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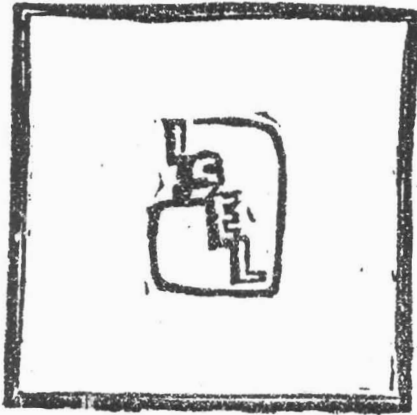


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LINGUISTIC STYLISTICS AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION:
AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION TO AWONUGA'S
ANALYSIS OF 'IF'

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Abstract

This study criticizes the linguistic stylistic procedure employed by Awonuga (1988) to interpret the poem 'If' by Jared Angira in his recent article in Ife Studies in English Language. The paper observes that while Awonuga's conception of linguistic stylistics and its principles is correct, his method of illustrating the approach is inadequate and inappropriate when considered, particularly, from the point of view of its relevance to learners/users of English as a Second Language. While the paper agrees to the fact that the linguistic stylistics approach always focuses the description of form in literary texts, it also believes firmly that such a description should never lose sight of the cultural context and speech situation of the texts under study. As it were, Awonuga's article can claim to have successfully accounted for the form of 'If' but not the text, in spite of the latter's primary role in communicative language teaching.

1.0 Linguistic Stylistics and Textual Interpretation

That linguistic stylistics has come under severe attack in recent times (see, especially, Fish, 1980) is not because it is not a valid approach. However, the inconsistent and inexplicit explications of the approach by the adherents continue to open it to criticisms.

In essence, linguistic stylistics is propounded as an approach which integrates linguistics with literary criticism (cf. Widdowson, 1975) in order to marry the objectivity of the former with the intuitive characteristics of the latter. It does not deny the fact that intuition plays a major role in textual interpretation, neither does it prevent an analyst from expressing his intuition during textual analysis (cf. Leech and Short, 1981). All it claims is just that the expression of the analyst's intuition must be made explicit to the reader. In other words, it must be 'disciplined' (cf. Awonuga, 1988) via the use of tools of a general linguistic theory for its description within the framework of the particular language of the text (cf. Halliday, 1967). A disciplined intuitive response, thus, will not only indicate socio-psychological experience in a text, it will also help to create an awareness about the internal patterns of language in the text (cf. Crystal and Davy, 1969).

Two main features seem to permeate the explication of linguistics in literary studies. First is the way linguistic stylisticians make inferences from the description of forms of texts by assigning values or messages to them (cf. Ohmann, 1964; Thorne, 1970; Halliday, 1973; Awonuga, 1988). And the second which is a corollary to the first, is the over-concentration on forms to the neglect of messages of texts. Both features have been criticized by stylistic critics (cf. Gray, 1969; Hirsch, 1976; Fish, 1980; Adejare, 1981) who have observed that while the first posits a logical error that style compels message, the second usually prompts a linguistic rather than stylistic description (see also sections 3 and 4 below).

This study observes and comments on the limitations of Awonuga's demonstration of linguistic stylistics through the analysis of 'If', a poem by Jared Angira (see Awonuga, 1988:48, and also the appendix of this work). The comments are made in terms of both the inadequacy of the analysis to the explication of the African experience presented by the poet and its

relevance to the development of the literary interpretive skills of, especially, users of English as a Second Language (ESL). Since the work, however, must have also its own strong points, it will be pertinent to initiate the discussion with the merits of the article before talking about its faults.

2.0 The merits of Linguistic Stylistics

One undoubtedly strong point of Awonuga's work is his adequate explanation of the concept of linguistic stylistics, including the highlighting of some of its major principles. In pp. 38-40, for example, he not only explains why he prefers the term 'linguistic stylistics' to other terms that have been used by scholars, from Hasan's (1971) 'stylistics' to Short's (1982) 'literary linguistic stylistics', but also reaffirms the position of stylisticians that "it is no use doing a linguistic description of patterns of language found in literary texts if one does not relate the description to relevant literary or artistic patterns in the text" (p.39). Again, in the same place, he rightly observes 'foregrounding' as a key concept of operation of the approach and defines it in terms of Halliday's (1971) 'motivated prominence' or 'dominance' and Mukarovsky's (1970) "violation of a scheme" (p.40). The terms 'motivated prominence' and 'dominance' are especially very important because a demonstration of both, rather than one of them is essential for an effective analysis of forms in a text. Thus, without disagreeing with Awonuga, we shall state in simplistic terms that motivated prominence refers to the literary relevance of linguistic items in terms of their significant contribution to the message of the text (cf. Halliday, 1973:113) while 'dominance' refers to the linguistic prominence of items in terms of their relative frequencies of occurrence (Halliday, *ibid.*)

The painstaking formal analysis in the work also shows the author's mastery of the structural approach. Thus, he is able to demonstrate his skill and patience by doing the grammatical analysis of all the seven stanzas of the poem. His observations of the prominence of a syntactic pattern, the repetition of items and structures and the identification of a sing-song rhythm with the poem are all properly pointed out. Finally, one can observe that the writer, at least, devotes some space, though less than a page (see bottom of p.45 to top of p.46) of his total description, to the identification of a message for the poem, even if it is not clear to the reader how the message derives from the values assigned to the forms described previously. The whole work thus stands out as a fine description of the form of 'If'. Whether this study of form gives the much-needed insight into the text analysed, is, however, the subject of the discussion below.

3.0 The Demerits of Linguistic Stylistics

The faults recognised in Awonuga's article can be discussed in three parts. In the first part are identified some contestable statements made by him in the work. The second part observes the inconsistency between the objective and results of his work. And the third part, which points out the limitations of linguistic stylistic procedures generally, forms the basis of our own suggestion of a more effective procedure for textual analysis.

One of the dangers of interpreting the language forms in a text independent of the situational context which prompts their use is the risk of misreading or misjudging the text. An instance of misjudgement of "If" is given by the assertion on p.44 that the statement 'If I wake up in the morning---' (Stanza VI, ls 1-3) contains an element of doubt suggested by the item 'if' about "the possibility of dying before morning."

This is a clear case of misjudgement of the poem, as can be supported by linguistic and non-linguistic evidence. Indeed, one can see (as Awonuga himself has observed in his analysis) that the writer right from the first stanza of the poem has formed a pattern of using 'If' implicitly at the beginning of every stanza to show the hypothetical nature of certain events (causes) whose occurrences are often accompanied by certain 'effects'. But it will be wrong to attribute any statement in this poem to the writer's person because one can see him playing a societal rather than personal role here. In other words, if there is any doubt at all expressed in this poem, it is a societal doubt, not the writer's, since the latter is only playing the role of an impartial spokesman of his societal consciousness. Besides, the report here does not indicate any doubt at all about the author waking or failing to wake up in the morning; what it does express is that it is a bad omen to wake up in the morning and find my teeth shaking'. Thus, the item 'if' (or 'when') is used in the sense of 'whenever' throughout the poem to indicate some conviction rather than doubt about the link between two events in which one preternaturally causes the other to happen.

Awonuga's further claim that the word 'surely' (Stanza VI, 1.4) is used by the poet to invite the agreement of the reader is equally inappropriate because the word is actually used in a conversive sense to Awonuga's interpretation to show the strong conviction of the poet's community about the content of the superstitions. The writer does not need to invite any agreement from the reader at all since he is not raising any doubt about his societal belief. The extent of his own association with and sharing of his people's beliefs can be seen in the opening lines of one of his poems "Strange Shadows" (Angira, 1972:24) in which he observes thus:

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"They said I had a high concentration
of the African in me"

The validity of our own interpretation here can be seen by making reference to the poet's socio-cultural background rather than by referring to any linguistic rule.

Similarly, a consideration of the verbal and situational context of communication should resolve any form of ambiguity which a pure linguistic reaction might have prompted in the course of interpreting a text (see Awonuga, 1988:45).

In another development, the observation of Awonuga on p.41 that the two things most prominent in the poem are the subordinator 'if' and 'syntax' is open to contests. For while one may agree that 'if' primarily attracts the reader because it is the title of the poem, and because it is implied in all the stanzas, one cannot readily do so in respect of syntax whose primary recognition may be regarded as a question of interest or preference. It is quite possible, for instance, to be first attracted to the poem by the lexical items denoting objects and states like squirrel, cheetah, merriment, overfed, ill-luck, joy, dead, dream, sweet slumbers, etc. which are related either by similarity or contrast in meaning (cf. Awonuga, pp. 44-45); those denoting physical action like crosses, turn a go, knock, slip, meet, dream, wake, crows, etc. more than mental action or relational state. What catches one's attention first in a poem is thus determined by the interest of the individual reader rather than any dictation by the structures, which brings us to the point raised by Awonuga at the end of his article. It should be made clear here that, contrary to his claim in the conclusion (see p.46), the 'vagaries of the reader (who can choose to neglect features even if they are prominent) are what, in fact, necessitate textual production and interpretation; the structure only offers a means of production, interpretation and explication of texts.

The faults highlighted above should not in any way prevent us from examining the thesis of Awonuga's work, which he states thus (p.40):

"I start with the linguistic details and work towards literary appreciation."

Reading through the work, one can observe that this objective has not been fulfilled, for, although the

analyst was able to give the linguistic details he had promised, he only succeeded in interpreting the forms, instead of the literature, by assigning values to them in the text. Thus, if one can claim that Awonuga has done remarkably well in interpreting the syntax of "If", one cannot so claim that he has worked actively towards a literary interpretation of the text. The reason is simple. No successful interpretation of a text can take place independently of the cultural and situational context of the text.

4.0 Towards an Effective Procedure of Textual Analysis

Linguistic stylistic procedures have their major weakness, because they operate on the wrong assumption that literary analysis can effectively proceed from a careful interpretation of forms to the suggestion of message. It is already a fact that forms do not correlate with function and a style does not compel a message (cf. Hirsch, 1976; Fish, 1980; Beaugrande and Dressler Dressler, 1981). According to Hirsch (1976:24) and Fish (1980:267), formal patterns themselves are supposed to be products of a prior interpretive act, hence the demonstration of an interpretation process should be preceded by the process of interpretation itself. This means that any explication of form would become relevant only when the literary relevance of a text is acknowledged and the features identified. Factors of literary relevance in this respect will include those pertaining to the situational and cultural context of the production and interpretation of the text, and also those pertaining to its use, function and message. Since many of these features¹ are not considered in Awonuga's explication, in spite of their relevance to the effective analysis of a text, these are considered briefly below in respect of "If" under four major subheadings: the cultural and situational context of "If", the use and functions of "If", the message of "If", and a framework for effective analysis of texts.

4.1 The Cultural and Situational Context of If

It is already known from the source of the poem "If" that it is written by Jared Angira and that the writer is an African. But further information gathered from other reliable sources reveal that he is from Kenya and that he is an accomplished poet who has published books of various collections of poems. Many of the poems in his collections have much to do with the traditions of his people, which he often cherishes with nostalgia. By writing "If", Angira informs the readership of the poem about certain superstitions which illustrate an aspect of tradition in his community.

Incidentally, the present analyst is an African like Angira, although a Nigerian. He, however, acknowledges the similarities of many of the superstitions above to those in the Nigerian society. Thus, he is very much interested in discussing them. As a user and teacher of English in a Second Language (ESL) institution, his primary audience are his fellow learners/users of ESL with whom he likes to share his interpretive experience, while his secondary audience are those non-ESL readers of African literature in English who might want to learn one or two things about Africa.

4.2 The Use and Function of "If"

In an African setting, superstitions of various kinds are normally used to educate and moralise. While those which are educative serve more to make members aware of the existence of a metaphysical world in which objects and supernatural beings inhere and from where these beings continue to influence the lives of human beings via the occurrences of preternatural events and actions that may be of good or evil consequences, those which moralise serve mainly to motivate members individually or collectively towards good habits and dissuade them from bad habits. The superstitions in "If"

seem to serve the educative purpose in this respect, although the author of the poem further intends to entertain his reading audience by choosing the medium of poetry for his presentation.

The two major communicative functions of "If" are the informative and aesthetic functions.² Both functions are well-represented by the poem and a discussion of their features should be useful to this stylistic analysis.

4.2.1 The informative function of "If"

The poem "If" demonstrates the prevalent belief of Angira's society in superstitions. The strong conviction which members of the society have about the superstitions is indicated by the expression "surely I know" (Stanza VI, l.4). And the co-occurrences of causes and effects in all the seven stanzas of the poem is a strong indication that the people's conviction is not in the individual 'causes' of events in the superstitions, which in themselves are hypothetical, or in the 'effects', which may have some other causes apart from the ones listed here; but, rather, it is in the co-relationship between these particular causes and effects.

The causes and effects of the superstitions in "If" are preternaturally determined, hence they appear to be binding on members of Angira's society, irrespective of the orientation of each individual towards them. In spite of the fact that the observations of their occurrences are of inductive nature and are stated in 'If--- then' form to appear like scientific truths based on inductive generalizations,³ the former cannot be regarded as really scientific because of the preternatural character of the events. But since the frequency of the correlation between the causes and

effects of events in the superstitions is very high, the people have no choice than to treat them like scientific truths.

Another major theme in "If", apart from the one of preternatural occurrences of events in superstitions is the theme of 'luck'. This theme also pervades the seven stanzas of the poem in the opposite forms of 'good luck' and 'ill luck', which are both identified as the effects of certain causes. These features are represented in the poem as demonstrated below:

Stanza I: good luck (ls 1-3); ill luck (ls 4-6)
 Stanza II: good luck (ls 1-4); ill luck (ls 5-6)
 Stanza III: good luck (ls 1-4) —————
 Stanza IV: ————— ill luck (ls 1-5)
 Stanza V: good luck (ls 1-5;6-8); ill luck (ls 9-12)
 Stanza VI: ————— (implicit) ill luck (ls 1-6)
 Stanza VII: ————— ill luck (ls 1-3;4-6)

A closer look at the analysis above will reveal a kind of balance of good and ill luck up to Stanza V, both sharing three stanzas and separately occupying one stanza each. But the last two stanzas emphasize ill luck, thus making ill-luck more prominent in the poem.

Lastly, there is also one major aspect of African experience revealed by the list of superstitions in "If" and this pertains to certain fundamental concepts about the world view of the people in respect of the 'unknown world'. One concept, for example, is that animals seem to have a closer link with the supernatural world than human beings; thus an observation of their behaviour (Stanza VII) or circumstances surrounding human beings encounter with them (Stanza I) can give the people some hints about unknown future events. Another concept is the sacredness of dreams, or events occurring during sleep (Stanzas V and VI). In dreams,

one is believed to be closer to the subconscious and events in the subconscious are felt to be largely suggestive of events in the unknown future. And during sleep, one is believed to be more vulnerable to attacks from certain evil spirits in the unknown world. There is also the concept of witchcraft, which prompts the belief that an old woman encountered in the feeble dawn (Stanza IV) might be a witch returning from one of her nocturnal meetings; it will thus be a bad omen to meet her first thing in the morning. Finally, the experience stated in Stanza II may not be unconnected with the concept of association of 'right' with something good and resourceful and 'left' with something bad and useless.

4.2.2 The aesthetic function of "If"

It is already stated in 4.2 above that the medium of poetry is employed by Angira for his presentation in order to entertain his audience. The poetic medium is widely recognised by scholars as a source of entertainment because of the rich aesthetic qualities which it normally possesses: rhythm, parallelisms of structures and senses, repetitions of words and structures, end rhymes, extensive imagery and figures of speech, etc. No doubt most of these qualities of aesthetics in a text will be revealed better via the description of form of the text. And this we have seen in Awonuga's analysis of "If". A lot of the aesthetic qualities of "If", particularly its sing-song rhythm which is enhanced by lexical and structural repetition, syntactic parallelism, occasional end rhymes, etc. are already identified by him and we have no cause to doubt his ability in identifying them properly.

4.3 The Message of "If"

In essence the concept of 'message' refers to an incorporation of the content and form of a piece of communication (cf. Hymes, 1972). While the 'message' refers to the means of presenting the communication, the 'message content' refers to the product of interpretation of the message form within a social and situational context. A description of the message of text thus should consider two things within the socio-situational context of a text, viz. the form of the text and its content.

In describing the form of "If", we have already agreed that the notions of 'motivated' and 'linguistic prominence' are important as a guide towards the identification of relevant items in the text (see 2.0). In this respect, we do not disagree with Awonuga's observation that the prominence of the "If---(then)" structure and the item 'surely' are motivated in the poem. But we do not so agree with him that the feature of syntactic parallelism as well as use of words are not motivated; we believe that this observation of his might have arisen from his lack of consideration of the cultural and situational context of the text in his description of the forms. For example, the syntactic parallelism can be seen to be motivated by the juxtapositions of events indicating the theme of 'good and ill luck' in the poem (see 4.2.1 above). Similarly, certain words in the poem can be seen as motivated in terms of their projection of this theme as well as their indication of the African experience pertaining to the people's belief, including the extent of this belief, in the superstitions presented. Such words as squirrel, cheetah or wild cat (Stanza I), hen and dog (Stanza VII) denoting animals; dream (Stanza old woman, in the feeble dawn (Stanza IV); overfed, merr (Stanzas II and III), ill luck (Stanza IV) and death (Stanza VII) are thus all motivated in this respect, but the evidence for their motivation lies in their collective projection of the themes of the poem rather than in their individual occurrences.

There can never be a complete description of the form of a text. Thus any description of selected formal features of a text will be a valid exercise, so long as the features are relevant to the interpretation of the text. In this regard, in spite of our disagreement with some of Awonuga's comments in his interpretation of "If" (see 3.0), we shall accept his description of the form as sufficient from a particular viewpoint of formal analysis. Note that it is also possible to account for the form of the poem using other procedures; but a description of any of such procedures is not of immediate interest to us in this study.

The message content of "If" may be summarized thus:

There are certain superstitions beliefs prevalent in my society which I want to share with you. These include---. The superstitions are observed in terms of certain hypothetical events (causes) whose occurrences may suggest good or ill luck (effects). My people have strong conviction that whenever the events occur, the effects will also occur.

As far as we are aware, Awonuga's interpretation of the message content differ very much from our own (see Awonuga, 1980:146). But the point of concern here is the manner in which he arrives at this message via an 'intuitive leap' (cf. Claudej, 1980:32) from his earlier description of form. One is puzzled especially by the way he talks about beliefs prevalent in the society of the speaker' (p.46) when his earlier description has not discussed any 'belief' or 'society'. Such an intuitive leap from message form to message content thus cannot but leave some gap in the analyst's presentation of his discussion of a text, especially when other readers would want to know the conditions under which the text has been interpreted by the analyst.

In the view of new linguistic stylisticians, one is likely to have overstepped the boundaries of linguistic stylistics by including most of the relevant details above in the analysis of a text. But text analysts who emphasize the pragmatics of language rather than linguistic form in textual study would welcome such details. They might however use other descriptive terms, apart from stylistics to denote their approaches, e.g. 'new stylistics' (Fowler, 1975), 'text linguistics' (Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981), 'critical linguistics' (Burton, 1982) and 'discourse studies' (Burton, 1980; Fowler, 1981). If we must suggest a term to represent our own suggestion of a framework for the analysis of texts, we would prefer the suggestion of a 'contextual text' theory. This would be a model which seeks to study how linguistic items relate to one another in a text and to the situation outside the text. Such a framework, at least, is in line with what we have done in this study.

5.0 Conclusion

The task of reading and interpreting English texts is not really a pleasant one for students who are non-native speakers learning and using English in a non-native environment. But the specialist English teacher can encourage his students to actually enjoy reading and appreciating the texts if he can make his analysis as pleasant and realistic as possible. The present weakness of linguistic stylistic procedures in describing formal features of texts without proper references to the essential contextual features is the bewilderment which such descriptions often cause the students. Any extensive description of English form can be very boring to, especially, non-native speakers learning the language if such a description is not linked with the socio-

psychological (i.e. 'literary') realities of the author and interpreters of the text. After all, of what use is form to them without a context and situation? Form exists within a social context and situation, and thus, must be taught, spoken, interpreted and analysed within and with reference to social and situational contexts. This is the basic principle of 'communicative language teaching' (cf. Widdowson, 1978).

Notes

1. It might, of course, be argued that the information about these features is already assumed for a text before the interpretation of forms and that it would be redundant stating them in a description. But the true position is that such things should not be taken for granted since the conditions of interpreting a text are not that stable. Readers will thus be interested in knowing the particular set of conditions under which the analyst has interpreted the text.

Many scholars have attempted to classify certain (general) functions which underlie individual uses of language. For example, Jakobson's (1960: 350-377) suggestion is as follows: (i) the cognitive/referential/denotative; (ii) emotive/expressive/affective; (iii) conative; (iv) poetic; (v) phatic/interaction management; (vi) metalinguistic functions. And Adegbite's (1988) list of six functions is as follows: informative, expressive, directive, aesthetic, ritualized and communicating.

3. An example of a scientific statement based on inductive generalization is given below (taken from Coulthard, 1977:150) thus:

"If you heat a bar to bright red and hammer it to shape, it will spread without cracking."

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Appendix

- I a squirrel crosses my way
while on a trip
then luck is mine
but when it's a cheetah
or wild cat that crosses there
I turn and go back.
- II I knock my right foot on stone
while on a trip
I melt in joy
since I shall be overfed
but when it's the left
I turn and go back.
- III I slip in my shirt
the inside coming out
I jump in merriment
for I shall be overfed.
- IV the first being
I meet in the feeble dawn
is an old woman
I turn to my blanket
it's all ill luck.
- V I dream my relative dead
in midst of sweet slumbers
I wake in joy
knowing he's overfed
the previous night
and if I dream I am dead

I rejoice
for growing an inch
and if I dream
of my ideal girl
then I lose hope
the answer is no.

VI I wake up in the morning
and find my teeth shaking
and loose
surely I know
they went eating excreta
while soul courted in fairyland

VII A hen crows
it must be killed
bà omen
a dog howls
instead of barking
the village owner
is at death's door
and if I walk on my head
then I am dead.