Exploring Grammar in Context: An Examination of Style, Language and Meaning in Selected Novels of Ngugi Wa’Thiongo and William Golding

By
Godwin F. Akpan PhD
Department of English
College of Education, Afaha Nsit
AkwaIbom State, Nigeria.
akpangody4@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper is concerned with examining style, language and meaning in the novels of Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat and William Golding’s Lord of the Flies. The background to this paper is premised on the need to analyse language use in literary writings beyond the level of sentence. In examining these novels, purposeful or proposal identifications/selections of data was done, and the appropriate stylistic and linguistic codes were assigned to them. The article applied the theory of stylistic descriptive approach. The analysis thus revealed that these authors seem to be bothered by similar preoccupation and therefore selected and used the long sentence varieties in the explication of their themes and meanings. Also, their figurative extensions gave meanings to their themes and justify as it were their unique grammatical and word selections. The paper concluded that language uses in these novels are impersonal and remote.

Keywords: Grammar, context, style, language and meaning
Introduction
Language is a vehicle of communication whereby one person conveys message to another for a range of different purposes, informing, ordering, persuading, and reassuring (Leech and Short, 1985). Thus, the nexus between language and its users (speakers/hearers, writers/readers) or more technically, relation between language and the context is a function of the speaker/writer’s choice of an utterance (be it in the oral or graphic form) and the hearer/reader’s interpretation of it is the concern of this paper. The stylistic import here is the attempt by this author to show the transaction between an author of a literary piece and the reader of that literary piece. Often times, meanings are not represented by the words of the writer and do not also follow from the literal decoding of the text. What Grice (1989) contends that at any conversation (language activity) the participants must acknowledge a kind of tacit agreement to cooperate, conversationally, towards mutual ends. This paper is concerned with the way in which a segment of syntax and or diction enhances the reader’s understanding of the style and meaning in the selected literary texts. Attempt would be made to foreground some grammatical properties in these texts.

The Meaning of Grammar
When it comes to definitions of grammar, there are varying opinions. One problem is that the world “grammar” means different things to different people. For many, the term suggests a list of do’s and don’ts. For others, the term may refer to the rules of grammar found mainly in written language. Yet, for others still, it may simply mean an objective description of the structures of language, with no comment concerning correct versus incorrect forms. Grammars with rules that make distinctions between correct and incorrect forms are defined as prescriptive grammars. And grammars that do not make these distinctions and that aim to describe language as it is actually used are called descriptive grammars.

In this paper, and for our purposes here, we won’t join these controversies of definitions; rather we will stick to Larsen-Freeman (2011) definition in which he proposes that grammar is, as with other naturally occurring systems, best conceived of as a non-linear, dynamics system. Larsen-Freeman further opines that grammar should be addressed in the three dimensions of grammatical structures: their form, meaning and use. Seen in this way, the complexity of grammar is respected, especially as manifest at the discourse level, the non-linear nature of language and its learning is best understood and the organic nature of language and grammar is appreciated.

Style and Meaning
Stylistics according to Fish (1986) was born out of a reaction to the subjectivity and impression of literary studies. Thus, for the appreciative raptures of the impressionistic critic, stylisticians purport to substitute precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions to interpretations for which they can claim a measure of objectivity. Therefore, style is a peculiar way of doing things. Put differently, the peculiarity and uniqueness of doing things is what constitutes style. The aim of stylistics therefore lies in the analytical
and descriptive methods. From this assertion, it is possible for stylistics to proceed from one stage of analysis to that of explanation and interpretation and the reason why a writer may have chosen to shape the text in a particular way.

Notwithstanding the difficulty in defining meaning, scholars have found the term indispensable in linguistic description. In stylistic analysis, interest is paid on utterances of various sizes: the word, phrase, clause, sentence and text. Today, scholars continue to have great difficulties in the production and interpretation of utterances due partly to the diverse procedures of meaning interpretation to demand at specific occasions. A fuller understanding of the nature of meaning and its roles in literary works with particular reference to the works under study can be got by considering some perspectives and types of meaning.

Malinowski (1923), Bloomfield (1933) and Wittgenstein (1953) defined meaning in terms of the extra linguistic world. Another perspective accounts for meaning within the linguistic structure and not in terms of the outside world experience (cf Katz and Postel, 1964; Chomsky, 1965). Yet, another angle sees meaning as an ubiquitous term which applies to all levels of language description, both formal and non-formal (cf Firth, 1962 and Beny, 1977). But Moris (1946) recognizes meaning in terms of semiotic descriptions of syntax, semantic and pragmatic relations. Again for our purpose in this paper, we are not unmindful of the vague and ambiguous nature of the concept like many other linguistic concepts. Therefore, we will stay with Akpan’s (2013) opinion that utterances and their meaning interpretation are contingent on circumstances. What this means is that, what we say and how we say it, is influenced by who we are talking to and where and when the interaction is taking place. To fully understand the workability of the interconnectedness of grammar, style and meaning in literary work, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) Pie Chart will suffice:

![Pie Chart](Adapted from Schmitt, 2002)

From the diagram above, the identity between grammar, style and meaning is firmly established. The blend of fact and fiction is a choice between choices in any literary genre. Thus, it is the style which incorporates matter and manner (Ufot, 2007).

**Theoretical Background**

Lucas (1955) stresses the concept of style as “the man” in his assertion that “literary style” is simply a means by which one personality moves another. He mentions some steps to the proper analysis of
In this present work, our theoretical background is anchored on Lucas (1955) stylistic descriptive approach (SDA). According to him, SDA is objective. It is an approach which offers a scientific description of a set of distinctive characteristics which mark a text out as belonging to a particular person, genre or profession. Arnold (1974) also opines that SDA to stylistic analysis of literary texts is given various names; statistical stylistics, computational stylistics, stylometrics or stylostatistics. To Freeman (1970), stylistic descriptive approach (SDA) is both analytical and verifiable because the characteristics serve as the corpus upon which description is made. Anyachonkeya (2008) quoting Lucas (1955) explains that the frequency of the features is counted and then their distributions are plotted statistically. Occasionally, this paper will draw from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In SFL, the notion of choice is fundamental. Paradigmatic relations are regarded as primary, and this captured descriptively by organizing the basic components of the grammar in inter-related systems of features representing the meaning potentials of the language. Halliday emphasizes that meaning underlies linguistic forms and recognizes grammar and meaning as being co-existent.

In this study, our attention is focused on the works of Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat and William Golding’s Lord of the Flies. A random sampling method is employed to gather the needed data from the selected texts for analysis. The choice of these two texts is premised on the seeming identical themes explored by the authors, although, the two novels have different settings: One Africa, the other English. It seems to portray the fact that man is eternally wicked; and that wickedness and evil do not respect colour.

However, it is not all aspects of style and language that are examined in the texts attempts are only made to look at the peculiarity of syntactic patterning and figurative extensions as employed by the authors.

**Syntactic Patterning in Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat and William Golding’s Lord of the Flies**

The crux of understanding the styles adopted by these authors lies in the relationship between the various sentence patterning and the semantic import. Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat portrays rebirth and regeneration, the end of brokenness and alienation and the restoration to wholeness and community. For Golding, his novel centers on the theme of universality of evil, where strife, chaos and brutality reign before salvation and restoration to wholeness and community. The two authors seem to be concerned with similar issue. To fully appreciate this fact, both authors present their story in long, windy sentence structures. The sentence structures are replaced in most part; this lack of simplicity, precision and conciseness can only but explain the precarious nature of the societies which the authors write from. It suggests a society and a people in disarray. Also, the plural nature of the sentence typologies in the novel is an indication of unevenness in the society. Ngugi’s novel is centered in Africa milieu, while Golding’s novel is premised
from an English background. Let us consider the following examples:

(a1) **Non-Simple Structure in**

*A Grain of Wheat* (AGOW)

His eloquence makes the people aware of their servitude, //and// inspires them to plunge into the struggle for freedom; it is his martyrdom (which) waters the tree of freedom //and// keeps the struggle alive by infusing new life into the party (which) finally leads to freedom (21).

This example is one of the most structurally windy sentences in AGOW which connect semantically to the theme and message intended by the author. The message for struggle and an attempt at self-realization and discovery is the preoccupation of the author. Although the choice of words is simple and clear, the simplicity nonetheless betrays the complex nature of the sentence. The sentence has the structure of SPC & PSCSP & PCA. The first sentence: *His eloquence makes the people aware of their servitude.* This sentence is a simple sentence structure which carries the burden of the message. It is the main clause, the kernel sentence, the thesis, every other sentence that follows it merely reinforce, seek to explain, and equally support. There are two coordinating conjunctions and in the text, one comma and one semi-colon both of which give the sentence varying length. There is also the use of two relative adjectives which only exists to rank-shift the clause. Importantly, what this style depicts is that Ngugi is able to achieve coherence and enhance meaning through the use of appropriate linkers. The shared knowledge talked about in the opening section of this paper also come to play, because the reader who lacks the sense of history of the political struggles in most African countries before independence will find the text alien.

(a11) **Non Simple Structure in Lord of the Flies** (LOTF)

The boy with fair hair lowered himself down the last few feet of rock//and/began to pick his way towards the lagoon//; he had taken off his school sweaters//and/trailed it now from one hand, his grey shirt stuck to him//and/his hair was plastered to his forehead//; he was clambering heavily among the creepers//and/broken trunks when the bird, a vision of red and yellow, flashed upwards with a witch-like cry; and his cry was echoed by another (11).

We have quoted this to show Golding’s deliberate use of lengthy sentence. The sentence in itself depicts the meticulous use of epithets. Examples are the epithets or descriptive words as: fair, grey, long, heavily, broken, red, yellow, witch-like. What emerges from the above descriptive passage is a graphic picture of a perspiring, worn-out school boy trudging laboriously through a sinister jungle. This impression is created by Golding’s choice of active verb constructions like ‘lowered’, ‘pick’, ‘trailed’, ‘stuck’, ‘plastered’, ‘clambering’. This passage thus established the mood and tone of the novel – the miserable plight of man as
well as the painful progress he makes through the rough and rugged terrain called life.

The structural pattern of this sentence shows that it has seven main clauses, brought together with the help of a linker ‘and’; this gives the sentence an uneven complexity. The structure is SPSPCC + (and) SPC + semi-colon + (and) SPC + (and) + rank shifted (when). This analysis demonstrates the plural skeletal structure which supports our view of a society in crisis.

From our observation of the syntactic patterns in the two novels, it is noticed that the long and non-simple sentences are used here for the reasons of syntactic foregrounding or prominence, because through their length, they evoke scene, a sensation or a state of mind which draws an expository and descriptive perspective.

(b) The Application of Figurative Language and its Extensions in these Novels

For AGOW, it seems impossible to read and interpret the novel without taking into account the Christian myth, which not only constitutes the basic framework of the story and incorporates the author’s message but also dominates his use of image and symbol. For instance, all the leading characters of the novel: Kihika, Mugo, Gikonyo, Mumbi, make use of Christian concepts to express their dreams and aspirations, their lapses and fears. And the central message of the novel is profoundly Christianity: the duty of each man and each society to work out its own salvation, the only way to attainment of this salvation being through suffering and sacrifice. The biblical text which proclaims this message and which is used as epigraph for the novel forms part of the answer to a rhetorical question posed by St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “But you may ask, how are the dead raised? In what kind of body? How foolish? The seed you sow does not come to life unless it has first died; and what you sow is not the body that shall be, but a naked grain, perhaps of wheat, or of some other kind…” (1Corinthians, 15: 35-36).

The message is reiterated through the words of St. John, a verse underlined in black in Kihika’s Bible. Kihika is the seed (symbolical with metaphoric extension) which, by dying first, comes to life, the ‘corn of wheat’ which by falling into the ground and dying ‘began forth much fruit’.

Perhaps the most spiritual struggle is enacted in the most graphic development of the character of Mugo, a highly complex character, sensitive, thoughtful, and imaginative, but also a nervous and restless soul, personifying the tensions and agonies of a troubled land. Often time, he is alone, like Carlyle’s Teufelsdrock the archetypal orphan, symbolizing in his person the African’s alienation which had made him a stranger in his own land. But this loneliness itself had a meaning, for ‘Moses too was alone keeping the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law (AGOW, 143).

This dialectic of aloneness and community dominates the spiritual evolution of Gikonyo too, the gradient of his life resembles the happenings in Golding’s Lord of the Flies.
Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* contains various levels of symbolism and metaphorical extensions. Such images as snake, fire, creeper, mountain, coral rock are employed in a symbolic sense in the novel. A casual analysis of these images show for example: The snake symbolizes the evil in man; fire symbolizes the best in man and hope; the creeper symbolizes disorder or chaos; the coral rock symbolizes brute and crude force. Other notable symbols are the couch symbolizing authority, Piggy’s eye glasses symbolizing a spark of genius. The whole novel evinces symbolic characterization. Ralph, as an example, represents democratic liberalism while Jack symbolizes brute force and banal dictatorship. Piggy stands for rational thinking or reasoning.

Other most striking figurative devices employed in the novel are simile, metaphor and imagery. There is also the preponderant use of satire that underlies the entire work. These devices give the novelist more breathing space and greater license to make large critical statements about society without blushing.

(a) It is said to be half as big as a cottage, big as a car, a tank, in movement, it is like a stream-roller, a mill-wheel (Simile, LOTF.3)

These comparisons implicate and depict the destructive tendencies in the boys and of course, in man generally.

(b) The bat was the child’s shadow, shrunk by the vertical sun to a patch between the hurrying feet (Metaphor, LOTF 25)

Here, the boys’ heads are metaphorically referred to as bullet, i.e., destructive heads, and their hair, likened to tow. What emerges in the final analysis is a sad picture of the boys as beasts. This is also a comment on the beast in man.

Generally, the novel is cast in imagery. For example, all through the novel, the image of heat achieves a refrain – like status by recurring several times. Also, a critical reading of this novel indicates that this author presents his message in a satiric mode. It is a ridiculous castigation of civilized man in his civilized society through the metaphor of children. What emerges in the end is a large comment on the human condition – of man’s helplessness just like children, and destructive nature in spite of his claim to civilization, science and technological advancement. There is also a vitriolic comment on the facist dictatorship that is maintained by our modern-day leaders as depicted through the agency of Jack.

**Conclusion**

From the discussion above, it seems that from the typologies of structural and syntactic patterning in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Lord of the Flies*, the authors have demonstrated a deliberate use of long windy sentences in attempt to explore their themes. It is also clear from our analysis that, the stylistic approach and choice of words have a great bearing on the themes of these two novels and by extension draw a similitude in their semantic exploration.

Also, the use of highly descriptive words by the authors builds up the picture of an
eerie and weird environment, steeped in confusion and bewildering disorderliness. Through the applicability of our chosen theoretical base, we can conclude that language use can be seen through the parameters of Stylistic Descriptive Approach (SDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) as frameworks in understanding theme, style, language and meaning in the novels of Ngugi Wa Thiongo and William Golding.

References
Authorized King James Version, Holy Bible.
Fish, S. (1986). What is stylistics and why are they saying such terrible things about it. London: Oxford Press.