

---

*International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies*  
(LALIGENS), Ethiopia

Vol. 5 (1), Serial No 11, February, 2016: 121-132  
ISSN: 2225-8604(Print) ISSN 2227-5460 (Online)  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/laligens.v5i1.11>

---

**Sentence Patterns in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter***

**Chukwukaelo, Anwuri, Ph.D.**  
Department of language  
Federal Polytechnic, Oko  
Anambra State, Nigeria  
E-mail: anwulidilys@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to isolate, describe and evaluate sentence patterns in Ba's *So Long a Letter* with a view to determining their stylistic significance. Such stylistic devices as foregrounding, sentence fragmentation pattern repetition and category rule violation. The emphasis is on determining how the author's sentences create aesthetic patterns and values. The Transformational Generative Grammar (TGG) was applied in the analysis of certain aspects of identified literary language. The TGG features were used to describe the sentence patterns. Thus, the paper discusses how sentence patterns/ Structure can create special effects.

**Introduction**

There is no gainsaying the fact that language is a basic tool of communication used by human beings. It is a code governed by a set of rules for generating well-formed sentence Yankson (1987, p.1) has observed that one of such rules is that every lexical item in English belongs to a particular grammatical category like a noun, a verb, an adjective etc. It must be noted that some ill-formed sentence are generated when the rules of lexical insertion are broken. Ironically, the breach of the rule is the hallmark of

the literary artist. Instructively, such breaches are not haphazard but systematic. This is not done to make meaning but to create special stylistic effects. Creative artists, while indulging in this breach, capitalize of poetic licence.

While Ogene (1993:13) stresses that “the question of whether or not linguistics has any relevance to the study of literature has for long engaged the attention of several linguists interested in the literary use of language” Yankson (1987) has observed that the creative artist expresses his sensations, perceptions, themes etc. primarily by means of language. Oha (2003) further noted that;

One of the major preoccupations of the modern Africa writers is novelty. They want to recreate fantasy in realistic essence. They want to revitalize the African literary mode and method. In unique form. The narratology tends to blend with the unusual ... in this process, they create literature of special language and style (p. 81).

It is common knowledge that such special language and style are captured through properly and specially crafted sentences. The investigation of these sentences to determine their aesthetic values in the text can be situated in the domains of literature or stylistics. Though there is a significant difference between literature and stylistics, the importance of linguistics in both realms cannot be ruled out. There are, however two approaches to stylistics – literary and linguistic. Leech and Short (as cited in Oha, 2003, p. 82) observed that stylistics aims at relating “the critics” concern of aesthetic appreciation with the linguists concern of linguistic description”. While noting that stylistics goes beyond linguistics because of its evaluation of quality, Oha, (2003, p. 82) has argued that linguistics only describes whereas stylistics describes and evaluates. This therefore, informs the choice of the stylistic approach to the study of Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*. The sentence will be described but evaluated to determine their stylistic effects. Consequently, the Transformational Generative Grammar model is chosen as the frame work for the sentence evaluation.

The text is the primary source for the data. The random sampling method is used to select sentence types and patterns for analysis. What has informed this method is the fact that not all they sentences in the texts can be selected and analyzed. This is in conformity with what Adejare (1992) has described as” notion projection” which he also observed to be useful because.

... in any text, the linguistic structures conveying the message projected at the different levels would be evenly distributed throughout the text and thus enable the analyst to select the proper examples form the data.

This accounts for the method applied in this paper for the selection of sample data for the analyses.

### **Theoretical Framework**

It is ideal that the concept of the Transformational Generative Grammar, TGG, as the preferred theoretical model for this study be explained to justify its choice. According to Tomori (1977), Transformational Grammar explains the rules governing structural changes and the formation of utterances. In appreciating the relevance of Transformational Grammar in Syntactic description, Brown and Miller (1980) observed that: “It is still the dominant linguistic paradigm and has contributed more to our understanding of the native of language than any other single model ...” (p.1)

The TGG consists of three distinct levels of organization which are the base, the transformational and the phonological components. Because a human being has the ability to abstract from language a finite number of simple sentences, each of these levels has its own set of rewrite rules for generating a sentence. In explaining TGG, Chomsky argues that human beings have an innate ability for comprehending the basic principles underlying the grammatical structures of language. This means that he recognizes the relationship among the various elements of a sentence of a language and uses the processes of transformations to express these relationships. This further explains the care of the relationship between Transformational Generative Grammar and style. The TGG, concerned with syntax, has made the greatest revelations about the nature of sentence relations than any other model; hence its relevance to this study which emphasis is on ascertaining how the writers’ sentence patterns have enhanced style.

For deeper insight into the work, we will endeavour to apply the tree diagram, using the various transformations and sentence patterns occasioned by the writing style of the author under focus, to illustrate the difference between the “ordinary language” and the literary language as identified in the texts. In linguistics, a tree diagram or parse tree is one way to visually represent the structure of a sentence. The importance of the tree diagram representation of sample sentences in this work is that it gives graphic generalizations about the pattern of sentences used by the authors.

### **The English Sentence**

Oha (2000, p. 68) notes that the sentence can be defined in two ways sentence can be defined in two ways namely, graphologically and structurally for Oha, a sentence, graphologically is a word or a group of word that ends with any of such punctuation marks as full stop exclamation mark elliptical mark or question mark structurally, Oha noted that the sentence is a group of words that is made up of subject and predicate. This can be faulted because situations and contexts or even “shared knowledge” in discourse can make words or non-predicate structures like phrases convey meanings or actions in the manner complete sentence do. All English sentences follow the same pattern – Subject (S), Verb (V), Object (O), (SVO), which was more

prevalent in the era of traditional grammar. The predicate/verb is, however, the defining element in a sentence

In classifying the sentence into structural types, Lamidi (2000:110) has shown three major kinds namely simple, compound and complex sentences. For Lamidi, he noted that the simple sentence consist of an independent clause which contains Noun Phrase (NP), INFL and VP components only. This simply means that such a sentence has one finite verb and in the elementary sense, indicates the doer/receiver of the action (the NP). Compound sentences refer to structures in which two independent clauses are joined together by like, and, so, or, then, but (e.g. Taiwo cooked and Kayode ate the food); and complex sentences contain a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses which are usually attached introducer technically called complementizer. We can also classify sentences according to their functional roles; the declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamatory sentences.

#### **Bio-Data of Mariama Ba**

Mariama Ba was born in 1929 in the West African country of Senegal. A former teacher and civil servant, she was a divorced mother of nine children having once been married to Obeye Digo, a one time member of the Senegalese Parliament. Ba died in 1981 before the publication of her second novel, *Scarlet Song*. In 1980, Ba won the Noma prize for her first novel.

#### **Synopsis of the Novel**

*Ba's So Long a Letter*, an epistolary novel, recounts the experiences of Ramatoulaye who feels betrayed with the secret marriage between Modou Fall, her husband of many years and Binetou, her daughter's friend. This is inspite of the Islamic cultural injunctions that allow/approve such marriage. It is in order to express her feelings that Ramatoulaye, in a letter to her friend, Aissatou, reveals her anger, frustrations, and disappointment at her husband's attitude in particular and in fact, the society, religion and custom that allow his marriage. Through characters' dialogue, Ba creates a literary piece whose reading is so compelling.

The focus of this paper remains the analysis of sentence patterns/structure in the texts in question applying stylistic and linguistic models. The way Ba achieves a stylistic effect is so profound through peculiar and outstanding sentence patterns and other stylistic devices will be explored.

#### **Sentence Patterns in *So Long a Letter* and their Stylistic Effects**

##### **Sentence Types**

Ba's use of (short) simple sentences in the novel instead of complex ones or other types of sentences is very remarkable and outstanding. It is our candid opinion

that this approach enhances the readers' appreciation of the text. It also symbolizes the writer's free and simple flow of thoughts. The simple sentences, marked by their brevity, conciseness and precision are not only dominant but observed to be punchy, definitive rhythmic and musical. In her lamentation over Modou's attitude after taking Binetou as a second wife, Ramatoulaya bemoans her situation thus:

I was not deceived, therefore I no longer interested modou, and I knew it. I was abandoned ... I faced up to the situation bravely... But my loneliness would emerge at night, Burdensome (p.52).

In the first sentence, for instance, there is a negation, NOT. The sentence could as well have been "I was deceived, therefore". It is remarkable to note that the NOT negation imposes a difference both in interpretation and meaning going by the negation function of the TGG (where a new element, especially a negative marker, can be inserted into a structure) as well as the notions of the deep and surface structures. Yet, the sentence remains a simple one for possessing one finite verb *deceived* accompanied by an auxiliary verb to be "was". The main verb is *deceived*.

Ramatoulaye, nostalgic of her past relationship with Aissatou writes:

Our common habits sprang up at their usual times. I missed dreadfully our nightly conversation... Like opium, I missed our daily consultations. I pitted myself against shadows. The wanderings of my thoughts chased away all sleep. I side-stepped my pain in a refusal to fight it... my sadness dissolved (pp 52 – 53).

Considering the notions of deep structure and surface structure, such verbs as *chased*, *side-stepped* and *dissolved* as indicated in the simple sentence in this passage impose a meaning on the deep structure that is different from the surface structure. This confirms our claim that the deep structure in literary language encapsulates a connotative meaning. Take for instance, the semantic implications of the words *chased*, *side-stepped* and *dissolved* and the connotative meaning they bring to bear on the structures in which they occur.

In capturing the power of women, Dauda, a politician, and the suitor of Ramatoulaye notes through these simple sentences:

But you women... you demolish. You destroy. Imagine a large number of women in the Assembly. Why, everything would explode (p.60)

It is instructive to note that each of the (finite) verbs ( *demolish*, *destroy* would *explode*) in this excerpt carries with itself beats of power that is illustrative, explanatory, incisive and forceful as shown by the simple sentence pattern. Ramatoulaye in asserting her position as well as reassuring herself of victory over

oppressive cultural inhabitations like forced marriage, expresses her feelings this way; still characterized by simple sentences:

I look Tamsir straight in the eye. I look at Mawdo. I look at the Imam.  
I draw my black shawl closer. I tell my beads. This time I shall speak out (p.57).

With the pattern repetition of “I look...” and the instrumentality of the simple sentence, the language becomes musical, dramatic and forceful.

### **Tense Patterns in *So Long a Letter***

A closer look at the text reveals that there is inconsistency and admixture of tenses (a tense being the form a verb takes to show time and action). Using present and past tenses interchangeably, Ba applies the past tense in recounting her past experiences and applies the present tense in making comments about personalities and their actions, situations and ongoing events. For example:

The family meeting held this morning in my sitting room is at last over. You can easily guess those who were present ... Binetou who is even thinner... The Mirasse commanded by the Koran requires that a dead person be stripped of his most intimate secrets.... (p.9).

On this excerpt, one would have expected that she writes “The family meeting held this morning... (was) at last over” since the introductory verb HELD is in the past, thus accounting for the reason why other verbs should have been in the past tense form. The first sentence contrasts with the last in the text in which the writer describes the requirement of the Koran in the present tense, “requires.” This is because the sentence explains a religious truth (in Islam) that is eternal – just like saying that “while in the school, my teacher taught me that the sun rises in the East and sets in the West”. Because the sentence expresses an eternal truth, “rises” and “sets” are forms of verbs different from the introductory verb “taught” despite the rule governing this application. We observe that this style pervades the entire text. Ba uses the present tense to bring freshness into the story and by implication makes the past to be immediate and now. Though the use of simple present tense to express habitual events/statements is not peculiar to Ba, its mode and pattern of usage established it as a stylistic tool by her.

### **Fronting of Prepositions**

Another method that marks Ba’s style through sentence patterning is the fronting of prepositional phrases e.g.

- i. On the fine sand, washed by the waves... (p.21).

- ii. In the evening, the Fishermen would return from their laborious outings (p.21).
- iii. In our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom (p.19).
- iv. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially (p.12).
- v. In the midst of life, in the midst of poverty, in the midst of ugliness, young Nabou would often triumph with her knowledge and experience (p.47).
- vi. Under, the wondering gaze of the kids... (p.21).

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that there is a category rule violation in which there are shifts in the place and location of the subjects, “The Fishermen” and “We” respectively. The stylistic implication is the foregrounding effect in which the reader is drawn out to share in the feelings of the author. Casting the sentences with prepositional fronting is of stylistic significance thus forcing the reader to be in empathy with the writer.

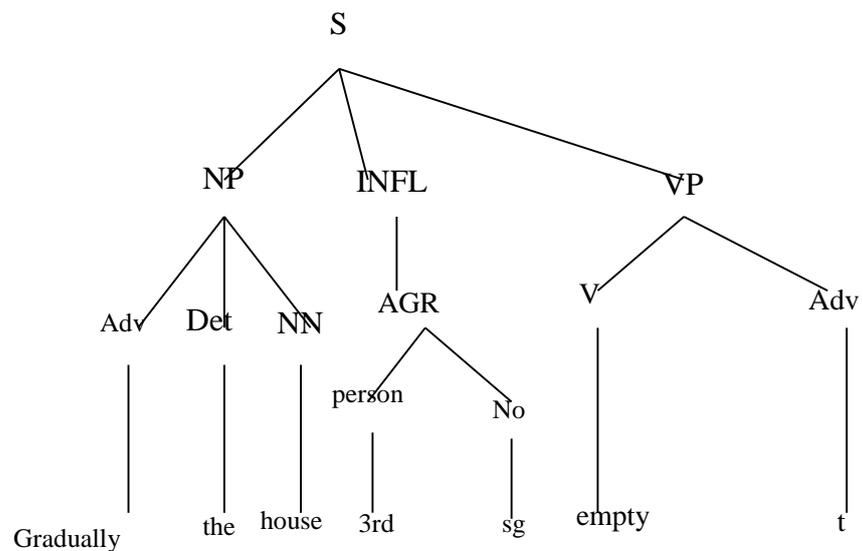
#### **Introductory Adverbials**

Like fronting of prepositional phrases, Ba also uses introductory adverbials for stylistic effect. The consistent use of introductory adverbials in the text, either as single words, phrases or clauses is significant and noticeable. To show sentence variability with varying patterns opposed to the traditional SVO structure, usually considered as the norm, the writer (un) consciously deviates from such structure and writes thus:

- i. Gradually the house empties (p.7).
- ii. Vehemently, they recommended marabouts ... (p.48).
- iii. If over the years, and passing through the realities of life, dreams die, I still keep infant memories ... (p.1).
- iv. Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am widowed.
- v. Even though the primary schools are rapidly increasing (p. 18).

It is to be noted that the mode and frequency of occurrence of these sentences, rather than deviation in usage, make them stylistic. The obvious sentence patterns in sentences **i – iii** are ASV, ASVO and ASVCPO. These structures occur to show the departure from the traditional sentence patterning. Ordinarily, structures in the sentences (i) and (ii) could have been “The house gradually empties” and “They vehemently recommended marabouts; thus indicating the traditional function of the adverb as a verb modifier so that “gradually and “vehemently” will be directly

modifying the verb “empties” and “recommended”. But the adverbs are brought to the initial sentence position for emphasis. This shift however does not change the meanings of the sentences both in the deep and surface structures. These adverbials as a matter of fact, build up an uncertainty and at other times, expedition in the mind of the reader. Stylistically, the fronting of these adverbials particularly, “Gradually”, “Vehemently”, “If” and Even though ... add credence to the import of the novel as a literary work primarily concerned with manner or attitude. There is no doubt that Ba uses introductory adverbials and the fronting of prepositional phrases for stylistic effect. Let us consider the free diagram on introductory adverbial using the sentence, “Gradually, the house empties”.



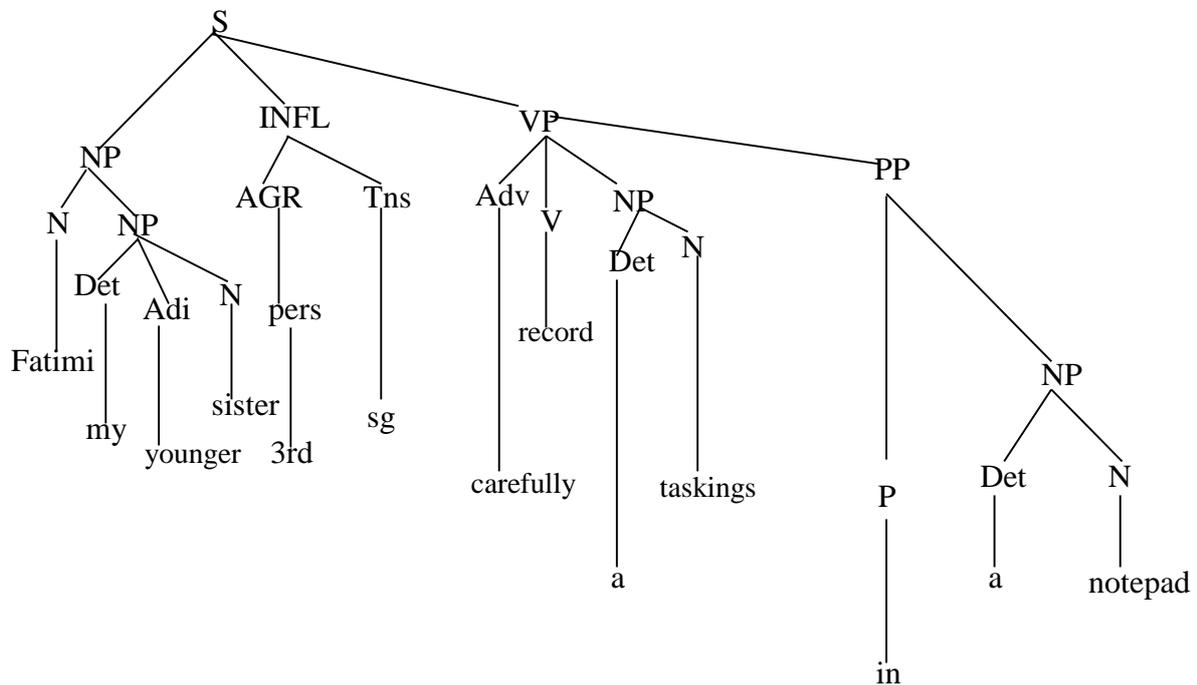
This diagram shows surface structure derivation from adverbial fronting.

Though it is obvious that the fronted element is not a part of the subject (S) and so, cannot be attached to the subject NP, the adverbial, “gradually”, is moved to the subject position as an emotive device and to sustain the rhythm in the author’s use of language to further her style. The symbol, t, leaves a trace that as item has been moved using the transformational rule of move alpha which enables a lexical item to be moved any where but still leaving the sentence grammatical. Affix hopping rule applies to the INFL and verb components to have empty – press + AGR to yield the surface string, empties.

### Nouns in Apposition

Also important in the novel is the use of nouns in apposition. A noun is in apposition when it is immediately preceded by another co-referential noun and in which case the second noun explains more the first. For example, “John, the footballer, won the award”. Here, footballer, a noun, is in apposition to another noun. The noun in apposition and the noun as a complement to another are almost the same but they are distinguished by the syntactic position of the word in the sentence. E.g. In “John is a footballer”, footballer is a complement of the noun, *John* while in “John, the footballer won the award”, the *footballer* is in apposition to the noun, John. In the two circumstances, however, “footballer” points at John and explains his identify.

Let us use as example form the text, “Fatimi, my younger sister, carefully test records my takings in a note-pad” (p.6).



In the example shown on the diagram, Fatimi and my younger sister are in apposition with the later explaining the former. This is for emphasis. Other examples of nouns in apposition in the text include:

- i. Tonight, Binetou, my co-wife, will return to her SICAP Villa (p.7).

- ii. Modou, a practical man, led his unions into collaboration, with the government... (p.25).
- iii. ... You remember Daouda Dieng, my former suitor.../... Daouda Deing, a candidate for my hand!(p.59).
- iv. ... Old Tamsir, Modou's brother, and the Imam from the Mosque in his area (pp.9/36).

The underlined noun phrases are in apposition to the subject nouns preceding them. These phrases are used in such a manner that they serve as re-enforcements to eth subject nouns; they not only lay emphasis on these immediate nouns preceding them, they explain them. This is to say that the writer uses this device to be detailed and concise in her reference.

### **Linguistic Parallelism**

The creative writer does not depend solely on the conventional language use. Typical of the writer's use of language, Ba weaves her language into unique patterns that adequately describe/convey the various moods to her readers. One of such devices employed to achieve this purpose is linguistic parallelism. Parallelism refers to parallel structures or the idea of balancing one idea with a similar idea, use of two or more phrases in a sentence that have similar rhythm/grammatical structure or two or more sentences that are similar in rhythm and structure among others (Ike, 2002, p.107).

But Yankson (1987) has further given as insight into the meaning of linguistic parallelism to mean the use of pattern repetition in a literary text for a particular stylistic effect (p.14).

In harnessing linguistic parallelism in the novel therefore, efforts are made to look at it from the different angles and to ascertain how these enhance the desired stylistic goals in the novel. Apart from being childhood friends, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye share a common feature of not having husbands both being separated from their spouses through divorce and/or death. Ba uses form and language to capture this natural affinity through the balancing of both the idea and the grammatical structure:

Yesterday you were divorced

Today I am widowed (p1).

In representing these parallel structures linguistically, we will have: Adverb + Pro + Verb + Participle with the two adverbs "Yesterday" and "Today" in paradigmatic relationship with each other. They are synonymously related under the general feature/+ time/. Similarly, the two past participles "divorced" and "widowed" are

related synonymously under the general feature/-husband/. This juxtaposition of ideas is similar to the instance in this excerpt:

I shed tears of joy and sadness together joy in being loved  
by my children, the sadness of a mother who does not  
have the means to change the course of events (p.53).

Besides reflecting the similarity in the plights of both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in the passages, the literary significance of the patterns of language on the text is that form and language have been used to reinforce the message of the text. Ba applies structural parallelism and pattern repetition to achieve a certain communicative effect as in the following text.

My efforts cannot for long take my mind off my disappointment. I think of the sucking baby, no sooner born than orphaned. I think of the blind man who will never see his child's smile. I think of the cross the one armed man has to bear I think... But my despair persists, but my rancour remains, but the waves of an immense sadness break in me! (p.12).

Apart from the repetition of "I think", such parallel structures as suckling baby/orphaned; the blind man/... see his child's smile: the cross/the one armed man has to bear, etc, build a powerful effect on the reader and as well dramatize the situation. However, the three adjectives – "Suckling", "blind" and "one armed" are in paradigmatic relationship with one another sharing the same feature (+ vulnerable) while the noun phrases, baby, and man as shown in the passage belong to the same paradigm and share the same semantic feature (+ human).

Still on the use of linguistic parallelism in balancing of ideas with similar ones, Ramatoulaye writes:

The nation is made up of all the families, rich or poor,  
united or separated, aware or unaware (p.89).

This parallel structure achieves a stylistic effect.

### Conclusion

We have noted how the sentence patterns in Ba's *So Long a Letter* have achieved a stylistic effect. Ba manipulated language to achieve the effect: using the grammatical model of the TGG and applying same on other stylistic features like foregrounding, parallelism, paratactic patterns we are able to analyze the sentence patterns in the selected novels. The use of simple sentences and paratactic patterns and parallelism make *So Long a Letter* stand out. Thus making it achieve a particular stylistic effect.

**References**

- Ba, M. (1981). *So Long a Letter*. Nigeria: Heinemann Books.
- Crystal, D. (1991). *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lamidi, M.I. (2000). *Aspects of Charskyan Grammar*: Ibadan: Emman Publishers.
- Ogene, J. (1993). Aspects of the Study of Literary language. *Journal of Humanities* Vol. 3. P. 12.
- Oha, A.C. (2000). *Studies in Grammar*. Nigeria: Headmark Publishers.
- Stockwell, R. P. (1977). *Foundations of Syntactic Theory*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Umunnakure, N. (1994). *Dear Ramatoulaye* Owerri: Alphabet Publishers.
- Yankson, K.E. (1987). *An Introduction to Literary Stylistics*, Obosi: Pacific Publishers.