Poetry as Action and Interaction: Conversation as Strategy in the Poetic Art of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide

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Abstract
Though generally perceived as a highly individualistic, reflective and inward affair, poetry is quite interactive, and more or less employ conversational and discourse features which engage various levels of interlocutors within and outside the text. Thus, poetry could be said to embody and project certain patterns and strategies of interaction and language use that are structured in the form of conversation or have features of human conversation.

Poetry and Conversation
According to Labov and Fanshell (1977:30) conversation is
... a matrix of utterances and actions bound together by a
web of understandings and reactions.

As a means of social and communicative exchange, conversation entails active and interactive conducts through which the status, rights and obligations of participants are implicitly or explicitly expressed. And unlike most types of communication acts, Conversation obviously appears to be the most fundamental and pervasive means of conducting human affairs. It represents the platform by which people relate linguistically in an enormous range of social situations, on an extensive variety of ideas, and with an unpredictable number and set of participants (Crystal, 1987:116).

In ordinary day-to-day human relations and activities, conversation takes diverse forms and dimensions, which include dialogues, debates and interviews. But in poetry, these conversational forms assume varied and distinct patterns and, consequently take on peculiar dimensions of unique poetic renditions. In the poetic works of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, the utilisation of the technique of conversation and other forms of communicative interaction is a significant delineating feature of their art. Some of their poems that can be categorised in this way are:

Dialogue:
The subsection entitled “dialogue” in Songs of the Season, especially the poems “buka banter” and “Song of Life”; “Okerebu Kerebu” in Waiting Laughters; and “When tomorrow is too long” in The Fate of Vultures.

Debates:
“Eating Tomorrow’s Yam”, “Search for a Wife” in Village Voices; “Olowo Debates Talaka” in...
Poetic conversations are artistically construed discourse renditions which consciously project communicative and expressive strategies.

Ordinarily, poetry is hardly associated with conversation because poetry is mostly considered a unilateral, non-dramatic, non-interactive ritualistic communication. Generally, it is perceived as a linguistic re-enactment of the subconscious deliberations and inner thoughts of the persona or the poet. Thus, poetic discourse is commonly perceived and couched as non-exchange linguistic activities or communication.

But poetry has a great deal of conversation elements and features. Though now a predominantly written medium, poetry embodies some fundamental conversational constituents and, conversation has revealed itself to be a significant trait of poetic discourse. Haynes (1987:1) confirms this when he notes that

The to and fro of conversation and its commonness and apparent lack of ritual, set it apart from poetry, which is usually a one way communication, self-conscious...carefully composed in writing...Yet despite these striking differences, poetry and other verbal arts, can in a sense be 'derived' from conversation. The linguistic resources used by both are the same, and conversation often contains poetry.

Many of Osundare and Ojaide's poems demonstrate the efficacy of conversation as a discourse technique. Osundare's "Akinunde, Come Home" and "Olowo Debates Talaka" are succinct examples as these excerpts illustrate.

Come home, son
for we cannot be all iroko

Olowo: I deserve the profits. I run the risks.
Talaka: What risks? What risks?
Olowo: Of changes of fortunes, of foreign exchange.
Talaka: Of missing limbs, of asbestos in the lungs.

(Songs of the Season, p. 43)

In addition to its discourse attributes, conversation has significant import as a stylistic device in poetic communication. For instance, rendering poetry in a conversation-like manner gives it the element of realism as events depicted appear real. Osundare's "Eating Tomorrow's Yam" is an example of this kind of stylistic aspect of the poetry. The following excerpt demonstrates the point:

There is only one yam left
in the village barn
the prodigal calls for a knife
'what shall we eat tomorrow',
the people ask,
'if we finish all the yam today
just how shall we feel
when the dunghill has relieved
stomachs of their improvident burden?'

And says the prodigal:
'tomorrow will take care of itself.
how can we know the next day
if we die of hunger today?

(Village Voices, p. 16)
The deliberative nature of this conversation represents the primary communicative and expressive drive of the poem, and through it the message of the poem is made accessible and realistic. However, conversation in poetry is clearly distinctive in contrast to that in ordinary discourse. Participation and interaction in poetry are peculiar in many respects. First, participants and their roles are not explicitly distinguished. Thus, the distribution of role might not be clear and as such role performance is often not explicitly delineated and determined. For instance, the addresser, addressee and even the audience in some cases are not easy to ascertain. Osundare's "Chicken Story" is illustrative in this regard.

Who does the chicken think it is deceiving?
It eats pebbles
and swallows sands
yet complains of toothlessness
the goat which has teeth
the dog which fortifies its mouth
with the strongest of ivory
dare they eat pebbles in the morning
and still walk about at noon?

Let the ear sift
What the mouth says
the mills inside all men
do not grind with equal force.

*(Village Voices, p.14)*

In the poem, the status of the persona is difficult to establish. One could hardly say whether the persona is human, animal, man or woman. Also, there is no clear audience being addressed; it could be inferred to be the reader. In another sense, the poem could be interpreted as a form of soliloquy.

Symbolically this poem captures the significance of literature as a contrived form of human interaction and an artistic medium with the utilitarian essence of acting as a strategy for bringing about the development and enhancement of the human condition. First, the facelessness and anonymity of the persona and the audience largely recreate the undecipherable status of the elite (mis)managers of the Nigerian state as the ogre that masterminds the underdevelopment of the country. Secondly, the idea of poetry as interaction presents a re-enactment of the need for better understanding of the human mechanism of communicative interaction which is an essential ingredient of development and national cohesion, especially in Nigeria where there is a great necessity for evolving unifying inter-group communication strategies.

Also there are some instances in which the poems may be rendered as direct conversations, interviews, one-to-one interactions, or even such forms as anecdotes, proverbs, quarrels, messages, directives and pieces of advice.

In poetic discourse, as the illustration above implies, participants are sometimes assumed or imagined, the audience may be non-existent or indistinct and conversation may hold between non-human or inanimate participants. These abstract recreations of conversational elements, features and situations seem to represent attempts to symbolically re-enact the function of the arts, particularly literature, as imaginative reconstructions and interpretations of the human condition. As a device for constructing and deconstructing reality, literature in this sense projects the human condition and essence through the imaginative process and vision as was to provide human beings the impetus and opportunity for a better explication of the essence of life and thus crystallise the development of the society. Though conversational roles are easily distinguishable in ordinary conversations on the basis of the form of interaction, the situation in poetry is somewhat peculiar. Here, purely linguistic and artistic considerations and their literary implicatures may determine roles. This pragmatic attribute of poetry, which inheres from the suggestive nature of literature and human social interaction in general, empowers human relations as a form of symbiotic communicative exchange and interaction. The reconstruction of this in poetry and other artistic spheres serve as avenues for enacting the logical basis for understanding human social interactions and fostering of enduring human relations.
Conversation and Conversation Analysis

In general, conversation entails more than merely exchanging information. It requires a high degree of co-operation among participants for it to be fully actualised. Co-operation involves employing devices and strategies that assist in the maintenance of coherence and efficient conduct of conversation. Co-operation manifests in the form of shared assumptions, beliefs, expectations about conversational inputs and knowledge of the world around. Poetry especially thrives on this kind of conversational principle, considering its reliance on connotations and implications to communicate meaning. The communicative essence of poetry is largely based on its ability to draw up evocations in the imagination and consciousness of the audience based on this. The implications that underlie the co-operative principles inform the assumptions that enable us to understand the message in poetry. The functionality of the principle of co-operation comes alive somewhat in Osundare’s poem, “Meet Me at Okeruku”. The interpretation of the use of deictic items such as: “here”, “your”, “me” and “next” in the poem is essentially a factor of shared assumptions and knowledge of the world and the sociocultural roots of the poem and the poet. These lines of the poem illustrate the idea.

And when the rains are here
When this dust is clod and clay
Show me your camwood shoes
Show me hurried toermarks
On the ciphered pages of narrow alleys
Awaiting the liquid eraser
Of the next shower

(The Eye of the Earth, p. 33)

This implies that in the conduct of conversations, participants share certain common principles of conversation that facilitate their interpretation of utterances and consequently ensure effective and meaningful contribution. One of the assumptions, for instance, is that if a speaker asks a question, the interlocutor’s response will be interpretable as constituting an answer to the question. Assumptions such as this are based on the principles of co-operation and they produce the platform for active contribution and interpretation of messages in conversations. This fact underlies Grice’s maxims of co-operative behaviour in discourse.

Since conversations, like stories, are often structured and presented in rounds to maintain consistency and smooth flow of events, it implies that each round has to be relevant to the ones that precede and follow it. Relevance and cohesion are attained if the connection of elements from the different narrative rounds is consistent and recognisable. The establishment of connections between utterances and communicative interaction is central to effective conversation. This relates to the maintenance of coherence of ideas in conversation, that is, the sequencing conventions, procedures and principles that lead to the interpretation of utterances as interactions.

Conversation thrives on the exchange of information between interlocutors who consciously and purposefully participate in a session of communicative interaction geared towards meaningful exchange of information. Thus, a significant feature of conversation is participation and the role participants play in conducting conversations. Participants are principal agents who engage in the conduct of conversations and through whose contributions and interactions conversations largely unfold. They are crucial to the comprehension and appreciation of any conversation because they reinforce the communicative force of such interactions. To confirm this, Crystal (1987:116) observes that:

For a conversation to be successful, in most social contexts, the participants need to feel they are contributing something to it and getting something out of it.

The conventions of active and successful participation or participant involvement in conversation require that certain specific conditions have to obtain, namely:

i) Every participant must have an opportunity to make a contribution. That is, everybody must be given a chance to speak. No participant should monopolise the conversation-interruptions, if any, are minimised.

ii) The role of participants should be clearly indicated.

iii) Every participant should know the time to speak and the time to be silent; that is, when to contribute, intervene or proffer information and when to be aloof or withhold information.
Generally, participants ought to develop mutual tolerance and understanding of each others' communicative weakness like speaker unclarity and occasional inattentiveness on the part of the listener.

Conversation Analysis of the Poetry of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide

This aspect of the paper undertakes a conversation analysis of some of the poems of the two poets with the aim to ascertain or determine how they creatively employ the dynamics of conversation and other devices of linguistic interaction in defining the essence of their poetic art and communicative dexterity in literary discourse.

A consideration of some of Osundare and Ojaide's poems reveals some delineating conversation elements and discourse attributes. In Osundare's Village Voices, for example, the cohesive structure is represented in the form of an extended conversation in which each poem is a conversational turn or comprises conversational turns. Even the sub-divisions of the anthology are also systematically arranged into abstruse conversational patterns.

The titles of the sub-sections give an insight into this feature. The opening section is entitled “rising voice”. Then the subsequent sections are “voices in dialogue and banter”, “voices about coming and going”, “voices of anger and indictment” and the concluding section is “...closing”. In the same manner, the first and last poems of the anthology have structural relations: the first poem is entitled “! wake up this morning” while the concluding title is “I Rise Now”.

Cohesion is maintained through the rendition patterns and sequence of the poems which creatively re-cast the dynamism and liveliness of local Nigerian oratory as is evident in the use of indigenous songs and musical renditions. This feature imbues into the works native attributes and tendencies and the fact that the songs are structured to fit into known indigenous song forms gives it identifiable texture and pattern.

As evident in most of the titles of the anthologies, the song element and technique is pervasive in Osundare and Ojaide's poetry. Common examples are Songs of the Season, Moonsongs, Songs of the Marketplace and The Endless Song. In addition to songs, other oratorical archetypes delineate discourse. We have Waiting Laughters and Village Voices, which use several techniques to attempt recreating speech in poetry.

Within individual anthologies, conversational relations are established through the structural relations and patterns of incidents in the poems. Take a look at The Eye of the Earth, for example, which is rendered like a narrative excursion and topographic survey of traditional African flora and fauna. The journey is represented in musical movements, which recreate the unity of message and movement of thought. Osundare notes this in the preface to the anthology. He affirms that the anthology is

...a journey into these times and beyond, when the earth's head stood on its neck and a hand sprouted but five fingers...

The 'forest' in the first movement... is essentially, shades and shadows of a remembered landscape, echoes of an Eden long departed when the rain forest was terrifying green...

(The Eye of the Earth, p. xii)

Village Voices presents a more explicit cohesive structure in which the poems, as individual units of discourse, deploy their own cohesive, interactive and co-operative mechanism. Each poem demonstrates sufficient internal conversational balance and cohesion as could be found in the anthological structures. This is achieved through the use of certain cardinal cohesion strategies as evident in their modes of rendition, collocation patterns, content and connectives, among others.

We can cite instances from Ojaide's “No”. The performative conversational format creates a unified form with elaborately outlined internal order and presentation of ideas. The nature of syntactic parallelism, which initiates some stanzas, also establishes a balance of tone. Similarly, the pronominal pattern institutes an ordered system of participants and communicative devices. Here is an excerpt to illustrate.

Stop them

lest your enemies think you are too weak
you hurl a stone mountain at them
and you become a murderer

lest your friends call you hard-hearted
you lavish all you have on them
and you become a pauper.

(The Fate of Vultures, p.43)

Topic Management and Switching Strategies

The management of topic in conversation is fundamental to the smooth and systematic conduct of discourse. Topics essentially require deft management skills and strategies in order to accomplish their objectives and full discourse effect. This is important because topics are constrained by specific discourse activities, participants, occasions, sociocultural indices and discourse genres, among various other considerations. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that the nature, form and focus of topics have elaborate cultural and social significance, as topic relevance and conduct are inherently culture-specific. By implication, participants' interaction and relationship in discourse have cultural undertones, which are situation conditioned. To buttress this point, Coulthard (1977: 75-76) observes that

Some topics are not relevant to particular conversations
... and the suitability of other topics depends on the person one is talking to. We experience, see, hear about events all the time... Some are tellable to everyone, some have a restricted audience, some must not be told immediately, some can wait and still retain their interest.

But the recreation of topics in poetic discourse does not usually observe norms of discourse activities in real life: rather it is based on certain artistic assumptions and communicative expectations.

Conversation topics in poetry have distinct outlook in that they are generally not as transient and temporal as in ordinary discourse; the degree of intimacy and immediacy between participants may be remote; and exchange of roles among participants and topic switching patterns are not quite explicit. Rather, topics in poetic discourse appear institutionalised such that even when the ideas may seem transient and immediate, their portrayal has clear universal and classical outlook. This could be exemplified with Ojaide's "The Fate of

I understand all your words
And even those you haven't spoken
But hear this if your fledging ears
Have not been blocked
By the excess of juvenile praise

Listen, palace singer, listen royally
Your fish will come belly up some day
The day is coming
When your drum will be mute
Like a royal statue
For if you listen properly
To the dying echoes of your drum
You will hear this resounding fact:
The people always outlast the palace.
(Village Voices, pp.5-8)

Unlike ordinary discourse in which the management of conversation entails that participants select and arrange topics in an agreeable order suitable to the form and purpose of a topic, poetic discourse is sparse, abrupt and terse; an inclination which derives from its suggestive communicative techniques and implicatures. Thus, poetry does not necessarily rely on preambles in order to launch, develop or conclude its topic. Even if they occur, such preambles are insignificant or conventional.

Again, effective conversational conduct relies on topicalisation inputs such as topic nomination ratification (acceptance), elaboration and comments (Richards and Schmidt, 1987:140). The poetic realisation of this strategy is identifiable in the topic management patterns of some of Osundare and Ojaide's anthologies. Osundare's Waiting Laughters is a handy instance. Centrally, the anthology focuses on the idea of waiting and laughter, their connotations and conceptual implications. As a discourse topic, the idea has multiple dimensions, which are represented in various poetic units. Each unit constitutes a conversational turn in an extended conversational topic employing several techniques that ensure that the communicative essence of the conversation is fulfilled.

Conversation Opening
Text opening strategies refer to those discourse commencement devices and initiation summons that signal the opening of conversations. They are the elements that inaugurate or start-off linguistic interaction and social relationship among participants in a discourse. These devices manifest in the form of attention calling and floor holding techniques. Since poetic discourse is not a formal social discourse activity, it uses unique commencement devices to recreate and achieve textual openings. Some opening strategies prevalent in the texts analysed in our study include performative openings, abrupt opening, invocations and invocative openings, anecdotal initiating tactics, and incantatory openings. Instances of the use of these strategies are present in Ojaide's "The Music of Pain", "For Anne", "The Fate of Vultures", and "What Poets Do Our Leaders Read?" and Osundare's "Moonsongs I, IV, XIV", "Let Earth's Pain Be Soothed" and "Who Says That Drought Was Here". However, this excerpt from Osundare's Waiting Laughters is illustrative of the dramatic nature of some of these text-opening devices.

I pluck these words from the lips of the wind
Ripe like a pendulous pledge
Laughter's parable exploded in the groin
Of waking storms
Clamorous with a covenant
Of wizened seeds
(Waiting Laughters, p.2)

Conversation Closing
Conversation closing is also marked by some structural strategies such as terminal exchange expressions, pre-closing expression, and direct declarations. These are artfully designed discourse features whose communicative implications signal the conclusion of texts or mark topic endings. Also, discourse endings can be marked through some non-linguistic but equally communicative tactics. For instance, graphic and graphetic devices could indicate text closures in poetry.
Though poetic discourse may employ some of the elements of conventional discourse, it normally gives them distinct patterns and unique artistic realisations. Poetic closing may appear unsystematic, abrupt and impolite in the conventional sense; such closing patterns may constitute deliberate communicative acts with specific stylistic effects. Consider the following discourse ending pattern in Osundare’s “I Rise Now”:

Descend the tree of words now
put the ripe fruits
in your thinking pockets
for the seeking hunger of coming days
let them traverse the moonlight of thought
to the noon fields of action

Put my words in your left hand
So they do not land in the stomach
with the unwitting morsel
then plant them like a yam seedling
which multiplies the original breed.

Village Voices, p.71

While the former excerpt is invitational with images suggesting a beginning such as “pluck” and “waking storms”, the latter is conclusive as expressed by the images: “descend” (as in curtain descending); and “hunger of coming days”, for example. Embedded in these images are textual structuring devices that mark discourse openings and closings respectively.

Effective discourse structuring mainly entails smooth resolution of the narrative sequence such that issues and ideas initiated and developed are ultimately put at rest. This is achieved through the use of devices that help to bring the presentational sequence to a resolute conclusion. Such ending indicators include lexical markers, graphic and graphetic indicators, discourse-concluding stanza features, allusions, performatives, among others.

5.4.3 Sequencing Strategies

These are a set of communicative devices that are concerned with the patterning, sequencing and presentation of narration and information in poetic discourse. Though poetry is a discourse medium with an unconventional system of information presentation and structuring, it somehow incorporates into its expressive and communicative mechanism certain institutional narrative elements and techniques. These manifest in several forms. In the poems of Osundare and Ojaide, the following sequencing strategies have critical communicative import.

Narrative Structuring and management Strategies

These are strategies, which are used to maintain narrative sequence and balance within individual discourse units. They are concerned with how elements are organised and co-ordinated, from the beginning to the closing, in order to maintain definite logical patterns. These include strategies for the ordering, itemisation and serialisation of information, action and events in particular discourse units and segments.

In the works of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide, we identify such sequencing strategies as referential sequencing patterns, elliptical suggestions and imputation sequences; graphetic connections, etc. Vivid dramatisation of these features is evident in many of the poems in The Eye of the Earth and The Fate of Vultures. Also, Ojaide’s “The wanderer’s Victory”, for instance, demonstrates how referential sequencing, repetitions and equilinguistic constructions contribute towards the attainment of narrative order and logical balance. The constant repetition of “They, for pride of birthplace” in the stanza and the recurrence of parallel structures like “They planted malice in my body”/“They denied me hospitality” as stanza opening devices help in maintaining consistency of tone and in the synchronising of rhythm and tempo.

In Osundare’s “Excursions”, the narrative effect is achieved through the use of sequence establishment devices like lexical connectors, graphetic form and lexical repetition. For instance, the opening lines of the first stanza three stanzas of poem illustrate this:

Past bush paths tarred by tireless treading
Past the depleted copper of harvested cornfields
Past the gallant butterfly dallying from flower to flower
(The Eye of the Earth, p.41)

5.5 Conclusion

The discourse form of the poetry of Niyi Osundare and Tanure Ojaide is therefore fashioned towards a creative imitation and restructuring of the conversational and interactional strategies such that the poems come off, more or less, as pieces of interactive actions and imaginatively configured exchanges between a complex and somewhat distinctive set of interlocutors who may exist within and outside the world of the text. Apart from the distinctive artistic and communicative implicatures of the use of the interactional strategy, Osundare and Ojaide's poetry through this device acquires more dense communicative impetus.

The necessity for society to evolve effective communication and interaction as an essential tool for the understanding of human relations, enhancing social cohesion and reducing conflict underlies the relevance of investigating communicative strategies and conversation devices upon which poetic art thrives. Though an imaginative art form, poetry largely presents an avenue for interpreting human tendencies and communicative essences as a way of giving vent to charged human emotions as well as promoting development through structured and contrived social relations and interactions.

References

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