Linguistic deviations in Niyi Osundare's The eye of the earth: A stylistic analysis

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Abstract

Partly due to the high level of linguistic deviations featured in poetry, many scholars hold the view that poetry cannot be studied using linguistic parameters. This paper however supports the opposite argument: that poetry can and should be studied with insights drawn from linguistics. This it demonstrates by examining different forms of linguistic deviations featured in Niyi Osundare's **The Eye of the Earth** and their effect in the anthology. It then discovers that these deviant forms are used to condense the poems and emphasise some points as well as to paint graphic and lasting pictures in the reader's mind. Indeed, they emphasise the dynamic quality of language and make poetry enjoyable.

1.0 Introduction

One of the criticisms raised against the application of linguistics to the analysis of poetry is the high level of linguistic deviation it exhibits. Deviation, according to Wales (1989:117) 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.

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. Hence the argument in some quarters that a linguistic analysis of poetry will be tenuous, that linguistics need not intrude on the threshold of literature since it concerns itself with analysis of phonemes, stress, syntax and lexico-semantics, unlike literary criticism which preoccupies itself with values, purpose and aesthetics. But the fact remains that these deviations become glaring only when poetry is weighed on the scale of linguistics. Saporta

(1960) argues that 'if poetry is language and linguistics is the scientific study of language, linguistics is also the scientific study of poetry.' Thus linguistics offers the tool for breaking the language of poetry to pieces with the aim of establishing how these bits relate to the whole structure.

This paper attempts a stylistic analysis of the linguistic deviations in Niyi Osundare's The Eye of the Earth, with particular emphasis on deviations resulting from the breaking of normal rules of linguistic structure. The aim is to reveal new aspects of meaning in the anthology and how these contribute to the aesthetics of the anthology. Such deviations in The Eye of the Earth cut across different levels of linguistic analysis. However, they will be analysed here under these sub-headings: lexical and morphological deviations, syntactic deviations and semantic deviations.

2.0 Lexical and morphological deviations

Africans writing in foreign tongues are not only bilingual but also bicultural. And this situation becomes problematic when they attempt to articulate African culture in foreign tongues because 'each culture has its own way of looking at the general world and ... culture and language are intimately related' (Osundare, 1995). Faced with such situations, most African writers resort to literal translations of the native concepts. But some lexical items are less easily translatable apparently because lexis is more culture-bound. And the African writer is left with no choice but to transfer directly to English lexical items from their native language. This direct transfer of lexical items from one language into a discourse in another language is called borrowing. And Osundare features this in The Eye of the Earth.

An example of borrowing is seen in 'Earth', which ends with the praise name Ọgééré amọkọyerii (the one that shaves his head with the hoe). Other examples from 'Forest Echoes' include elulu (a kind of bird that hoots at regular hours of the day), oro (a tree), agbegilodo (timber lorry), babalawo (native doctor), patonmo (a plant with small leaves that 'fold up' when touched), and so on. These borrowings reflect the poet's attitude to his native language. Though he writes in English, he still falls back on Yoruba to show his love for his native language. Secondly, they show that he writes essentially for the Nigerian readers whose aesthetic experience will be enhanced by such borrowings since they are familiar with the semantic import of such expressions, including the culture-bound meanings that would be lost in translation. And for the non-Yoruba-speaking audience who might not be familiar with those terms, he cushions the borrowed expressions through footnotes.

Other instances of lexical deviation in The Eye on the Earth are essentially neologisms, pertaining to the invention of new words or items of vocabulary. Niyi Osundare appeals to the rule of word-formation in English which permits the affixation of bound morphemes to free ones to convey new meaning. An instance of such affixation is 'darkdom'. Here, the poet appeals to the meaning of '-dom' as 'an area ruled by something or somebody', to accentuate the level of irresponsibility exhibited by NEPA (National Electric Power Authority):

a desperate match
stabs the night
in the gloomy alleys
of NEPA's darkdom, (p. 25).

NEPA is here seen as the ruler of darkness. It is ironic that the institution that should provide and supply electric power to the masses is seen as thriving in darkness.

Similar deviant lexical items include 'tuberous' and 'breadsome' in 'Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder', a poem that calls for the gainful use of land and the resources therein. The poet taps into the meaning of '-ous' as 'having the nature or quality of' and '-some' as 'producing or likely to' to derive 'tuberous' – having the nature or quality of a tuber – and 'breadsome' – producing bread.

let the sweat which swells earthroot
relieve heavy heaps of their tuberous
burdens;

let wheatfields raise their breadsome
hands
to the ripening sun ..., (p. 48).

Though the poet adheres to existing rules of word-formation in English, the rules are not completely free in their application: they are limited to a small group of items. So their use here strikes the reader as novelty and as a surprising extension of the expressive possibilities of the language.

Osundare also features lexical items that are deviant owing to some foregrounded features of language. One of such is 'maleficient' in 'They Too Are the Earth', which ordinarily refers to anyone capable of doing evil but which the poet gives the associative meaning of male-female domination.

The italicising of 'male-' and the context of use brings out this associative meaning of the word:

> Women battling centuries of maleficient slavery, (p. 45):

Here, the poet satirises the sexist behaviour of men and their agelong 'enslavement' of women.

Another deviant lexical item graphologically induced is 'executhieves' in 'What the Earth Said' which the poet uses to foreground the corrupt practices of supposed leaders. Here, the poet changes '-tives' to '-thieves' to draw attention to the money-laundering and mismanagement of public funds exhibited by Nigerian political leaders. The poet also plays on the phonological features of 'executives' by replacing /t/ with /θ/ to give the deviant structure. This corrupt trait of policy executors is amplified when it is noted that most Nigerian speakers of English pronounce both /t/ and /θ/ as /t/. In effect, they do not know the difference between the policy executors (executives) and their corrupt counterparts (executhieves). This goes to show how deep corruption has eaten into the Nigerian society.

3.0 Syntactic deviations

At the syntactic level, Osundare features fragments as sentences, elliptical sentences and violations of the selectional restriction rule.

Tomori (1997:19) quotes W. Cobbett's (1868) definition of a sentence as 'one of those portions of words which are divided from the rest by a single dot which is called a period, or full point.' Going by this graphological definition of a sentence, Osundare employs a lot of one-word sentences in The Eye of the Earth. 'Our Earth Will Not Die' features these examples:

> Fishes have died in the waters. Fishes.
> Birds have died in the trees. Birds.
> Rabbits have died in their burrow.
> Rabbits, (p. 51).

'Dawncall' also features similar structures:

> Solitary this hour, the earth swarmed by minds and matters, monsters and manikins: Solitary. And soulitary? A deafening silence usurps the earth. Silence in the leaping lair. Silence. Silence in the munching mill. Silence. Silence. in conquered covens. Silence, (p. 40).

It should be noted that the lexical items in the one-word sentences are the subjects of the preceding sentences. They are repeated and given prominence in the one-word sentences for emphasis sake.

Another feature of English syntax is that sentences usually have subjects and predicates apart from imperatives which feature zero subjects. But Osundare features in The Eye sentences that lack this subject-predicate quality. 'Earth', for example, is an accumulation of nominal phrases:

Temporary basement
and lasting roof
first clayey coyness
and last alluvial joy
breadbasket
and compost bed
..., (p.1).

These nominal phrases are more of extended praise-names (Ojaide, 1995) accentuating the different qualities of earth, thus making the descriptive nature of the poem more graphic.

Yet another deviant English syntactic structure featured in The Eye is the omission of the S element in the first stanza of 'Our Earth Will Not Die':

Lynched
the lakes
Slaughtered
the seas
Mauled
The mountains, (p.50).

Ordinarily, the sentences should have an SVO structure but the S element is elided. The sentences are deviant because it is only imperatives that normally give room for the elision of the S element. But here, we find declarative sentences having a similar quality. The poet apparently gives the V and O elements a line each to draw attention to the missing S. And the obvious gap created by the ellipsis is probably meant to draw the reader's attention to the referent(s) of the S element(s). One might ask: Who lynched the lakes? Who slaughtered the seas? Who mauled the mountains? The reader is left to identify who it is that is out to destroy the nation's natural resources.

Also of great significance is the unusual collocation exhibited in the poem: a lake cannot be lynched, a sea cannot be slaughtered and a mountain cannot be mauled. These unusual collocations emphasise the

futility of the actions of the earth's destroyers because, according to the poem, 'our earth will not die.'

Another unusual collocation featured in the anthology is the violation of the selectional rules which 'describe the restrictions on the co-occurrence of certain linguistic items' (Tomori, 1997:76). In other words, some words should not be found in the environment of some other words. But in The Eye of the Earth, we find expressions that flout this rule. The first three lines of 'Forest Echoes' are illustrative:

A green desire, perfumed
memories,
a leafy longing lure my wanderer
feet
to this forest of a thousand
wonders, (p. 3).

The abstract noun 'desire' cannot ordinarily be given a colour attribute; nor can 'memories' be perfumed; or 'longing' leafy. But the poet calls up the connotative meaning of 'green' and 'leafy' as 'fresh' and 'perfumed' as 'sweet-smelling'. Here the poet reminisces on some fresh desire and fond memories that provoke his love for nature and its beauty. These novel structures make more forceful the poet's description of the beauty of nature and his call for its protection.

4.0 Semantic deviations

Semantic deviations are seen in the figurative language of poetry which Griffith (1982:58) defines as 'the conscious departure from normal or conventional ways of saying things.' In The Eye of the Earth, Osundare features different figures of speech like metaphor, simile, personification and metonymy.

A metaphor is a direct comparison of two unlike properties with the aim of bringing out their shared qualities. The last four lines of 'Farmer-Born', for example, reads:

I have thrown open my kitchen
doors
and asked hunger to take a seat,
my stomach a howling dump
for Carolina rice, (p. 44).

The poet sees his stomach as a disposal bin for Carolina rice used here to refer to foreign foods generally which the poet seems to detest. Another

example of metaphor is seen in 'Ours to Plough, Not to Plunder' where earth is seen as 'an unopened grain house' (p.48), housing a lot of natural resources needed for the general wellbeing of man.

Simile, which is the comparison of two unlikely properties signalled by the use of 'like' or 'as' is featured in 'The Rocks Rose to Meet Me':

> The rocks rose to meet me
> like passionate lovers on a long-awaited tryst, (p. 13).

Another example is this from 'First Rain':

> as the land vapour rises
> like a bootless infantry, (p. 29).

These comparisons paint images in the reader's mind.

Personification involves giving animate qualities to inanimate objects. The title of our primary text personifies the earth as having eyes. Some other instances of personification in the anthology include:

> for a sun about to sleep, (p.24)
> trees slap heaven's face ,(p.34)
> you wonder who sent the skies
> weeping,(p.36)

Literally, the sun does not sleep, heaven has no face and the skies do not weep. But here, the poet uses these pictures to describe the approach of dusk, the vitality of the trees (the richness of the soil) and rainfall respectively.

Metonymy involves using a thing to represent another thing closely associated with it. In 'They Too Are the Earth,' the poet uses 'snakeskin shoes and Mercedes tyres' (p.45) to refer to the rich who wear such high-quality shoes and drive such expensive cars. In the same poem, the poet uses 'sweat and grime' to refer to the poor who work tirelessly to make ends meet.

5.0 Conclusion

The analysis above has shown the stylistic effect of deviant forms in Niyi Osundare's The Eye of the Earth.' But it does not claim to be exhaustive. For instance, little mention is made of deviations resulting from the overuse of normal rules of usage like the abundance of phonological, lexical, syntactic and structutral repetitions featured in the anthology. The poet's sudden shift from stanza structure to prose in 'Dawncall' is also not discussed; all in the present researcher's bid not to flout the journal's editorial policies. These features however will be discussed in another paper.

All of these notwithstanding, this discourse has demonstrated and espoused the effectiveness of applying linguistic principles in the analysis of poetry and the new frontiers of meaning foregrounded. It has indeed helped in breaking through the language of poetry which is seen as an iron curtain militating against the appreciation of poetry. Osundare uses these deviant forms to condense his poems and emphasise certain points. He also uses them to paint graphic and lasting pictures in the reader's mind as well as to appeal to the associative meanings of some expressions. What is more, they emphasise the dynamic quality of language the frustration of which will result in a preponderance of hackneyed and unmotivating expressions. Kolawole (2003) quotes Aristotle as observing that

> 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 will raise the diction above the commonplace.

Indeed, the beauty and sublimity of Osundare's The Eye of the Earth is accentuated by these linguistic deviations.

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