with a poet's eye. Hudson puts it succinctly, 'the poet appeals directly to the poet in ourselves, and ... our real enjoyment of poetry therefore depends upon our own keenness of imaginative apprehension and emotional response' (p. 126). Such appeal and enjoyment of the aesthetics of poetry are better appreciated when poetry is evaluated with insights drawn from stylistics.

4.0 Poetry and stylistics

Put simply, stylistics is the linguistic study of style. But the concept of style is problematic owing to its multiplicity of meaning, usually arising from its scope or application. Generally, style may be seen as 'the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose.' (Leech and Short, 1981:10) Though it can be applied to spoken and written as well as literary and non-literary varieties of language, it is usually associated with written literary texts. Even within this sub-genre exist scopal distinctions: it may be seen as the linguistic habit of a particular writer (Okot p'Bitek's or Soyinka's style); the linguistic habits shared by a group of people at one time, or over a period of time (the style of post-independence literature); the way language is used in a particular genre (epistolary style); effectiveness of a mode of expression (clear or refined style); etc. (Crystal and Davy, 1969:9-10; Leech and Short, 1981:11).

Stylistics has as its goal the task of explaining the relation between language and artistic function. Being the meeting point of linguistics and criticism, it relates, in the words of Leech and Short, 'the critic's concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguist's concern of linguistic description' (p. 13). Thus it serves as a buffer against the schism on the application of linguistics to literary criticism, using tools from both disciplines. This marriage becomes expedient when it is observed that its condemnation, according to Kolawole (2003:4), stems from the direction of 'linguists who are not armed with the knowledge of literature and critics lacking linguistic knowledge'.

Interestingly, poetry was adjudged the most unsuitable for stylistic analysis because of the high level of linguistic deviation it exhibits. Deviation refers to

> divergence in frequency from a NORM, or the statistical average. Such divergence may depend on (a) the breaking of normal rules of linguistic structure (whether phonological, grammatical, lexical or semantic) and so be stylistically unusual/infrequent; or (b) upon the overuse of normal rules of usage, and so be statistically unusual in the sense of over-frequent. (Wales, 1989:117)'

Thus, the language of poetry is inundated with novel linguistic features that were not part of the norms of the language, or overuse of existing features thereby drawing attention to them. For example, the syntax of poetry is usually chaotic in its violation of the Chomskyan sub-categorisation rules and selectional rules, hence the argument that a linguistic analysis of poetry will be tenuous. But the fact

remains that these deviations become glaring by weighing poetry on the scale of linguistics. Thus, linguistics offers the tool for taking the language of poetry to pieces with the aim of establishing how these relate to the whole structure. Secondly, language is dynamic and any move to frustrate this quality will result in a preponderance of hackneyed and unmotivating expressions. In fact, as Aristotle puts it, "The most effective means of achieving both clarity and diction and a certain dignity is the use of altered form of words, the unfamiliarity due to this deviation from normal usages raises the diction above the commonplace" (cf. Kolawole op cit (p. 4)). The beauty and sublimity of poetry lies in the effect of such deviations, which, according to Stankiewicz (1960:75), are 'not only tolerated but even expected within various poetic traditions, periods, and genres'.

Essentially, a stylistic analysis of poetry can be done at four distinct though inter-related levels: graphology, phonology, syntax and lexico-semantics. Graphology looks at the 'print, colour and shape of printed marks, punctuation and paragraphing, and assesses their contribution to the aesthetic appeal and readability of the literary text' (Eyoh, 2003:43). This except from Nnimmo Bassey's *Poems on the Run* illustrates the contribution of form to aesthetic appeal:

But we cannot but
Dedicate this poem
To you courageous folks
Who bear the pains of this fire
Who stoke the fires of this rage
Who stand at the front and the rear
Of this.
Bat–
Tle
For
What
Right
Ly
Is
OURS!
(cf. Kato, 1999:30)

The phrase 'Battle for what rightly is OURS!' attracts more attention than it would have done if written conventionally; thus the 'reader spends more time trying to figure out what the meaning of the split words really is' (*ibid*). Cecilia Kato's 'Gurara' shows the meandering flow of the waterfalls:

Gurara
For
Growth
Unity
Reconstruction
Advancement
Revival
Awareness
Gurara for Survival
Gurara it is
Drinking freedom from the fall
(lines from *Desires* (p.13))

A phonological analysis brings out the aesthetic effect of sound in poetry. It is at this level that features like alliteration, intonation, rhyme, repetition, metre, rhythm, onomatopoeia, assonance, pitch, etc. are treated. This excerpt from Niyi Osundare's *The Word Is an Egg* foregrounds the use of repetition for rhythm and emphasis:

Talks about talks
Talks before talks
Talks after talks
Talks between talks
(68).

In this excerpt, Ezenwa-Ohaeto uses alliteration, assonance and consonant clashes to accentuate the pitiable and almost hopeless plight of the Nigerian youth and graduates:

they went through universities
angling for dregs of average joys,

dripping soggy with sampled sex
insatiable with videos of violence
(27)

One can almost 'hear' the sound of dripping water with the repetition of the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ and the violence and confusion resounding in the voiced labio-dental fricative /v/, voiced alveolar fricative /z/ and the consonant clusters /θr/ and /mpl/.

At the syntactic level, stylistics analyses a poem in relation to syntax and the types of sentences it features. One major feature of the syntax of poetry is the inversion of normal syntactic structure for thematic fronting like the inversion of the SVC structure to CSV in the second line of Okigbo's 'Idoto' to front the adverb 'naked':

Before you, mother Idoto,
naked I stand

Another is the use of non-sentences like J.P. Clark's 'Ibadan', which is only but a noun phrase, syntactically speaking:

Ibadan,
running splash of rust
and gold-flung and scattered
among seven hills like broken
china in the sun.

Violations of sub-categorisation and selectional rules are more pronounced at the lexical level. Barryseaman Obinwune's 'Voice of the Palm Tree,' for example, features this sentence:

The palm wine kissed me a sweet sensation
(Onochie *et al*, 2005:185)

Here, a non-human character (palm wine) is made to perform a human activity (kiss). Other features discussed at the lexico-semantic level include diction, word classes, figures of speech, imagery, neologism, borrowing, binary opposition, transliteration, etc. Osundare features a fresh coinage of '*male*ficient' in this line from *The eye of the earth:*

women battling centuries of *male*ficient slavery.
(45)

The italicising of 'male' and the context of use brings out the associative meaning of the word. The poet uses it to satirize the sexist behaviour of men, their age-long enslavement of women.

In all, stylistics analyses the distinctive way of using language for a particular purpose or to achieve a particular effect. It investigates the motivations behind a writer's linguistic choices. Indeed, the style of a literary work is 'the result of the choice of certain forms and structures over others that could have been chosen but which were not' (Verdonk, 2002:6). This view perfectly matches McCrimmon's (1980:189) definition of style as

> the pattern of choices the writer makes in developing his or her purpose. If the choices are consistent, they create a harmony of tone and language that constitutes the style of the work. A description of the style of any piece of writing is therefore an explanation of the means by which the writer achieved his or her purpose.

McCrimmon's view stresses the effect of context – linguistic and non-linguistic – on a writer's style. The writer's purpose for writing is usually predicated on some happenings in the non-linguistic world of experience, which in turn define the author's audience and choice of literary genre. These in turn culminate in the writer's choice of the besat linguistic means of achieving his or her purpose and determine the distinctive nature of the write-up. Thus, stylistics does not study every aspect of language in a text, but the distinctive linguistic features. Such foregrounded features 'hold a promise of stylistic relevance and thereby rouse the reader's interest or emotions' (Verdonk op cit).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the nature of poetry. It has also pointed out the relationship between linguistics and the appreciation of poetry. A good analysis of poetry is almost impossible without an understanding of the way language works. Stylistics bridges the gap between poetry and linguistics and has made itself so useful for poetry analysis. Teachers and students who approach poetry from this viewpoint will indeed appreciate the beauty of the genre. It is then suggested that teachers of poetry equip themselves with the rudiments of linguistics as this will, to a large extent, ensure a better appreciation of the poetry genre.

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