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Lexico-Semantic Devices and Contextual Meaning in Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother and Comes the Voyager at Last*

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Abstract

Literal and implied meanings are inherent in literary texts and studies abound, that have examined how intended meanings are construed and understood, in various texts adopting various semantic and pragmatic principles. However, this study investigated Kofi Awoonor's two literary texts: *This Earth My Brother and Comes the Voyager at Last*, to determine the lexico-semantic choices deployed and how such features enhance meaning in the texts. This is to enhance the comprehension of intended meanings in the texts as scholars have described the texts as not easily accessible as it is written in poetic renditions. The study adopts the pragmatic principle from Mey's perspective as a theoretical framework to account for contextual meaning(s), and complements that with M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to explain lexico-semantic realization of construed and/or intended text meaning(s). The findings showed that lexical items are deployed in texts to point to meaning(s), argument(s), motives and goals of the researched texts. The lexical items lead to the understanding of the major theme(s) of texts. Some of the lexical features that occurred luxuriantly relate to concepts such as decay, corruption, death, slavery, native/home land, oppression, and freedom. The findings of this study concluded that lexico-semantic devices and context contribute greatly in enhancing the understanding of the study texts.

Keywords: explicit meanings, implicit, lexical semantics



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1.0 Introduction

Meaning making is the major preoccupation of every communicative encounter as speaker/writers deploy various linguistic devices to construe meanings while listeners/readers try to decode such construed meanings. Contextual meaning has increasingly become a preoccupation of linguists who seek to unravel construed and covert or implied meaning(s) of texts. Existing literature reveals that the Ghanaian writer, Kofi Awoonor's creative works have received robust investigation; his poetic works especially have been studied in their plots, settings and imageries, to determine their literary forms and functions. These works have, however, not adequately accounted for Awoonor's fictional prose narratives in systematic studies. This study therefore, investigated the two novels of Kofi Awoonor: *This Earth My Brother...* and *Comes the Voyager at Last* to determine how lexico-semantic choices are made in the texts to enhance meaning. This study enhances a clearer understanding of Awoonor's texts which many have considered as being obscure as they are written in poetic renditions.

2.0 Literature review

A number of works have been done on Awoonor's creative works. Some of these include: Early (1975), Killiam, (1980), Anorld (1983, 1988), Asante (2013) and Larbi (2016). No doubt Kofi Awoonor is a name that has appeared and reappears with some frequency in discussions and anthologies of contemporary African literature. His published poetry in two volumes, *Rediscovery* published in 1964 and *Night of My Blood* published in 1971 have received robust investigation by many scholars. His essays and poems have appeared in a number of magazines, and he has been interviewed in a series on African writers. It is observed from extant literature that most of the studies on Awoonor are on his poetry where it is established that he has made remarkable advances and left indelible prints in his poetry. What remains unclear is the extent to which his novels have imparted human consciousness in terms of style and other linguistic features as only allusions thus far have been made to his fictional narratives (novels). This study therefore, attempts a pragmatic analysis of Awoonor's two novels from the perspective of conversational implicature to determine how inert meanings have been construed and understood in the texts.

3.0 Theoretical framework

The study adopts principles of pragmatics from Jacob Mey's perspective as a theoretical framework to account for contextual meaning(s) in texts, and it is complemented with

M.A.K Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to explain linguistic realizations of construed and/or intended text meaning(s) through lexico-semantic choices in the texts. Data were drawn from Awoonor's two fictional texts, *This Earth My Brother...*; and *Comes the Voyager at Last*, and were subjected to pragmatic and linguistic analyses.

3.1 Lexico-semantics

Lexical semantics is an academic discipline concerned with the meaning of words. The basic is that the semantic properties of lexical items are reflected. A large number of studies across languages in lexico-semantics, syntax and morpho-syntax have shown very robust regularities and strong generalizations around the notion of argument structure. Semantic labels, often called thematic roles, have been proposed to name the semantic relation which holds between an argument and its predicative term. Complex relations, called linking rules, have been established between grammatical functions (subject, object, indirect object) in sentences and arguments. Subsequent relations have been established between arguments, labelled by thematic roles, and represented by means of variables, and deeper semantic representations, such as the Lexical Conceptual Structure.

4.0 Data analysis

4.1 Lexico-semantic devices and meaning in the researched texts

Lexical devices are language items that make for the peculiarity of vocabularies or words used in texts. The individual and associative links of such words contribute to achieving the holistic meaning of texts. The focus in looking at this concept in this study is to determine how these lexical items are deployed in texts to point to the meaning, argument, motive and goals of the researched texts; particularly how the entire text can be understood. For it is those lexical items or words that lead to the understanding of the major theme(s) of texts. In what follows, some of the lexical features that relate to concepts such as decay, corruption, death, slavery, native/home land, oppression, freedom, and how they relate to the textuality of the texts and the meaning(s) they convey in the texts are discussed. One cue used to identify such lexical items is their emphasis through the use of repetitions.

1. The policeman signalled him on. He drove past the Institute of Arts and Culture where a crazy group of drummers and artists were reviving African culture with a vengeance every day. On his left were the

temporary buildings that housed the National Lotteries, a monument to the greed of men, erected to satisfy the money lust of the lowly workers... the old colonial building that housed the government Printer and the Public Works Department. Opposite in similar forgotten edifices were... moth-eaten desks filthy with old tattered files...

2.

This Earth my Brother... (TEMB) pg.25

3. They swerved into the pot-holed road on which Tiptoe is. Tiptoe is a leftover from the wartime night clubs which catered for the soldiers. It is open-air like the gutters of the city.

4. THE DESERT, MAN'S DEATH LAND, birthplace. Washed over rolling sand dunes. Time stood still in these grains of sand. The toothy grin of the acacia, gnarled by centuries of heat. The desert was not long. Our journey commenced at its edge, a dreary outpost which could have been the terminus. Then the chains were fastened upon us accompanied by the barking of dogs and men, the crying of children and the whimpering of women. Order came that our march southwards should begin at dawn.

Comes the Voyager at Last (CTVAL) pg. 1

5. My name is Marcus Garvey MacAndrews and that is my slave name. My African name is Sheik Lumumba Mandela. My ancestors must have been one of the first batch of Africans to arrive the New World. And my father used to say this entitled us to more from the land than any refugee from Hungary and Latvia who came the other day. CTVAL pg.8

From the examples above, the underlined items signify most of the lexical items that indicate the discursive issues treated in the texts under investigation. The study reveals that the text "***This Earth My Brother...***" deals largely with issues of societal degeneration as it relates to infrastructure and societal norms and values as well as degeneration in moral values of individuals as typified in the character of the protagonist Amamu, who suffered nervous breakdown and eventual death. Conversely, "***Comes the Voyager at Last***" deals with issues of the slavery journey of Africans to the New World. It narrates the journey of the protagonist, whose fore-fathers were captured and taken as slaves to

the New World and how providence led him to find his way from the New World to his roots in Africa; culminating in a final reconciliation and atonement for him.

Text (1) highlights issues of decay, deterioration and corruption that characterised the new independent nation of Ghana. “The policeman signalled him on. He drove past the Institute of Arts and Culture where a crazy group of drummers and artists were reviving African culture with a vengeance every day. On his left were the temporary buildings that housed the National Lotteries, a monument to the greed of men, erected to satisfy the money lust of the lowly workers... the old colonial building that housed the government Printer and the Public Works Department. Opposite in similar forgotten edifices were... moth-eaten desks filthy with old tattered files...” The excerpt, especially the underlined portions, signal decay in individual morals typified in the ‘greed of men’ to deplorable infrastructure represented in “the old colonial buildings” and abandoned edifices infested with moth-eaten desks that were filthy with old tattered files. This deplorable state of both individual and infrastructure is used to imply the decadence that characterise the New Ghanaian state where the leaders are shown to have failed in their responsibility in providing good governance. The argument made here is that lexical items signifying decay, corruption, deterioration and filth as indicated above feature in the researched texts to implicitly convey intrinsic meaning of the failure of government in its responsibility to the people. By and large, the excerpt reveals that the National Lotteries typify people’s greed as it is set up to satisfy the money lust of certain people, which is the height of corruption. What hitherto was the colonial building that housed the government Printer and the Public Works Department like many such structures were forgotten edifices with moth-eaten desks filthy with old tattered files; this is the height of deterioration and decay bedevilling the so-called independent state. These issues of corruption and infrastructural decay constitute one of the major themes in the text.

Text (2) further talks of infrastructural decay. “They swerved into the pot-holed road on which Tiptoe is. Tiptoe is a leftover from the wartime night clubs which catered for the soldiers. It is open-air like the gutters of the city.” It describes how a road is infested with pot-holes; and how the gutters in the city are left open filled with filth. Words indicating rot and decay as highlighted here describe how deteriorated national infrastructure has become and how those responsible to change the situation are unconcerned and involved in corrupt practices that aggravate the situation. It also points to the failure of government in carrying out its statutory responsibilities that include infrastructural development. Thus, the author, though talking of infrastructural decay, is

by implication indicting the government for its failures. Hence, the lexico-semantic items deployed in the text are said to have pragmatic implications.

On the other hand, text (3) addresses the issue of slavery or bondage as the main preoccupation of the second novel being investigated – ***Comes the Voyager at Last***. The excerpt states that: “THE DESERT, MAN’S DEATH LAND, and birthplace. Washed over rolling sand dunes. Time stood still in these grains of sand. The toothy grin of the acacia, gnarled by centuries of heat. The desert was not long. Our journey commenced at its edge, a dreary outpost which could have been the terminus. Then the chains were fastened upon us accompanied by the barking of dogs and men, the crying of children and the whimpering of women. Order came that our march southwards should begin at dawn.” In the excerpt we observe how people of African descent are captured from their ancestral homeland and sold as slaves to the Americas. It describes the episode of captivity in Africa as the desert, man’s death land, and birth-place. The journey southwards to the coastlands where the captives were ferried to the New World is described as being washed over rolling sand dunes through the desert lands of Africa to the coast. As the process is described as time standing still in the grains of sand of the desert; with the journey commencing at its edge and the chains fastened on the people to slavery. Hence, reference to linguistic items to homeland, journey, chains and many more reflect the theme of slavery and the hope for and pursuit of freedom in the texts.

Equally, text (4) reflects the thematic issue of slavery/bondage and freedom. “My name is Marcus Garvey MacAndrews and that is my slave name. My African name is Sheik Lumumba Mandela. My ancestors must have been one of the first batches of Africans to arrive the New World. And my father used to say this entitled us to more from the land than any refugee from Hungary and Latvia who came the other day.” In the excerpt the speaker identifies himself by the name given to him by the slave lords as Marcus Garvey MacAndrews and goes on to state the new name he gave himself as the longing to identify with his roots in Africa heightened as Sheik Lumumba Mandela. He further explains how his ancestors might have been one of the first batches of Africans to arrive the New World. All these support the narrative that the theme of slavery, struggle and freedom characterise the texts. The protagonist’s longing to identify with his roots drives him to find his way to Africa – Ghana, where he links his ancestral home. The lexical items that make reference to slave name and African name make implicit reference to slavery and freedom respectively and items like this, point to when the thematic indication points to bondage or freedom in the text.

4.2 The place of 'Context' and its impact on meaning in texts

Context entails how physical settings, background knowledge of participants and the reason(s) people engage in discourses determine what and how issues are discussed and understood in texts. It is about how meaning(s) of texts are determined by knowledge of the physical and social world, the socio-psychological factors that influence the communicative encounters; as well as knowledge of the time and place in which the interactions take place. The focus in looking at context here is to see how context determines the choice of language use, the communicative meaning of linguistic items as used in the interactions, and how it is that participants are able to communicate information that is much more than the words they use. In looking at context in this perspective, we first determine the speaker's meaning, which is dependent on basic assumptions of knowledge that are shared by both speakers in the interaction. In light of the foregoing, the study in this section highlights those aspects in the texts that point to aspects that are drawn upon such as shared knowledge of participants in the interactions, based on various aspects of context; and to show how they enhance meaningful understanding of texts. Investigation reveals that the following examples are drawn from contextual background knowledge.

6. Kodzo Dzide, the town crier, had spent the night on Mr Attipoe's compound. There had been a wake the previous night. Since that was his seventh wake in the last two days, he had passed out comfortably in a corner near the chicken coop. He opened his eyes, rubbed his face with his palm and looked round to make sure where he was... A little naked boy stood in front of him scratching his left foot with his raised right foot, sucking his fingers. What is your name? Adonu Why haven't you had your prick cut? No! My father said they will cut it for me when I grow up. Who is your father? Road-overseer. Eh, are you road overseer's son? Yes. Which woman's son are you? My mother is from Kuli. Kosiwo? Yes. Then I am your uncle. You hear? Yes. Go and fetch me water to wash my face.

TEMB pg. 11,12

7. Bring a rag this child has passed excrement I don't know what is wrong with him these days it is not long ago he passed excrement. Crawling after fevers running stomachs touching the fireplace with tiny fingers scream scream scream; you can't look after a child, if it were food you

would be filling your stomach with it with double hands. Crawling, crawling picking up and eating tasteless chicken droppings... the cat is going to claw this child one of these days.

TEMB pg. 20

8. ...we arrived in an abandoned settlement. It could not have been deserted long before we came. The round conical houses were still intact... Scarcely had we settled down when an eerie sound hit our ears, a sharp prolonged ululation announcing calamity. Our captors jumped upon their feet, their machetes ready. The sound came from right behind us. Our eyes were trained upon the little shed beside the shrine, covered with grass mats which had almost rotted. And soon, as if summoned by our apprehension and collective fear, an apparition appeared.

CTVAL pg. 25, 26

9. ...I grew up somehow, believing I was destined for something. I believed in mysteries. I still do. If you were born close to an ancestral shrine, your uncles played brekete drums every night, and whenever you came home on vacation you were taken to pay homage to all the old folks in the shrine, you will grow up believing in mysteries. Don't misunderstand me, I am also a modern, very modern African. I went to the University of Ghana where I was taught by an assortment of Englishmen who produced a number of first-class holders whose training in English verse and prosody was unsurpassed.

CTVAL pg. 72

In Text (5) notice is made of a young boy who is asked, "Why haven't you had your prick cut?" and the boy in question responds "No! My father said they will cut it for me when I grow up." Of the many meanings of the word 'prick', one of it that is mostly referred to, especially in the African context, in its colloquial sense is its reference to the penis. And often the process of circumcision which is the removal of the male foreskin is colloquially termed 'prick cut'. It is also common knowledge that some communities in Africa, till date, do not circumcise their young on the eighth day as most civilised societies do today. They still allow children to grow even up to their teens before circumcision is carried out on them as part of the act of initiation into adulthood. In the context of the excerpt it is observed that the one that asks the question is caught between two cultures; his roots as

with his people and he understands the traditions and norms, at the same time his level of education and exposure avails him the opportunity to understand modern trends of doing things. Hence, he gets troubled seeing a boy old enough to walk around on his own is yet to be circumcised; the boy is apparently going about naked for his un-circumcision to be noticed in the circumstance. So when asked why his prick is yet to be cut, based on the environment and culture the boy understands it to mean circumcision and not the chopping-off of his entire manhood as the literal meaning suggests.

Text (6) presents another contextual situation worthy of note. The excerpt says: “Bring the rag this child has passed excrement I don’t know what is wrong with him these days it is not long ago he passed excrement. Crawling after fevers running stomachs touching the fireplace with tiny fingers scream scream scream; you can’t look after a child, if it were food you would be filling your stomach with it with double hands. Crawling, crawling picking up and eating tasteless chicken droppings... the cat is going to claw this child one of these days.” In the excerpt the speaker calls for a rag because a child just defecated. This is a common phenomenon in settings where proper sanitary conditions are not observed in the handling of human waste. Because proper sanitary habits are not taught from childhood, children grow up and are seen defecating in the open; and when they do, rags are used to clean their buttocks of the residue of faeces left there. Hence, in the text the child is said to have defecated in the open and in a bid to clean up the mess, what is called for use to clean it up is any rag that can be seen around. This un-hygienic condition does not just describe the condition of the child and the immediate environment but is used to depict the entire condition of the nation that is messed up by both the government and the governed as it is seen in open glare due to the filth in the environment and the deplorable state of infrastructure.

Text (7) exemplifies the context of Spiritism as it is evident in the study texts. “...we arrived in an abandoned settlement. It could not have been deserted long before we came. The round conical houses were still intact... Scarcely had we settled down when an eerie sound hit our ears, a sharp prolonged ululation announcing calamity. Our captors jumped upon their feet, their machetes ready. The sound came from right behind us. Our eyes were trained upon the little shed beside the shrine, covered with grass mats which had almost rotted. And soon, as if summoned by our apprehension and collective fear, an apparition appeared.” In the context of the text some captives are being conveyed by their captors to the coast for their onward journey to the New World. They get to a deserted village and decide to camp there for the night. They have hardly settled down when the excerpt reveals that they started hearing strange sounds around them; a kind

of sound described as heralding disaster, and which sent shivers down the spine of both captors and the captives. It is a common belief in many communities, especially on the African continent, of spirits whom when their paths are crossed could cause harm or untold hardship on the intruder(s). Hence, when the captives and captors get scared because of the strange sound around them, they are drawing from their shared background knowledge of the consequences of crossing the path of evil spirits. Their being scared was not just baseless as we learn from the passage that they are by a 'shrine', a place of worship hallowed by association with some sacred thing or person, so when they hear a mysterious sound coming from its direction, their apprehension is understood based on the common knowledge of what they knew and heard about such places and the likelihood of what could befall them. In this regard, context, which presupposes shared background knowledge plays a significant factor in the fears the captors and the captives had by the strange noise/sound they heard coming from around the shrine. Little wonder then an apparition is said to have appeared afterwards that confirmed their fears. 'Apparition' talks of spirits or ghosts which indeed have the propensity to instil fear.

Similarly, Text (8) re-echoes the shared knowledge of mysticism, which is also belief in Spiritism as discussed in example (7) above. The excerpt asserts that: "I grew up somehow, believing I was destined for something. I believed in mysteries. I still do. If you were born close to an ancestral shrine, your uncles played brekete drums every night, and whenever you came home on vacation you were taken to pay homage to all the old folks in the shrine, you will grow up believing in mysteries. Don't misunderstand me; I am also a modern African. I went to the University of Ghana where I was taught by an assortment of English-men who produced a number of first-class holders whose training in English verse and prosody as unsurpassed." We understand from the passage that assumptions are held by people with regards to why certain things happen or do not happen based on cultural beliefs, traditions and experiences. These assumptions form strong beliefs and ideologies that people hold. In the excerpt the speaker affirms having strong inclinations about his destiny. He also asserts his belief in mysticism as catalyst for bringing to pass his destiny. These are preludes to contextualization, to the kind of belief and ideology held by a person or group. Reference made to ancestral shrine, pay homage and brekete drums laid credence to strong traditional form of worship. Overall, it is evident that the kind of context depicted in the passage in question is a typical traditional setting where fetish beliefs, crude forms of worship are accepted and practiced.

5.0 Conclusion

Conclusively, this study has examined lexico-semantic devices and their relation to meaning in texts. Aspects of lexical items and how they enhanced the understanding of thematic issues in texts were highlighted. The place of context is discovered to be pivotal in explicating and putting together what would have posed as a puzzle for the understanding of intended meaning of the utterances. The place of context re-echoes its importance in the study of pragmatics in arriving at meaning.

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