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Iconicity and the Pragmatics of Communication in Nigerian Poetry in English: The Example of Niyi Osundare

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Introduction and Background Considerations

This paper examines Charles Sanders Peirce's iconic interpretation of the sign as the basis for the analysis of linguistic explication and the communicative import of Nigerian poetry written in English. It investigates how the application of stylistic and creative elements in such poetic writings act as signifying processes and communicative signposts, which are capable of having well enunciated and elaborately articulated semiotic implications. For the purpose of this paper, the works of Niyi Osundare serve as the primary data for the analysis of emerging creative patterns and systems of literary and linguistic artistry in Nigerian literature in English. In other words, the study uses the poetry of Niyi Osundare as representative of significant trends in L2 English literary creativity in Nigerian poetry.

The study primarily examines how language use in non-native English Literatures represents distinctive creative applications of the English Language as medium of international literary expression. It also attempts to capture and interrogate the diverse and plural linguistic and sociocultural conditions and their impacts on the signalling systems of literature written in English as L2. Poetry written in English as a second language, more often than not, manifests marked features that seem to suggest unique application of elements of language. It is the contention of this paper, therefore, that the peculiarity of linguistic and literary explication in L2 English poetry largely derives from the plural linguistic, literary, oratorical and cultural backgrounds of the literatures as well as the writers. More succinctly stated, it could be said that the plurilinguistic and cultural conditions of the works and experiences of the poets contribute immensely in defining the character and identity of the various forms of non-native English poetry, particularly those of the second language situation.

A basic distinctive feature of English usage in Nigerian poetry is its signalling system. From the point of view of semiotics, the application of linguistic signs and the communicative force which they express in poetry written in English as a second language seem to derive from the peculiar experiences and conditions of multi-lingualism and multi-culturalism. Osundare's deployment of linguistic features and their semiotic implications invest in the use of English language in his poetic works a unique communicative force.

Niyi Osundare the Poet

Niyi Osundare, a leading Nigerian writer and critic, has distinguished himself as a significant voice in the country's literary scene since the last two decades of the twentieth century. He has excelled through his seminal works which span

various fields of interests extending from the creative and the academic to journalistic writings, as well as publications in literary criticism.

In the genre of poetry, Osundare is prolific and well received. Since the publication of his first collection of poems, *Songs of the Marketplace*, in 1983, Osundare has produced several excellent anthologies of poetry, including *Village Voices* (1984), *The Eye of the Earth* (1986), *Moonsongs* (1988), *Songs of the Season* (1990), *Waiting Laughters* (1990), *Selected Poems* (1992), *Midlife* (1993) and *The Word Is An Egg* (1999), among others.

Osundare has received international acclaim, as testified to by various awards. In 1968, his poem, 'It's the Harmattan', won the first prize in the Western State Festival of Arts and Culture, and a principal book prize in the 1981 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 'Arts and Africa' Poetry Awards. He has twice won the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize for poetry in 1986 and 1989. He was also a joint winner of the 1986 Commonwealth Poetry Prize.

Conceptual Considerations

Iconicity

Peirce identifies three types of signs: the icon, the index and the symbol. The icon is a sign discerned by a relation of similarity between the sign and its object. As he states,

An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence: such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line (Lidov, 1999: 93)

In simple terms, an icon 'functions as a sign by means of inherent similarities, or shared features, with what it signifies

... the similarity of a map to the geographical area it stands for' (Abrams, 1993: 276).

It could also be argued that similarity by itself alone might not sufficiently determine an iconic sign. As Cobley (2001: 204) illustrates, though twins look similar, they are not signs of each other. Thus, he contends, 'for iconic signs to obtain, the effect of convention or habit, social practices or special functions must be added to similarity.'

Therefore, the relevance of iconicity stems from the conception of the sign as an icon, one strand of the tridonomy of the sign, identified by Peirce. In this paper, iconicity is conceptualised in terms of the Peircean interpretation of the sign as an icon and/or possessing the features or qualities of the icon.

The analysis is based on the following selection of Niyi Osundare's poetry: 'The Nigerian Railway', 'Sundown' (from *Songs of the Marketplace*), 'An In-law's Message' and 'The Padlock and the Key' (from *Village Voices*), and *Waiting Laughters* (pp. 29-30, 32, 36, 84-85).

The analysis is purely interpretative using the principles of logic, description and relevance. That is, the poems are analysed in terms of their iconic signification and their communicative function.

Theoretical Considerations and Framework for Analysis

Semiotics

Semiotics (also Semiology), the systematic study of signs, is concerned with the analysis and interpretation of signs, sign systems and their meanings. It studies how meaning is encoded in language, especially in communication between individuals in different societies and cultures. The theory of semiotics deals essentially with human communication, that is, the nature, form and structure of all possible sign systems and their roles in the meaning-making process of language. According to

Newton (1988:171), the 'basis of Semiotics is the sign, that is, any configuration to which there is a conventionalised response'. Thus, Semiotics investigates the various systems of signs and how they create the shared meanings that constitutes any culture.

Modern Semiotics originated in the late nineteenth century from the American pragmatist philosopher and logician, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), and the Swiss Linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Both scholars independently posited the possibility of 'a science that studies the life of signs within society' (Eco 1984:4). While Saussure referred to the innovation as 'semiology', Peirce called it 'Semiotics'. For practical purposes, both could serve as alternate terms.

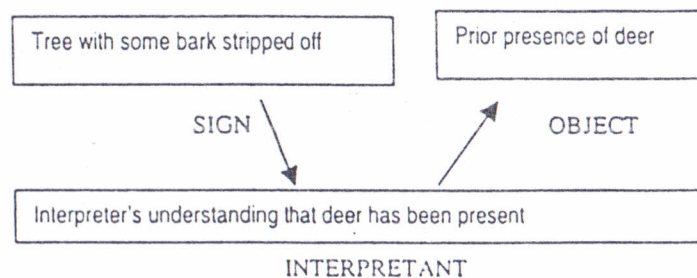
As a linguistic principle, Semiotics examines the conditions that necessitate meaning in language; that is, it seeks to understand how meaning is made possible and how information is constructed through language. In essence, Semiotics sets out to understand how the elements of language are configured to produce meaning and the relevant communicative effects.

Peirce's semiotic notion is based on a generalised system designed as an aspect of logic which he conceptualises as 'the doctrine of the essential varieties of semiosis defined as

an action, an influence, which is or involves, a co-operation of three subjects, such as a sign, its subject and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in anyway resolvable into action between pairs. (Peirce 1931:5.488, 484 as quoted in Eco 1976: 15)

This process is however infinite as the interpretant, that is, the interpreting thought, is itself a sign and will consequently stand

in its own triadic relation to another interpretant. Hookway (1985: 122-4) quoted by Malmkjaer (1987) diagrammatically represents this triadic conception as follows:



Here a sign represents something, which is its object, and this stands for something to somebody, the interpreter. The interpretation of a sign in a particular way by an interpreter depends on the interpreter's understanding of the sign as having the possibility of such a function. Thus, the understanding is the interpreting. In essence, Peirce demonstrates that a sign can hardly have a definite meaning; rather, meanings always have to be qualified.

Iconicity and the Pragmatics of Communication in Niyi Osundare's Poetry

This section examines various forms and aspects of iconicity taking into account linguistic (lexical, syntactic, phonological and morphological) and formal (graphetic and graphological) considerations.

Linguistic Considerations of Iconicity

This aspect of the analysis looks at the iconic interpretation of linguistic elements in the poems, particularly, how features of language are configured such that they graphically evoke the ideas they convey. Here, language is examined as an

instrument used to imitate and textually replicate an idea or some ideas through the structuring of linguistic items in the poems. For instance, lexical, syntactic, phonological and morphological items are deployed in the poems such that they tend to recreate the ideas they communicate. Subsequent analyses examine various aspects of the linguistic iconicity.

At the lexical level, items are creatively exploited to achieve specific iconic effects as the instances below illustrate.

the
y
a
w
n
of
the
moon

(*Waiting Laughters*, p.84)

Here the form of the word, *yawn*, is arranged to imitate or evoke its semantic content. Other instances of this feature can be seen in the layout of the words *Waiting*, *along*, and *bandages* in *Waiting Laughters* (p.29):

Wait
ing
And the hours limp a-
long
with
band-
ages
of fractured moments

Syntactically, iconic effect is created through the word order or combination patterns of some of the poems. In this regard, some of the poems project unconventional syntactic forms, which tend to express certain unique attributes and effects. The poem, 'The Nigerian Railway', displays a truncated line order as well as syntactic and morphological arrangement. Through this device, the poem portrays the inefficiency and decadence of the Nigerian railway system. The following lines of the poem illustrate the point:

dark sna
ky str
uctures
tor tuous
milli
pede on
legs
of iron
crawl ing
wear ily

fromswamptosavannah.
(*Songs of the Marketplace*, p. 30)

The chaotic line arrangement and lexical forms express unorthodox pragmatic and aesthetic effects. The iconic significance of congested lexical formation of the last line of the example above recreates a situation of disorder. Another effect of this iconic form is aptly depicted on page 37 of *Waiting Laughters* in the line that reads:

Without a face without a name without a face without a...

The anthology, *Waiting Laughters*, also unveils other aspects of the iconic attributes and implications of syntactic elements, as can be seen in the instances on pages 29, 34 and 36. The line patterning in the example on page 36, which seems somewhat prosaic and disjointed, has exceptional aesthetic and communicative import. The following excerpt from the poem demonstrates the significance of this innovation:

And	minutes
drag	their
feet	so
in-	finitely
in	grey
boots	of
laden	hours
each	wink
a	wail

(*Waiting Laughters*, p. 36)

'Sundown' presents even a more vivid example of this form of iconic representation through the reconstruction of its syntactic patterns.

Formal Consideration of Iconicity

From the stylistic point of view, the feature of iconicity is well projected in the poetry of Niyi Osundare. One form of iconicity at the stylistic level is embodied in its graphic and graphetic qualities. This is evident largely in the layout, texture and organisation of information in the poems. The patterning of text and presentation of information in the poem is generally evocative of the subject of the poems. In other words, textual

organisation, layout and formatting of the poems constitute an essential aspect of their communicative essence.

The deployment of graphetic and graphological devices in the poems is such that they seem to visually replicate the message being expressed. In this instance, the line pattern, stanza format, and general presentation of the poems give insights into the ideas they communicate. In addition to the immediate aesthetic effects of this device, they constitute suggestive signalling instruments. This point is well articulated in the first stanza of the poem on page 32 of *Waiting Laughters*. The poem, which discusses the inefficiency of the Nigerian railway system, structures its first stanza after a major traffic warning sign of the Nigerian Railway Corporation often placed at rail line and road intersection points. The line structure and layout of the stanza aptly imitate that sign.

Conclusion

Iconic representation of form, linguistic elements and textual organisation represent articulate signalling and expressive devices which delineate the communicative essence and significance of Niyi Osundare's poetry.

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