A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF OLU OBAFEMI'S SONG OF HOPE AND ONLY HOPE PERSISTS

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Abstract

This article interprets the meanings embedded in two selected poems from Olu Obafemi's anthology. The purpose is to use syntactic knowledge to appreciate how structural arrangements of lexical items in poems obviate the obscurities in figurations. The two poems 'Song of Hope' and 'Only Hope Persists' capture the state of affairs in Nigeria. The poems are a lamentation of the indigent Nigerians who are being under-fed while the politicians, their malefactors over-feed. These politicians horrendously keep the gap between them and the helpless poor wide. Chomsky's (1986) postulations of semantic roles affirm that arguments relate to predicates and determine the range of expressions which fulfill argument functions. This submission forms the tool for the analysis of the selected poems. The analyses reveal that meaning is made when the elements in clause structure relate. The argument positions inter-play with the semantic properties of the verb to assign roles in the structure. All these relationships result in the overall meaning embedded in the lines of the poem analyzed in this study. As aesthetic and stylistic as the use of language appears in these poems, there is a bias for both the information and the syntactic forms. Hence, the poet balances conformity and non-conformity to conventional syntactic rule.

Keywords: Argument positions, X-bar syntax, Theta roles, Semantic roles, Syntactic meaning, Nominal Group, Verb Group, Agent, Experiencer

Introduction

Semantics is important in the context of grammar because of the interaction between syntactic forms and structural aspects of meaning. In the same vein, syntax and semantics are linguistic fields that interplay, resulting in clear-cut description of difference which is describable by the deep and surface structure. Katz (1972:362) traces history and writes that:

> When scientific fields undergo the change from description in terms of ordinary terminology to description in terms of technical terminology, distinctions arise that mark off parts of the fields that have not been satisfactorily demarcated, previously. The separation of syntax and semantics rests in just such a distinction.

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A theory of syntax which formerly served as a descriptive vocabulary was replaced by a system of technical constructs designed specially to make description more precise and encompassing. Thus prescriptive linguistics is characteristic of a recent growth in linguistic theory. The known rationale behind the replacement and redefinition of theory, resulting in generative grammar is that grammatical phenomena break into three kinds phonological, syntactic and semantic (cf. Katz 1972:364). Meaning relations posed the greatest difficulty to early linguists. That situation informed Chomsky's submission as quoted by Katz (1972:363), thus:

> Part of the difficulty with the theory of meaning is that %meaning+ tends to be used as a catch-all term to include every aspect of language that we know very little about. In so far as this is correct, we can expect various aspects of this theory to be claimed by other approaches to language in the course of their development.

In this article, we are interested in how meaning is made in poetic ordering of structures. Meaning in structure is basically thematic. Theme in structure is indicated by position in the clause. As stated by Halliday (1994:37) the theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned. Some grammarians have used the terms, %topic+, instead of %Theme+. To clarify some issues, Halliday differentiates Theme and Rheme. He employs Theme in his discussions of clause as message, because of its relevance to his discussion. He further maintains that, 'if in any given language, the message is organized as a Theme-Rheme structure, and if this structure is expressed by the sequence in which the elements occur in the clause, then it seems natural that the position for the theme should be at the beginning, rather than at the end or at some other specific point'. The theme in the words of Halliday (1994:38) is not necessarily a nominal group.

Radford (2002: 164) puts the Theme role as a central concept in the description of structures. According to him, 'it has become customary over the past two decades to refer to the relevant semantic roles as thematic role; and since the Greek letter /o/ (theta) corresponds to th in English and the word thematic begins with th, it has also become standard practice to abbreviate the expression thematic role to o-role, pronounced theta role by some and thyta role by others). Radford goes ahead in illustrating the diverse thematic roles as Theme/Patient, Agent/Causer, Experiencer, Recipient/ Possessor and Goal. While the Nominal Group positions, i.e, Argument positions enjoy those o-names. The Verbal Group positions according to Halliday (1994:115) are the mental and material processes. In a clause of mental process, there is always one participant who is humanõ one that senses, feels, thinks or perceives, while in a material process, every participant is a thing; that is, it is a phenomenon of our experience.

The third distinction between material and mental processes is that of tense. MC, Cauley (1971: 55) believes that syntactic and semantic representations are objects of the same formal nature, namely ordered trees, whose non-terminal nodes are labeled by syntactic category symbols, and that in each language there is a single system of transformation which convert semantic representations of sentences into their superficial form.

Obviously, the semantic and surface forms of syntactic description play a prominent role in the assignment of semantic roles to structures. In this study, the ordering of the Deep Structures (DS) in partial relation with the Surface Structure (SS) are brought to the fore in Olu Obafemi's %Song of Hope+ and %Only Hope Persists+. The preoccupation of the study is the thematic roles that are assigned the argument positions and how meaning is made inter-textually in the two poems.

Thematic Roles and Arguments in Structures

Levels of linguistics display a web of inter-connectivity, which signals an undertone of structural and extra - structural bonds. In specific terms, inter - textually certain cohesive operations connect the lexical entries in structures to make meaning. Extra-textually however, the lexical entries connect especially when it concerns the essence of communication to achieve solely a smooth meaning decoding-encoding process.

Again, the semantic role is a central one in any structure. For two decades now, it has customarily been referred to as thematic roles (Halliday 1994: 37-38). The crux of it all is the argument positions that can be filled by certain Grammatical Functions (GF). For example:

> %FBI arrested Larry Luckless+ has two GFs. FBI is the AGENT argument and the predicate %arrested+, and %Larry Luckless+ is the theme/Patient argument of arrested. Radford (2002:64) posits that the thematic role played by a given argument in relation to its predicate determines the range of expressions which can fulfill the relevant argument function. See the sentences below as illustration.

> The FBI, arrested Larry Luckless
>
> Agent   Theme
>
> The suspect received a caution
>
> Recipient   Theme
>
> The audience enjoyed   the play
>
> Experiencer   Theme
>
> The president   went   to London
>
> Theme   Goal

The nature of the relevant restrictions depend on the semantic properties of the predicate on the one hand and on the semantic (=thematic) role played by the argument on the other. As sentences such as the following illustrate:

a.   my uncle realizes that I'm a lousy cook

b.   my cat realizes that I'm a lousy cook

c.   my gold fish realizes that I'm a lousy cook

d.   my pet amoeba realizes that I'm a lousy cook

e.   my frying pan realizes that I'm a lousy cook

The experiencer argument (subject) of a cognitive predicate like %realize+ has to be an expression denoting a rational entity. We shall demonstrate, (using the x-bar syntactic model of syntactic analysis in our data presentation and analysis), the centrality of certain theoretical questions which arise on how theta roles are assigned to arguments. As reiterated by Radford (2002), V constituents of the form verb + complement, the thematic role of the complement is determined by the semantic properties of the verb.

The canonical ? - role associated with D.P complements is that of THEME. However, the question of how subjects are assigned theta-roles is more complex. Marantz (1984:23) and Chomsky (1986: 59-60) argue that although verbs directly assign theta roles to their internal arguments (i.e complements), it is not the verb but rather the whole v-bar constituent i.e verb + complement string which determines the theta role assigned to its external argument subjects.

Data Presentation

Olu Obafemi's %Song of Hope+ and %Only Hope persists+ have been selected for this study from the forty five poems carefully compiled in the anthology. The choice is due to their peculiar thematic underpinnings. The two poems summarize the intention of the poet. Quintessentially, similar, the two poems lament the helplessness of the indigent Nigerians who are left at the mercy of affluent underprivileged citizenry of what is described as the 'national cake.'

The poet's wealth of experience as a dramatic literate is evident in his astute choice of words. This device oils the medium through which the poems are being relayed. A combination of simplicities and complexities of sentence structure dominate the patterning, the choice and the graphology of the poems. Our choice of the two poems is due to its specific thematic preoccupation of the entire anthology.

Our theoretical framework of analysis is the G.B syntax. The theory provides many relevant syntactic tools for the analysis of selected structural data. For instance, the x-bar theory analyses the structure of phrases, while

the case theory analyses the nominal phrases (NP). The ? - theory however, shows relationships between verbs and their NPs. While control theory analyses infinitival clauses, bounding theory discusses co-referential relationships among NPS and Government Theory investigates the relationship between the governors and their governees. In our analysis, we shall remind the informed minds of the inevitability of stylistic impulses in the linguistic (syntactic) analysis of poetry.

Textual Analysis

Theta Theory and Semantic Selection in Text

The controversy surrounding linguistic analysis of poetry is due to its non-conformity to the convention of writing. Osundare (2003:17) refers to any writer who has not only bent but broken the pre-set rules of language as remarkable. He adds that code-oriented variation (or difference) which is characteristic of literature may be lexical, syntactic or rhetorical.

Datum I

The syntax of Datun 1 %Song of Hope+ is rather complex. Set in eight stanzas with a conjugation of vocabularies that are code-oriented, the stanzas are rather uneven in the number of sentences. The poet is therefore a person possessed; but how much conscious control can he have in that state? And if it is true that the muse speaks through and for him, who gets the blame for a poorly wrought turn of phrases, for a
reactionary idea, expressed? (Osundare 2003:15).

In stanza one, the given information, i.e,. (Rheme) is

[Though we know] (Those who cut our bellies open)

[With a knife] (meant for the throat of a cow)

The new information, i.e., [Theme] is

(We do not stretch our hands)

To strangle the air

There are four (4) verb phrases (v+) compressed into a complex sentence, i.e., the six line stanza. %Though+ is a subordinating element that made the sentence complex thus:

1. [though]   [we]   know   [those who cut our
    bellies]

    Sub element   (N'' Agent) v'' [mental process]   (N'' Theme)

                                      Subject

2. [we]   [do not stretch]   [our hands]   [to strangle the air]

    (N''Agent) (dosupport+NegativeN'' (Theme)   P'' (Goal)

+ lexical verb= V'')   Accusative

Nominative   Accusative (oblique)

Within the framework of GB syntax, lexical items are bundles of distinctive features. In this regard, ‰know+ in the first ‰clause+ being a ‰mental verb+, (cf. Halliday 1994, p. 108) is c-selected by its external argument the N+ pronominal, ‰we+ and s-selects its internal argument, v-complement, N+ (theme), which is a conjugation of two embedded clauses, where the second is elliptical, i.e (which is) meant.

Unlike the first sentence, the second sentence above has N+ (Agent), a V+ with a do support operation, i.e a negating element (not) and a material process, 'stretch'. The V+ in its internal argument complement has an N+ (theme) and a P+ as Goal. The concept of process, participant and circumstance are semantic categories which explain in the most general way how phenomena of the real world are represented as linguistic structures. Material processes indicate processes of doing. Mental processes indicate processes of sensing while relational processes indicate processes of being.

The senses portrayed by the poet touches the sore point of contemporary linguistic and stylistic thinking. Ohmann (1953:123-134) cited by Osundare (2003:19) opines that syntactic transformations are ‰meaning preserving and therefore merely stylistic+. This argument highlights one of the weaknesses (in spite of its strengths) of TGG as a sentence grammar largely limited to the propositional as opposed to implicational, contextual content of language.

By restricting stylistic choice to meaning preserving transformation, T.G.G. banished stylistics to the surface-structural component of analysis, a tangential concern literally limited to the performance level of language. With all this in mind, it is evident from the first stanza that Olu Obafemi used a critical hardware element, 'metaphor' to picture how wickedly the masses are %slaughtered+, and the citizenry rendered helpless.

The poet tactically rendered the stanza following a balanced syntactic model where all argument positions are taken care of.

In stanza two:

[We]   [know]   [too well]   [that those who õ meat]

N'' (Agent) v'' (mental)   A''(circumstance)   comp''

Nominative

[from out of our watered mouths]

P''

[mean   us   to weep õ]   [those õ mean us   to weep

V''   N''(patient) p'' (Goal)   Agent   v'' N''   Goal

The second stanza is written in another complex sentence. Two senses are revealed: the first (Given), i.e the thematic preoccupation of the poet which is the knowledge that certain ruling sects treat %us+badly, and the second, i.e %the remainder of the message, the part in which the theme is developed, according to the Prague school terminology is the Rheme (see Halliday 1994:37).

There seem to be two V+ and virtually all the other grammatical names in T.G.G, i.e., the Nominal phrase N+, Adverbial phrase A+, Prepositional phrase P+ and the Adjectival phrase, A+. The agent %we+, c-selects %know+, a mental verb which in turn c-selects the CP+ i.e Complementizer Phrase, %that+. The first clause is complex. The Rheme itself is dependent on the theme for the sense of the stanza to be reasonable.

In stanza three, we discover a line of structure persistently running through from the beginning to the end of the poem:

We do not stretch our hands	line 5
We know too well	line 7
We do not cry	line 15
We do not dull the edges of our eyes	line 16
We brace ourselves	line 19
We do not mourn	line 23
We mend our shattered dreams	line 24
We gather our splintered brains	line 27
We do not open mouth	line 31
We sing the song of hope	line 35

All the clauses above represent the textual theme function of clause complex in functional grammar, because they indicate or assume the nominalization status. At the accusative/oblique case another peculiar clause structure runs through the poem:

To strangle the air	Line 6
To sing the song of hope	Line 22
To sing a hopeful son	Line 26
To remember in our swollen memories	Line 28
To the foul wind	Line 32

The first set; for example:

[we]   [do notõ]

N''   V'

The second set; for example:

[to strangle the air]

Goal

Accusative/oblique case

In line 19, - brace: V'+ [-NP] to +V2 + NP

In line 19, the V' is %brace+ which according to the projection principle permits an NP- 'ourselves', while all the embedded complements are ignored in this scheme. The semantic specification of the V+ brace as it projects to select %ourselves+ its satellite requires that N+ ? - marked %Goal should be [+ human]. So, 'ourselves+ vested with human quality of receiving the action 'brace' obeys the s- selectional rule of the verb.

In the first sets above, the grammatical subject of the clauses starting with 'we' is classified as pronominal from the purview of Binding theory. Binding principle requires that a pronominal is free in a local domain, that is, it is not bound. Thus, the clause %we brace ourselves+ answers the Bounding theory principle, i.e.

<u>we</u>   <u>brace</u>   <u>ourselves</u>

Agent   process   Goal

The lexical entry pronominal 'we' projects onto the syntax of the sentence. Since, %we+ is the agent that does brace something, then Cobbett (1819 in Cobbett 1984:73) is correct to say in 1819 that: 'never write a personal pronoun without duly considering what noun it will upon a reading of the sentence, be found to related...'

So, %we+ relate to %ourselves+ because Binding theory is basically concerned with the same issues of how pronouns and other types of noun relate to each other but extends the antecedent pronoun relationship to other categories in a rigorous fashion. Binding theory is concerned with connections among noun phrases that have to do with such semantic properties as dependent of reference, including the connection between a pronoun and its antecedent (Chomsky 1988:52).

In essence, the semantic implication of the verb %brace+ as it projects to %ourselves+ and as it semantic selects %ourselves+ a reflexive pronominal as used by the poet is indicative of encouragement. The poet carefully uses %brace+ which in paradigmatic relations is equal to %encourage+, %prepare+, %strengthen+, etc. The poet acknowledges that the gory situation, they (the masses) are into, demands a mental or physical preparation for something unpleasant that is imminent. In another sense, %brace+ or %a brace+ is something that is used to strengthen or support another thing or to make it stiff (Longman English Dictionary 2005:71).

An interesting phrase that is relevant to this discussion is the phrase: %The precious moments of our collective dreams+. This is because; the X-bar

syntax maintains that every phrase is a maximal projection. For every maximal projection, the head of a phrase and its paraphernalia or satellites serving as specifiers and complements are essential. The syntax of the N+or NPS above is built in such a way that, there is an insertion of another constituent between the specifiers and complements are essential. The syntax of the N+or NPS above is built in such a way that there is an insertion of another constituent between the specifiers and the head of the phrase. This could be illustrated thus:

The   precious   moments of   our   collective   dreams

Specifier   A'' (Adj Phr) N (head)   p'' ---N'q

Theme

The category that blocks the direct relationship between the specifier and the N0 (head) occupies what is called attributive position in GB syntax. Aarts (2001:285) defines an attributive position as %he syntactic position in a noun phrase between the specifier and the head element. The phrase is a minimal projection because it is flanked by its own specifier and complement and not externally. Radford (1997:270) defines a minimal projection as a %constituent which is not a projection of some other constituents, hence, heads, i.e, (words) are minimal projection+. On the whole the NPs above carry the thematic essence of the stanza. It is possible to relate the syntactic conjugation to the content of the poem a dream of relief. The poet-personae imagines a time when they will sing a song of hope when liberation comes.

Datum II

This poem is one of the longest in the collection. This intimidating length is a reflection of the posture of persistence which hope is made to assume by the poet. Since we are embarking on a syntactic analysis, we wouldn't mention all the elements of poetry relevant only in a stylistic analysis. However, certain NPs, seem relevant for our study.

Group 1	I will be there -	Line 1
	Let me explain	Line 10
Group 2	Who inherit the glint of our past	Line 23
	The only thing that persists	Line 44
	The stubborn groveling of our famished throats	Line 51
	The only stain	Line 65
Group 3	Draught drained from yesterday's dregs	Line 63
	Will not wish joblessness away	Line 64

Wasters, wafflers and wasters	Line 69
Bury them in unfathomable depths	Line 70

The sentence in line 1 has the structure:

<u>I</u>	<u>will be</u>	<u>there</u>
Participant	process	Goal

In line 10:

<u>Let</u>	me	explain
Process	intrusive	Process
Mental	pronoun	material
	Complement	

In line 23:

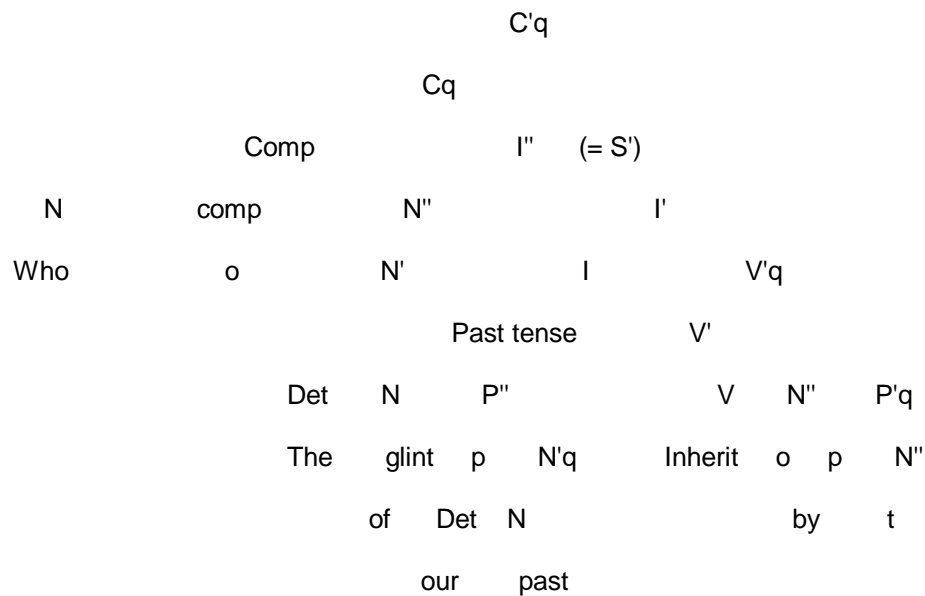| <u>Who</u>	inherit	<u>the glint</u>	<u>of our past</u>
Agent	process	patient	Goal

Or

Line 51

[Surface   The glint of our past was inherited by who]

[structure   ]

It can be represented on a tree diagram thus:

```
                              C'q

                        Cq

                  Comp              I"    (= S')

    N           comp          N"                    I'

   Who            o          N'               I          V'q

                                       Past tense        V'

                  Det    N     P"              V     N"     P'q

                  The   glint  p    N'q      Inherit  o    p     N"

                        of   Det  N                        by     t

                             our   past
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Some other phrasal groups are presented below:

     The only thing that persists

     The stubborn   groveling of our farmished throat

     The only stain

        NPs (Agent)

     Draught drained from yesterday's dreg

     N" Theme

     Will not wish joblessness away

   Goal   Rheme (v")

     In line 69-70, we see another NP,

I.e.,   <u>wasters   wafflers   and   worsters</u>

       N" (compound) Theme

      <u>Bury them in unfathomable depths</u>

       Rheme V"

Meaning interpretation is dependent on good grammar. Elements in a correct structure in other words relate to convey meaning. In GB syntax (see Cook 1988: 111), o - theory is said to be part of the theory that handles relationships. Cook (Ibid) states that 'they are part of the contents of the lexical entry for an item which gets assigned to a relevant NP in the sentence.

Theta Roles and Semantic Selection in the Text

The o - roles are semantic roles that are assigned to GF positions in structure. Cook (1988:34). Horrocks (1987: 101-102) considers the theory, one that deals with the assignment of roles such as recipient, agent, patient, etc to elements in the sentence, constrained by the o - criterion. In our second data, several examples present relevant for a syntactic analysis.

The pronominal %we+ in the structure above plays the agentive role %do not open+ belongs to the verbal group. It is the process, functionally that relates to what was not opened. What was not opened receives the action, as the patient. The ? - theory informs the agentive and patient roles. In another structure:

<u>We</u>   <u>sing</u>   <u>the song</u>   <u>of hope</u>

Agent   process   theme   goal

Four thematic roles are identified. The agent %we+ governs the process %sing+. The verb %sing+ in turn dictates the thematic preoccupation of the structure %the song+ and %the goal+ 'hope'.

Conclusion

The purpose of examining syntactic conjugations in the selected poems for this study has been to connect the syntactic structures with the meanings made by Olu Obafemi by himself and by us the readers. The x-bar syntax championed by Chomsky and explicitly explained by Cook (1987) and Radford (2000) as well as Halliday's (1994) explication of his Functional approach to Grammar studies has been adopted for the syntactic analyses of theta or semantic roles in the poems. The arguments in this article have shown that meaning is not made in oblivion. It is the product of the poet's mastery of the structure of the language which he uses to express his thoughts. Although poets flout the conventional syntactic rules of language, there is a sense in which they adhere to some processes to make meaning. The deviance from syntactic rules under the guise of poetic license in poetry is incongruous. It disagrees with formalism in syntax. Adherence to the rules however informs the observance of the theme-rheme rule in clause structure.

Evidences in the selected poems have revealed that poets do not alter the syntax of English but re-arrange the clause-element. As long as meaning is made, the positioning of the subject nominal or object nominal as well as the mental and material processes is irrelevant. Little wonder why

Halliday (1994:38) asserts as earlier quoted in this article that the theme in a structure is not necessarily a nominal group (subject or complement) but it seems natural (in non-poetic structures) that the position for the theme should be at the beginning rather than at the end or at some other specific point.

The thematic or rhematic as well as mental and material processes are the departures from the message. They interplay with the semantic properties of the verb to assign roles in the structure. All these relationships result in the overall meaning embedded in the lines and verses of a poem. Olu Obafemi's poems analysed in this article are among other contemporary poems, which are not only a departure from the Elizabethan poetry but quite modern. Our motivation seems to be that the structures in the poems seem to perform dual roles õ a simplification of the grammar. The use of the English language for aesthetic essence in the poem is not without a bias for both the information value and syntactic forms. Simple as the diction appears to the eyes, the poems satisfy peculiarities of poetry in regard of the conforming as well as the non-conforming attributes to the conventional lexical and syntactic choice patterns.

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