

Lexical Innovation in Nigerian Novels: A Critical Discourse Investigation

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Abstract

The emergence and application of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the study of language has enabled discourse analysts to interpret text beyond its surface meaning, accounting for how language use is, in most cases, influenced by non- and extra-linguistic factors. Employing the critical methods of CDA, therefore, this article investigates the use of lexical innovations such as *I-better-pass-my-neighbour*, *face-me-I-face-you*, among others are used in selected Nigerian novels in order to show how Nigerian writers employ language in a critical manner in responding to socio-political events. The novels: *Arrows of Rain* (2000), *Love my Planet* (2008), *Waiting for an Angel* (2002) and *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (2008) were purposely sampled for

analysis. The methodology involves linguistic and extra-textual analysis of excerpts taken from the sampled texts. The analysis exposes the intertwined relationship between the novelists' lexical innovation and the social process of text production and consumption. Also revealed in the analysis is how ideas and meanings are hidden in words.

Keywords: military dictatorship, lexical innovation, democracy, historical reconstruction

Introduction

The Nigerian society as the pond from which its writers fish for the raw materials to create art has over the years interested critics in different ways. Ekpa and Nta (2006), for example, aver that literary production in Nigeria, as obtains in other parts of the world, is witnessing writers' engagement with social transformations. Nigerian writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Osundare, and Betiang have used their works to challenge racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, military dictatorship and post-independence tyranny. Consequently, writers are seen as invaluable change agents. In the absence of organised and sincere political opposition, as in the case of Nigeria, writers serve the role of government watchdog. It implies that writers are actors in the process of governance. The Nigerian novel is constantly drawing from the realities of the country's social processes in the first tradition of protest art. It follows that the novelists must be well informed of the dynamic nature of their society for them to ably represent that society in art. That the artist draws on common and accessible myths and stories and, from these, recreates new myths to meet contemporary needs is no longer contested (Ekpa and Nta, 2006).

The sociological dimension, which describes the relevance of writers, is located in their grasp and understanding of the interplay of social forces within their socio-political reality, and how they harness their talent in reaction to these forces seems to disturb Egya (2009: 208) who argues:

From Festus Iyayi's arresting Marxism to Buchi Emecheta's acid feminism, down to the loud Marxist-feminism of Sefi Atta and Ifeoma Chinwuba, and to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Igbo-centric post-colonialism, the Nigerian novelist has continued to pay undue attention to socio-political theme (instead of balancing ideas with craft) to avoid being seen as irrelevant to his society.

By contrast, in his book, *Writer as Righter*, Osundare clarifies that it is expedient for African literature to have socio-political and cultural content (2007). Udumukwu has drawn attention to the fact that '... we should use socio-political experience and evidence as a basis for defining Nigerian literature' (2012: 610). Although Odumukwu's perspective seems to be prescriptive, it is one of the best approaches of reading and writing Nigerian literature.

Also, Egya's queries have raised several other questions. Amongst these are: (1) What should be the basic canon of the Nigerian writer in the twenty-first century? (2) What are 'ideas?' And what is 'craft?' (3) Can the two be separated from each other? These questions may direct attention to the problem of Africa's critical theory, and this might interest a later study. But, the question is, if the writer does not address these social issues, in the absence of constructive political opposition, who should? Achebe (2012) reiterates that if African writers do not present the events of their society in their works, they would be irrelevant to their societies.

Interrelatedness between the novel and its socio-political antecedents is inescapable. It follows that the study of the Nigerian novel is not just the study of its linguistic domain and developments, but also its history. It is not as though our attempt is to reduce literature to polemics; it is just that the archival role of literature cannot be ignored. The sampled novels authenticate this claim. The article, therefore, focuses attention on Abimbola Adedun's *Under the Brown Rusted Roofs* (henceforth *Rusted Roofs*); Vincent Egbuson's *Love My Planet* (henceforth *Planet*); Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* (henceforth *Arrows*), and Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (henceforth *Angel*), to illustrate how the novelists' lexical creations are testimonies of the politico-historical atmosphere from which they compose their art.

Lexical Innovation and the Nigerian Novel

The vocabulary of any language is the most susceptible to rapid change. One can discuss changes that take place in language or linguistic changes only after embracing some innovations, new linguistic facts that find their way into a language system because of changes in society. Innovations occur from the existing patterns in the language in which conversation takes place. Lexical innovation describes 'words created to satisfactorily explicate current ideas or events in a society' (Aboh 2013: 131).

A lexical innovation, therefore, implies the use of a new lexical unit, the modification of the root or any part of the structure of a word in a language. Although lexical innovation is not a feature typical to Nigerian writers, in terms of literary discourse, dealing with Nigeria-related themes, inevitably reflects some slants of linguistic and socio-political attributes. Prominent Nigerian writers like Soyinka, Achebe, Okara, Osundare, and Ushie have given Nigerian writing a new character by deliberately stretching

the English lexicon in their works to create new realities. This informs us that Nigerian writers are obviously engaged in the business of extending the frontiers of their inherited colonial language to accommodate their peculiar Nigerian experiences.

While most scholars would look at lexical innovation as merely a stylistic device employed by creative writers for aesthetic reasons, it is pertinent to note that lexical innovation, critically examined, offers insights into the correlation between societal events and writers' use of language. Wodak (2006) argues that the analysis of discourse should depend on specific historical traditions, norms, beliefs and socio-political contexts of the speakers and discourses because discourse may be similar, but the contents as well as the settings in which certain linguistic realisations become possible differ. This calls for a careful and critical interrogation of language use because it is in discourse that the hidden meaning in texts is exposed.

The authors of this article are of the opinion that the semantic distinctions drawn by the innovations are difficult to translate and to convey succinctly outside Nigeria, as they connote peculiar Nigerian socio-political life; though an understanding of the fundamental conceptual structure underlying the innovations is vital for accurate interpretation of Nigeria's historical realities. While the authors focus attention primarily on the formation of words to rebuff socio-political hegemony in the Nigerian context, they are also concerned with broader issues of the way societal events influence a writer's creative use of language.

Using language, literature performs numerous functions. In describing literature and its roles, Obinaju (2008: 9–10) observes: Literature which itself proceeds from language, is closely linked to human activities on earth. It therefore reflects and refracts the goings on in the societies, using whichever

languages are obtainable and adequate for such human groupings. For this reason, in every human community across the ages, literature has been elevated to a very high pedestal and assigned the noble and major role of educating man right from his infancy thus helping him to appreciate and perpetuate the norms and values of his race or social group as well as fulfil himself.

This implies that to adequately discuss form and content of literature, the analyst must consider the socio-political factors – the subtexts that motivate its production. Literature fulfils particular social functions; is marked by particular relationships between other agencies of political, historical and economic power; is characterised by particular interpersonal relations between writer and reader; and language is often the fossil through which literature is preserved and ‘transmitted’. An appreciation of the fundamental role of language to literature or vice versa enriches a discourse analyst’s understanding of writers’ creative use of language in literary situations.

Critical Discourse Analysis

There are diverse views to critical discourse analysis just as there are several scholars and contributors. But all contributors seem to agree that critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA) is mainly concerned ‘with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in languages’ (Wodak, 2001: 2).

The term ‘critical’ is associated with the Frankfurt school of philosophy’ (Mazid, 2007:352), and it means both ‘self-reflexive’ and ‘socio-historically-situated’ (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 261). Self-reflexivity and socio-historical situatedness, in addition to the concern with power, control, ideology and, recently

identity are the defining characteristics of CDA. CDA provides an alternative text processing approach to discourse analysis with differentiating features in the way that it aims to relate functions of linguistic structures to certain value systems, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions – in short, ideology – in society (Mazid, 2007). Therefore, in this approach, the emphasis is on bringing to the surface structure what is ideologically embedded in the deep structure of language.

Fairclough argues that our social practices are unclear because they are ‘bound up with causes and effects which may not be at all apparent’ (1995:133). CDA demystifies the mystery of text: it identifies how language helps in hiding as well as revealing socio-political inequalities that exist in society. CDA reveals, through systematic linguistic analysis, how language reproduces ‘to a greater or lesser extent, the social and ideological structures in which the text is written and is read’ (Thornborrow and Wareing, 1998: 215). The core of CDA is to go beyond textual analysis to uncover hidden meaning and messages as well as possible interpretation, be it social or political, inherent in a linguistic expression, and its consequence on the hearers/decoders.

The basic tenet of CDA lies in the need for a broad, diverse, multidisciplinary and problem-oriented programme which will select its methods and areas of analysis on the basis of a theoretical analysis of social issues (van Dijk, 2001). CDA is therefore interested in examining the fundamental relations that assign power to various groups in society, and sees language as one particularly important instrument of exercising that power. It provides special guides for human action, enabling the analyst of text to transcend the micro (linguistic form) to study how the

macro (non-linguistic form) implicitly affects the production of the former.

CDA helps to liberate people from the strictures of power; and it is critical in the sense that it shows the text's unspoken and suppressed voices; the fact being that the speech of a book comes from a certain silence. Macherey (1978: 68) contends that 'at the edge of the text, the language of ideology is momentarily hidden, but is made eloquent by its very absence'. The analyst must, therefore, go beyond the surface level of the text and explain it, must say what it does not and could not say. Moreover, the ideological concern of writers manifests in the way they manipulate language to present social imbalance.

CDA as a practice in discourse analysis is applied to the analysis of the sampled Nigerian novels to investigate, describe, and specify the linguistic (micro) and extra-linguistic structures (macro) that the novelists employ in the production of the overall ideological message communicated through their novels. CDA in practice is therefore a useful medium of discourse analysis not only because it relates literature to particular worldviews, through a detailed study of the practices and choices of language, but also provides discourse analysts with the means of critically reading works of literature. The concern of this article is to apply the multidisciplinary and critical methods of CDA to the analysis of lexical innovation as reflected in the selected Nigerian novels.

Lexical Innovation as 'Reincarnation' of History

Lexical innovation, considering strategies for historical reconstruction or expression and the sociolinguistic implications thereof, is a widely represented topic in linguistic and literary research. Particularly, the study of Nigerian literature includes linguistic as well as historical, ethnological, sociocultural, and

pedagogical approaches. In the discussion of lexical innovation, the article focuses attention on connotative meaning. This is because the meaning of words in discourse situations requires a progression from the peripheral meaning to the focal meaning, the intended meaning of lexical items. As far as discourse is concerned, the focal meaning of words can be ascertained by contextual variables. The core of this position is that words derive the meaning they have by virtue of their correlation with functional distinctions in the culture or subculture, in which the words are used.

In the fifty-three years of Nigeria's political independence, the military ruled for more than thirty years, and the remaining years have been left in the hands of 'mediocre caliber of politicians who were emerging to try their luck in the new transition to democracy' (Maier, 2000:44). The words, examined in this article, are emotive and evaluative re-presentation of the political disturbances that rocked the country both in the military and civilian eras.

Words can be created to show a people's contempt for the situation they find themselves in. They can also be created as symbols of struggle for the liberation of people. The novelists under consideration here demonstrate a strong desire to invent words that empower them to deconstruct hegemonic norms. Some of these innovations, their lexical processes and the novels they are taken from are presented in the table below.

Lexical Innovation and Reincarnation of History

| Innovation | Meaning Equivalence | Lexical Processes | Novel |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|
| Glasses-wearing figures | Government assassins | Sarcasm/compounding | <i>Angel</i> (p. 51) |



| | | | |
|---------------------|---|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| I-pass-my-neighbour | 700-volt power generator | Compounding | <i>Planet</i> (p.165) |
| Face-me-I-face-you | Rented apartments where rooms, separated by a passage, face each other. | Sarcasm/compounding | <i>Angel</i> (p.85) |
| Soja | Soldier | Phonological | <i>Arrows</i> (p.100) |
| Sinator | Senator | Phonological/Sarcasm | <i>Planet</i> (p.232) |
| Opina po | Opinion poll | Phonological | <i>Rusted Roofs</i> (208) |

All the words in the above table are nouns that name people or describe places, ideas and concepts. They are used to perform peculiar social functions. For example, the noun phrase *glasses-wearing figures*, a morphological process of compounding, has historical connotation. It refers perversely to certain people who were perceived as subservient and seemed to follow orders impetuously. Those *glasses-wearing figures* were government stooges whom the military government of Late Sani Abacha engaged to unleash terror on those who dared to oppose his draconian decrees. Lomba, one of Habila's narrators, captures the situation succinctly:

'Excuse me, please,' I began, but they neither looked at me nor faltered in their determined progress to a black Peugeot 504 with tinted windows parked by the roadside. As they appeared, the back door opened and another black-clad, glasses-wearing figure stepped out and dragged Bola into the car, shutting the door after him. Now the two men turned and

faced us; there was a crowd behind us. They stood so that they blocked the car door, their hands in their coat pockets.

‘Please,’ I began, and stopped. I don’t know what more to say. If only I could see their eyes, but their glasses were like walls separating them from us.

‘You can’t take him away! Peter interjected. ‘He is our brother! He is not well.

‘He is not well,’ Paul echoed.

‘Please.’

Now one of them opened his mouth to a trap-like slit and hissed, ‘Get lost if you know what is good for you.’ (*Angel* 57) If the denotative meaning of the word *glasses-wearing figures* is relied on, the actual meaning will be lost. The lexical item has a powerful political meaning. *Glasses-wearing figures* could have positive meaning if it refers to a movie star, for example. But in the context of the novel, it has a negative connotation. It serves as smokescreen behind which evil-doers hide to perpetrate evil on the down-trodden Nigerian masses.

The innovated word clearly captures how Abacha, though not the type that was frequently seen in public, ‘spawned a climate of fear that Nigerians never experienced’ (Meredith, 2006: 575). The dark glasses worn by Abacha himself, and his agents of oppression were metaphors for the gloom that befell Nigeria. In dealing with political opponents, Abacha resorted readily to arbitrary measures – arrest, detention without trial, among several other repressive methods. In fact, on Abacha’s military dictatorship, Meredith writes:

Even by the standards that Nigeria’s military dictators had set, General Sani Abacha reached new levels of notoriety. From his fortified presidential complex at Aso Rock in Abuja, he relished the use of raw power to crush all opponents and to amass a



personal fortune, acting with a degree of ruthlessness that outstripped that of all his predecessors (2006: 575).

Next to the above example is the use of *sinator* in Egbuson's *Planet*, a phonological realisation, and also sarcasm on the English word *senator*. While in English *senator* refers to 'a member of Senate' (*Chambers 21st Century Dictionary* 2004); in Egbuson's *Planet*, it describes the sinful attributes of the Nigerian senator. Again, the meaning of the word is drawn from the readers' encyclopaedic knowledge of Nigeria's political context. The outlandish behaviour of the country's lawmakers earns them the derogatory description. In fact, Aboh (2009) argues that since Nigeria's return to democracy in May 29, 1999, the theme of corruption has dominated literary discourse. The novelist creates such a word, and expands its meaning to arouse negative feelings towards corrupt leaders, and to see the need why such politicians should not be voted into elective offices.

Drawing significantly from the 'silences' of language, and the ultimate influence of society on language, the word *sinator*, which is a blend of *sinner* and *senator*, describes how the events in a society influence a writer's creative utilisation of the resources of language. While military dictatorship, which reached its climax in the eras of Generals Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha, left Nigerians in psychologically brutalised conditions, Nigerians are yet to find solace in the emerging democracy. The novelists' lexical innovation illustrates people's continuing extenuating negation of hegemony, indicating that societies would not stop and stay in their dominated states.

There is also the creation *soja* (see the table above), a derogatory word for soldier, (though not derogatory in ordinary life, and an adulterated Nigeria Pidgin pronunciation of soldier) is a furtherance of the assertion that language is an indispensable

hub which society rotates. The word captures Habila's disenchantment with the military's involvement in Nigeria's politics. He laments that 'The military have turned the country into one huge barracks, into a prison. Every street out there is crawling with them' (54). The innovation, *soja* adumbrates a history of political uncertainties and ruthless assassination of anti-military crusaders. For one to appreciate the meaning of *soja*, one has to locate the innovation within its historical context of military despotism in Nigeria. The writer presupposes that *soja* will capture the depth of military tyranny. So the distorted spelling of soldier is contemptuous: an expression of resistance against those who wielded power and subjugated Nigerians. The overall intention is to describe how the Nigerian populace was subjected to torture through draconian military decrees. *Soja* is the Nigerian commoner's word for *soldier*. The novelist's conscious preference of this 'down-trodden' version of the word makes the ordinary Nigerian the speaking voice, thus concretising the tone of protest through the lexical choice. Such historical reconstruction points a direction to the nature of Nigerian literature in general. Suffice it to say that this historical reconstruction does not reduce the Nigerian novel to history, but shows that the Nigerian novel can hardly be separated from the events of its society and time.

Interestingly, Ndibe's creation of *sapped breasts*, a morphological process of compounding, shows another way lexical innovation is involved in the 'expression' of people's disenchantment with circumstances that expose them to unbearable hardship. He writes:

Such blatant untruths provoked a bizarre reaction: laughter. Women laughed suckling their babies on sapped breasts. The vanquished and famished who craved the comforts of the



grave laughed. Medians laughed in groups gathered round their radio sets; ... (Arrows 191-2)

The word *sapped* is a derivative of SAP, an acronym for former military president, Ibrahim Babangida's economic policy of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). It is believed to be the fountain of crippling of Nigeria's economy. In the context of the novel, Ndibe creates the word to express his dissonance with an economic programme that impoverished Nigerians. Metaphorically, *sapped* connotes a dehydrating and osmotic programme which has impoverished Nigerians such that it has *sapped* the breasts of nursing mothers, leaving them with nothing to breastfeed their sucklings. The expression encodes the height of poverty that accompanied military dictatorship. Ideologically, the innovation indicates the novelist's strategic detachment from an economic programme that impoverished the people. The innovation *sapped-breast*, therefore, contests the adoption of an economic programme that is incompatible with the economic realities of the Nigerian people. During such moments of crisis, ideological construction of opinion becomes more explicit not only on the personal level, but also at the national.

Another fascinating example of lexical innovation is *opina po*. *Opina po*, a phonological equivalence of opinion poll, is Adedokun's castigation of corrupt electioneering processes in her country. Baba (a Yoruba word for father) alludes to an illiterate politician who dominates the politics of Ibadan. However, Baba's use of *opina po* exemplifies his disregard for free and fair election and penchant for imposing candidates on the people, a continuing feature of Nigerian politics. This is why when the party chairman suggests that the party steps up its campaign, Baba answers:

'You don't know anything. You think it is poster people vote for? If a hungry man comes here and I give him food, he goes

back to the whole of his *agboole* to announce my good name. If tomorrow I ask him to vote for my dog, he will. You tell the party to bring in more money and by the time we give people food and money here, you will see whether the sands in this Ibadan will not vote for you.' (*Planet* 208)

Lamenting Nigeria's democratic situation in his recently published book that was received with mixed responses in Nigeria, Achebe contends:

The question of choice in selecting a leader in Nigeria is often an academic exercise, due to the election rigging, violence, and intimidation of the general public, particularly by those in power, but also those with the means – the rich and influential. There is also the unpleasant factor of the violence associated with partisan politics that is often designed to keep balanced, well-educated Nigerians away. So it can be said that the masses – the followership we are concerned about – don't really have a choice of leadership, because there is no true democratic process. (2012: 245)

Underneath Adela Kun's creation of *opina po*, there is the subtext of resistance. *Opina po* carries the message of awareness, anticipating a qualitatively better Nigeria only if the people's votes count, and public office holders are not imposed on the people. *Opina po* becomes a critically symbolic lexicalisation, as it reveals one of the insidious strategies employed by a 'political godfather' in southwestern Nigeria to promote the culture of 'godfatherism'. The idea of 'godfatherism' undermines the masses' political interest and compels them to accept whatever votes, and whichever candidate is imposed on them. The novelist's choice of the non-literate *opina po* for *opinion poll* further depicts the irony of the blind leading the sighted in Nigeria's political landscape. Here, then, we are being presented

a situation where the barely educated, as evident in the innovated item, leads the rest, some of who are far more literate and enlightened. Thus, the novelist's lexical innovation, literature transcends its entertaining function to become the 'guilty conscience' of society.

Words have both evaluative and emotive ways of expressing our feelings about people and situations. This emotive way of using language is seen in:

My compound was a block in a row of identical blocks, distinguished from each other by the faint black numbers on their front. I lived in No. 15. When the sun was high, the roof crackled and spat. The buildings were long and tabular – from above they'd look like worms stretched out to dry in the sun. A long cavernous passage led from the entrance to the door of each room; ten in all, five on either side, facing each other (face-me-I-face-you, the tenants called this formation).
(*Angels* 85)

Habila's adoption of *face-me-I-face-you*, a Nigerian expression for rented apartments separated by a passage and facing each other, depicts in a vivid manner how poverty subjects one to reside in an environment where one would not ordinarily reside, as most inhabitants of this kind of residential formation are poor. However, the innovation points to a trend where rural dwellers, in search of better-life opportunities, have left rural areas for the cities. *Face-me-I-face-you* is a linguistic consequent of rural–urban migration which has caused most cities to be densely populated. Invariably, such residential formations are found in cities where there is a wide margin between the poor and the rich. Significantly, the innovation depicts language as the centrifugal pivot around which events in the society rotate; and the writer's onus is to capture such developments in their creative

endeavours. But more importantly, it decries government's inability to provide housing, as well as housing schemes for its teeming population.

Related to the example above is *I-pass-my-neighbour*: it describes a 700-volt power generator. It is a recent Nigerian lexical innovation that reminds us of the Nigerian government's failure to provide electricity to its teeming population. Critically, the full meaning of the innovation emerges as it is used to grade the level of poverty among the poor. Roughly translated, *I-pass-my-neighbour* means 'I am better than my poor neighbour.' In the context of the novel, *I-pass-my-neighbour* summarises social decadence and moral degeneration in the Niger Delta region. The poverty level and neglect of the region is so bad that Niger Delta girls have to indulge in clandestine sexual activities in order to make a living. Ereki explains the situation to Toundi, his cousin:

Ereki, wearing a new short sleeve shirt, new jeans and new sneakers, patiently explained again. 'That house where the I-pass-my-neighbour is belongs to Susan's father. When she comes from Oil City in Ogazza or Balazza she stays there too.'
 (*Planet* 165)

Oil City is where multinational oil corporation staff reside. The girls of Ogazza village go to Oil City to commercialise sex so as to enable them to take care of themselves and their families. The novelist's lexical process is an obvious reflection of the decadent moral level of some girls in Oil City, and also a graphic presentation of government's failure in providing social infrastructure for its people.

Again, we are forced to return to Meredith, cited earlier in this article. He writes: 'The Delta region is one of the poorest, least developed parts of Nigeria, lacking basic amenities; there is little provision of electricity or pipe-borne water supplies, and schools

were inadequately funded' (576). Several years after independence, Nigeria still presents a pitiable spectacle. There are frequent power cuts in most Nigerian towns not to mention rural areas that have been tossed to utter darkness; in the cities, most parts, especially those whose residence is cut-off from where the movers-and-shakers of government live, go weeks on end without electricity. Thus, Nigerian novelists use language in a political manner: their lexical choices and the way they manipulate linguistic structures to mean instantiate the political terrain they compose their art from.

Conclusion

The foregoing shows the Nigerian novelists' dissonance with the political situation in their country as characterised by aggressive lexical innovations. The items also show that the missing words have to be coined whenever the available stock (English) is insufficient in expressing the ideas that exist in the peculiar experiences which the novelists relate. From our point of view, the goal attained by the novelists is clarity of expression and greatest efficacy of vocabulary. This is why even when the expression *glasses-wearing figures* is an English expression, it has been semantically extended to cater for the realities it reflects. It therefore implies that the interpretation of innovated expressions must transcend their surface meaning so as to unearth their hidden meanings.

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