DISSECTING J.P. CLARK’S OZIDI: A SYNTACTIC PERSPECTIVE

Olarotimi Daniel Ogungbemi
University of Ibadan

Abstract

Existing studies on J.P Clark-Bekederemo’s drama have focused mainly on thematic functions. In the process, they have brought out the relation of themes to the meanings of the drama texts. These studies have ignored largely how Systemic Functional Linguistic devices contribute to meaning in his plays. The present study is, therefore, a syntactic appreciation of J.P. Clark’s Ozidi with a view to showing how syntactic devices contribute to meaning clarifications in the text. Syntactic features such as declarative mood, interrogative mood, imperative mood, and complex sentences were deployed strategically to achieve meanings and convey the intentions of the playwright. The above mentioned features are deployed to capture social and political realities in the country. To a very large extent, the meaning of the text depends on these features. These features help to convey series of information, and it is equally evident that the feelings of the playwright are fused into the messages that are both informative and didactic in the text.

Keywords: J.P Clark, Ozidi, Systemic Functional Linguistics, mood types, complex sentences

Introduction

Functional grammarians are interested in finding the link between the grammar and the meaning, as well as the grammar and the context. De Sylva and Burns (1999: 34) opine that “…if we see language as functionally related to its context of use, grammar is seen as determined by the kinds of discourses and texts that people need to produce for different purposes in different social contexts.” Systemic Functional Linguistics provides language with the affordances for making meaning and authenticating context with supporting linguistic components in the text. Young and Harrison (2004:1) and Lehtonen and Varis (2009) believe that Systemic Functional Linguistics is a semiotic approach which examines the functions that language has evolved to serve. SFL views language as a social construct; it considers the role of language in the society and the ways in which society has fashioned language. In addition, SFL makes a case for a dialectical view of language in which particular discursive events influence the contexts in which they occur and contexts are in turn influenced by these discursive events (Fowler et al 1979). Systemic Functional Linguistics also emphasizes the cultural and historical aspects of meaning (Graham 2004:33-35).

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) used as a theoretical framework for this study was developed by M.A.K Halliday, who built this conception of language on the ideas of his tutor, J.R Firth. It is an approach to linguistic description which aims to provide a comprehensible account of how language is used in contexts for communication. SFG, in the words of Gotzsche (2009), considers:

Language as a resource that is fundamentally shaped by the uses that people make of it; hence it aims to explain the forms of language in terms of the meanings that they express.

SFL also aims to develop a grammar which is designed to ‘make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written’ (Halliday 1994:15). It has four basic categories that are systematically linked to one another. The four categories are: unit, structure, system and class. Unit refers to the category which corresponds a segment of the linguistic material about which statements are to be made (unit comprises morpheme, word, group, clause and sentences). Structure is “the category set up to account for likeness between events in successivity” (Halliday 1967) (for instance, a sentence contains a subject, predicate, complement and adjunct). System is set up to account for the occurrence of one rather than another from a number of like events. In other words, it is the choice made from alternative forms within a structure e.g choosing between a pronoun and a noun or a present and past tense in a predicate. And class is described by Halliday (ibid) “the grouping of members of a given unit which is defined by operation in the structure of the unit next above. Put succinctly, it is the categorization of similar patterned words into distinct grammatical groups’ e.g verb, adjective, adverb.

J.P Clark is certainly an internationally recognized African writer. His works have evoked volume of criticisms across the globe. The bulk of the studies on this eminent and scholarly
playwright/poet, focuses on the literary and thematic features, thereby almost neglecting the linguistic aspects. Non-linguistic studies on the plays of Clark include (Egudu 1976), Olaniyan (2014) and Teilano (2007). Yebo’s works (2011a, 2011b, 2012a and 2012b) are all on J.P Clark’s poetry. From the two perspectives where Clark’s works have been studied, little or no effort has been made to solely address a Syntactic appreciation of his plays. While these studies have made insightful interpretations of the stylistic and thematic aspects they investigated, none has addressed the Systemic Functional Linguistic tools employed by the playwright to encode the messages of the play under study - Ozidi. This article examines J.P. Clark’s Ozidi with a special focus on how the playwright deploys syntactic devices to make commentaries on his country, Nigeria. The paper is interested in revealing the Systemic Functional Linguistic tools deployed by J.P Clark as he uses the play - Ozidi to portray the political and social experiences of the Nigeria nation.

Ozidi: A Synopsis

The play, Ozidi, is set in Orua. It tells the story of a man, Ozidi who is confronted by impossible tasks. Orua needs a king. Ozidi cannot be king because his elder brother, Temugedege is alive. The latter is not fit to be king, and Ozidi protests strongly against the desire of the council of state making Temugedege king. But the Council of State goes ahead and makes Temugedege king. Ozidi demands that since his brother has been made king, the latter be honoured as tradition requires. The men of Orua go to hunt for “a prize far beyond the lion’s head” (18) to honour the new king. There is a conspiracy. Ozidi is murdered by his kinsmen, and his head is presented to King Temugedege. The play tells of the posthumous birth of Ozidi’s son, the extraordinary manner of his growing up under the magic wings of his grandmother, Oreame, and of the numerous battles the hero engages in with all manner of men and monsters to regain for his family its lost glory. Ozidi is aided and guided by his grandmother, Oreame, who possesses supernatural powers. In his bid to make those who killed his father pay, Ozidi oversteps the natural bounds set to his quest, and it is not until he has received a divine visit from the Smallpox King that he emerges purged and is received back into the society of men.

Analysis and Discussion

J.P. Clark deployed the declarative mood in making invaluable comments about the social, cultural and political lives of Nigeria and Nigerians in the drama text - Ozidi. Instances of his use of the declarative mood are shown below.

1) Nobody is going to serve Temugede; he is an idiot. (Ozidi 15)
2) No sacrifice will sweeten them. (Ozidi 6)
3) We men have important affairs of state to consider right now. (Ozidi, 6)
4) You were never one to care in what position you stood in the eye of the public. Right now, if I may tell you, Orua is like a tree fallen in the open. (Ozidi, 7)

The first sentence is a statement of fact about the rivalry between Ozidi and Temugede, his brother who was chosen as the king at the expense of Ozidi. It is expressed with a tone of finality. In sentence (1) also, the second declarative sentence “he is an idiot” goes a long way to tell us how convinced Ozidi is about what he is telling the readers as regards his brother the king designate. This finds a parallel in the Nigerian political situation today. It is not uncommon among politicians in the country to publicly display their rivalry for all and sundry to see. In (2) above, the sentence is also rendered in a declarative mood. It is an assertion also of the fact that politicians in the country are selfish to a fault. Nothing satisfies them. This statement is uttered by the Old Woman to the Storyteller. This is strategically deployed by Clark to show the level of corruption in the country. However hard the people cry and groan, the leaders and the political class will not be moved to help them. In (3) above, the sentence is also assertive. It is said by the Storyteller in response to the Old Woman. The Storyteller said this to dismiss the Old Woman. J.P. Clark deployed this to show the inequality and power play that exist between the men folk and the women folk. It is a way of saying you have to excuse us now because you are not wanted here; this is the gathering for men who are superior to women. In (4), the mood is also declarative. Ofe was referring to one of the elders. An elder in any society especially in the African society is expected to be exemplary and a source of motivation to others in the society. J.P Clark is saying that leaders in the country just do not care about the position of the country in the eye of the public, local or international. The declarative statement, “Orua is like a tree fallen in the open” captures the Nigerian situation. To the international community and other concerned citizens of the country, Nigeria is a
disgrace and not living up to her potentials. She is a country heading for a collapse.

Further, the playwright, J.P. Clark, used the interrogative mood to make commentaries on the political, religious and the socio cultural beliefs of the people in Nigeria. There are instances of utterances in the texts under study that evoke the interrogative mood.

5) Temugede, what are you doing with a chewing stick in your mouth at this time of day? (Ozidi, 13)
6) You will save him for me, won’t you Tamara? (Ozidi, 26)
7) Is the great Ozidi telling us the throne of Orua is not big enough for the buttock of some people? (Ozidi, 9)
8) Is some poor fellow dying again? (Ozidi, 98)

The playwright deployed the interrogative mood in (5) above to intimate the reader(s) with how leaders in the country do not set their priority right. The interrogative statement is from Ozidi to Temugede who have just been pronounced king in Orua. As a king one should be proactive and up and doing about matters that concern and benefit the citizenry. Obviously, Temugede was just brushing his teeth at an inappropriate time, when more important things should be attended to. This finds a semblance with the Nigerian political terrain. Leaders are mainly incompetent. Little wonder, they are notorious for misplacing their priorities. They either do not do the right thing at the right time or do not do anything at all. In (6), Orea beseech one of the gods known to the Ijaw people, Tamara, the ‘Mother Almighty’, to protect her husband from the hands of his enemies in Orua. The sentence is also assertive. In the face of an impending danger, Orea commits the safety of her husband to the hands of a higher authority, a deity called Tamara. This is coming after it appears she has done everything humanly possible to convince her husband not to join in the raid that eventually led to his death. Here, J.P. Clark also reminds the readers that humans are mainly reliant on supernatural elements for their survival. When all seems over from a human position, humans remember the higher forces and look on them for liberation. In (7) above, J.P Clark is confrontational and daring. Leadership should not be the exclusive rights of an advantaged few. In Nigeria, some groups of people consider rulership as their birth rights. Ozidi in the play belongs to this group of people. Despite the fact that the majority has chosen his brother as the king, Ozidi still insists that his brother is not the rightful person to the throne. He calls his brother names just to discredit him before the people. Clark is in effect exposing the power play or tussle that goes on especially the political arena, in the society. Furthermore, in (8) above, Clark deploys the polar question to show the confusion of the people. They are confused; they have lost track of the tragedies befalling them. Clark deploys this to make comments on the Nigerian situation. Nigerians are fond of asking questions as the one in (8) because their land is not secure. The leaders have failed to provide security for the people and the land. They appear lost and confused.

The imperative mood is also used to convey his intentions and vision in the texts under study. Through the imperative mood, J. P. Clark comments on societal decadence and ills. Instances of the imperative mood are clear in the following sentences in Ozidi:

9) Give us good wives
10) Give us good children
11) Give us good money (Ozidi, 4)
12) Change your ways (Ozidi, 59)
13) Ozidi, do not go into the night. (Ozidi, 23)

The society described in the drama text Ozidi is one that is experiencing decay from different perspectives. There are no good wives; the children are not responsible and money is hard to come by. Imperative sentences (9-11) are instances of ‘give’ command from the members of the community to supposedly higher authority. The people are disturbed and fed up with the negative trends events are taking in the country. Therefore, they ask for good wives. It is a general believe in Africa that good wives will bring about good children. It is disheartening to see hunger amid of plenty. Nigeria is richly blessed with mineral resources and human resources. Therefore, it is shocking that in the midst of plenty, many are hungry. Thus, the people want to find solution to these anomalies as soon as possible. The mood in sentences (9-11) shows urgency and desperation. If necessary things are not done to correct the
situation, those making the demands might take the law into their own hands. In (12), the imperative statement is said by Orea to Ozidi. This is because of Ozidi’s violent behaviours. This sentence is also symbolic; it is J.P. Clark’s way of warning violent individuals especially leaders in society to desist from violence. Sentence thirteen is a warning and equally a command. Here, Orea warns and commands Ozidi not to go into the night. It is a stamp on the fact that the night or darkness signifies or is synonymous with hazard. This is tactically deployed by Clark to show the danger that comes with nightfall in the country. Night brings about insecurity, peril and annihilation. It is a time used by political rivals to slaughter and maim one another. The mood in the sentences above shows urgency, warning and desperation. The mood calls for urgent actions. It is observed that Clark’s deployment of these mood types concern complimentary themes and subject matters. The three mood types deal with deprivation, violence, betrayal, etc.

In addition, J.P. Clark’s intentions and vision are also encoded via sentence typology in the text-Ozidi. A sentence type that is deployed strategically by the playwright is the complex sentence. In the complex sentences, the two clauses are not equal. One usually depends on the other and cannot stand alone.

14) Until you bring him cowries and cows, we shall not sleep in this city (18)
15) He will tear us to pieces like mere goats unless we do something at once (19)
16) After the ceremony, he ceases to be mere wood (18)
17) You will tell the whole story if I gave you (32)
18) If you are my true brother, you will take care of all that (14)

J.P. Clark’s Ozidi describes a society in which there are inequalities. When one considers the import of what is said in (14) above, the disparity becomes evident. The ruling class and the ruled are captured in the complex sentence. Despite the fact that the rulers are privileged by virtue of their social and political standing, their subjects will still have to suffer to make sure the rulers are fine. This situation describes the Nigerian situation perfectly. One’s standing in the country determines how much power one wields. The rulers prey on the ruled. The stronger one is, the more likelihood one dominates the weaker ones. The rich and influential control and dominate the poor in the country. Further, through the sentence in (14), the playwright has its take on corruption. Corruption appears to be the oil that greases the Nigeria’s engine. With the gifts of cowries and cows, the people are assured of their peace. However, should they fail to bribe and placate the more powerful, disaster awaits them. Corruption is everywhere in the country. This has resulted in a myriad of problems. People prey on people. It is no longer news to hear that before job seekers are given jobs in the country, some of them have to pay through their noses. Before contracts are awarded, contractors must agree to give certain percentage of the money to the people giving out the contract. The first clause in (15) is a representation of how violent a man can be. The clause carrying this message is the independent clause. This is a deliberate attempt by J.P Clark to tell the reader(s) that the country is very violent. People are seen as animals. Little wonder then, they are mauled and killed for no just and good reasons. Violence is considered the answer to almost every question.

In (16) above, the disparity between the clauses shows the nature of man. It is widely believed that a man’s true behavior is known when he becomes rich or holds power. The subordinate clause in the sentence reveals that Temugede is still not showing the people his real self. When he becomes the king, he shows his true colours by making demands from the people. Truly, he ceases to be a mere wood. This also finds a parallel in the Nigerian situation. Politicians are notorious for hiding their true colours before elections, only to show them when they hold political offices. In 17, J. P. Clark also uses the complex sentence to talk about the insidious power of corruption. Orea, Ozidi’s wife, is the one talking here. She wants to know if her husband has been killed but the two messengers are being diplomatic and will not tell her. Sensing they will only talk if she gives them what they want from her, she tells them the secret of Ozidi’s power. Through her interaction with the two men, she knows something terrible has happened to her husband. Clark is in effect saying that bribery is the key that can open any door in the country. Another problem confronting the country is incompetence of our leaders. In 18 Clark talks about this particular problem. Temugede, Ozidi’s older brother, knows he is a misfit for the position of a king, yet becomes a king. He reasons that Ozidi being a powerful man will be there to fight and go to wars in the king’s behalf. Ozidi is killed while trying to help his brother.

Clark’s language in the texts is simple and down to earth even though the sentences are the complex types. The implication of this is that simplicity is one of the stylistic peculiarities of the text, Ozidi. It is also reveals the narrative style adopted by the playwright.
Conclusion

Halliday’s Systemic Functional Theory on which the study is anchored has been justified in this study. In Halliday (1991:18), language is said to perform these three functions: experiential or ideational, interpersonal and textual. At different linguistic levels, J.P Clark in his play understudy- Ozidi deploys language to perform different functions in the society. This study reveals that in various ways J.P Clark uses language to make commentaries on social and political issues in his immediate environment and beyond. Syntactic features such as mood types and complex sentences are deployed. The text was written decades back but the messages it conveys are timeless to the Nigerian situation. The play deals with issues of corruption, politics, leadership, etc. Clark uses the text to make commentaries on these issues to the Nigerian government and the Nigerian people. Clark's diction succeeds in delivering his message effectively in all the texts studied. In the text, Clark consciously adheres to character code concordance – a stylistic norm in which there is appropriate linguistic matching between character and language. The clausal nesting in the text, even when it appears heavy, does not blur comprehension. The clauses are so woven to suit the various situations of the stories. Complex sentence patterns are deliberately employed to show the nature of the society in which the texts are set.

References


Author

Olarotimi Daniel Ogungbemi
University of Ibadan
olarotimiozungbemi@gmail.com