

CO-CONSTRUCTION AS UNITY AND FREEDOM MARKER: A SYNTACTIC READING OF BEN OKRI'S *TALES OF FREEDOM*

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Abstract

Literary texts often concern themselves with central subject matters and themes which insightful readers are expected to explore by paying attention to the lexical and semantic choices the writers have carefully employed. This paper holds that thematic preoccupations in a work of art do not reside only in the lexical and semantic choices made by the writer but can also be deciphered at the other levels of language such as the syntactic. With insights from MAK Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), this paper adopts a syntactic approach to meaning construction by examining how characters, through structured dialogues, co-construct meaning and themes in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. The paper which theoretically discusses the nature of co-construction examines the forms and functions of co-construction and delves into the resourcefulness of co-construction in coding the major themes in Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. Descriptive analysis reveals the resourcefulness of co-construction as a syntactic category in "thematising" freedom, unity and, dialectics between freedom and slavery, as the author deploys co-construction in the text under study to produce grammatically coherent structures, enhance cooperation, seek collaboration and, to present a collective statement. The paper concludes that co-construction as a syntactic category has been very resourceful in coding the central themes in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*.

Key words: Co-construction, syntax, conversation, unity, *Tales of Freedom*.

Introduction

Co-constructions are morpho-syntactic structures in interactions which occur when another speaker completes a structure

initiated by the first speaker. A co-construction begins with an initial component; the first part of a larger syntactic structure, which the second speaker completes by co-constructing the final component. Although it is not always necessary, there may be a short stop marked by a pause, a slot-filler, or an in-breath between the initial component and the final component. First described by Sacks (1967), co-construction has been given different labels such as collaboratively built sentences (Sacks, 1967), sentences-in-progress (Lerner, 1991), collaborative production (Local, 2004; Szczepek, 2000), and joint construction of turns (Coates, 1991). Co-construction is specifically defined as the 'collaborative production of syntactic units in the interaction between speaker and hearer, practices by which participants in conversation complete a turn-in-progress started by another participant' (Kim, 2002: 1282).

As a conversational segment where a grammatical structure is jointly produced in turns by two or more speakers, co-construction is a product of coordination between speakers and, it leads to the production of grammatically coherent structures. It therefore points to the nexus between grammar and social organisation as it reveals how cooperation occurs between speakers through the coordination of both linguistic and psychological abilities. The cooperatively built structures emerge as a result of conversation. The combination of interaction and grammatical knowledge that comes into play makes co-construction a by-product of linguistic, psychological and pragmatic phenomena.

Ono and Thompson (1996) divide co-constructions into two: expansions and completions. In expansions, the second speaker expands what the first speaker says into a new and longer syntactic unit. In completions, the second speaker completes a syntactic unit that the first speaker has left incomplete (Ono & Thompson, 1996: 75). The grammatical components and how they are structured in co-constructions help to build interactions. Therefore, grammar is a vital interactional resource in conversation. The second speaker's contribution and how it is constructed depends on the utterance of the first speaker. The turn construction unit (TCU) is the unit of analysis

through which interaction is usually negotiated between speakers (Schegloff, 2007). The TCU can be lexical, clausal, phrasal, or a whole sentence (Schegloff, 2007). Although co-constructions are universal features of all languages, the form they take varies from one language to another because the organisation of grammatical resources is language-specific.

Functionally, a co-construction can show agreement in a social interaction. It can be used to prevent disagreement or to seek collaboration (Lerner, 1991: 244). It can be used to exclude another speaker from offering a different contribution (Howes et al., 2009). Co-constructions can also be used to present a collective statement (Diaz et al., 1996). It is in the light of the above that the paper interrogates the functions of co-constructions in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. This paper examines how characters, through structured dialogues, use co-constructions to foreground the themes of unity and freedom in Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. This way, the paper wishes to prove that meaning and themes in literary texts can be foregrounded not only at the lexico-semantic category but also through other categories, such as the syntactic.

Syntactic Structures, Systemic Functional Grammar and Meaning in Literary Texts

Syntax is a term used traditionally to refer to the area of linguistics concerned with the relationships among words in a sentence and the manner in which words are strung together to make sense. More broadly referred to as grammar, the field serves as the linguistic background that encodes 'social meaning, reveal attitude, show interpersonal relationships, and enhance textual cohesion' (Kamalu, 2018: 116). Clearly stated, it is the structure and ordering of the sentences (syntax) that allows the reader to understand the relationships among the participants, understands characters' attitudes towards one another, to recognise social meaning and appreciate the texture of any literary text. No wonder Wolosky (2001: 28) maintains that 'Piecing

words together, working through patterns, suspending understanding and directing attention, are experiences mediated by the syntax'.

Systemic grammar has proved very useful for stylistic analysis because it provides fairly adequate and semantically sensitive taxonomic and functional approach (Wales, 1989). Systemic functional grammar, which began with the work of Halliday in the late 1960s, notes the major units of linguistic analysis as morpheme, word, group, and clause and, theoretical categories as unit, structure, class and system. The idea of 'system' in the grammar is important, as grammar is seen as a network of options or choices. Each aspect of grammar can be analysed in terms of a set of options which are dependent upon the context (Wales, 1989). The analysis helps to arrive at the social and linguistic functions of the syntactic patterns: the reason this grammar is referred to as systemic functional grammar. In attempting a syntactic analysis of a text, elements of syntax which can be investigated include the group, the clause, the mood, transitivity, syntactic parallelism, variation of clause structure/inversion among others. Specifically, the analysis carried out in this paper concentrates on co-constructed syntactic patterns, which are important for social and textual meaning.

The study thus utilises the principles of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which perceives language as a network of systems used to perform certain social functions. SFG is concerned with how speakers and hearers use language to make meanings with each other as they carry out their social activities. Recognising language as a semiotic system deeply involved in the negotiation, construction, organisation, and reconstruction of human experiences, SFG holds that linguistic choices contribute in a systematic way to the realisation of social contexts. As a result of this socio-functional view of language, it is expected that the language used in literary texts should be different from the day-to-day language of common people, especially when such language, as we have in the text under study, shows strong indications of constant dialectics between freedom and slavery, unity, and freedom as ideological imperatives which the author, through certain characters, intends to communicate to the readers.

We see the text under study as a semiotic invention through which language has been specifically patterned in order to perform certain functions such as when characters foreground unity and freedom through dialogues. No wonder Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 31) posit that ‘the systemic analysis shows that functionality is intrinsic to language’. Halliday argues that this functional organisation of language is a determinant of the form taken by grammatical structures and he proposes three meta-functions of language. The ideational meta-function is the ability to express human experiences, making reference to entities and building up categories and taxonomies. The interpersonal meta-function, represented by mood and modality, is used to express speakers’ attitudes, socio-economic roles, relationships and actions towards one another while the textual meta-function concerns the construction of meaningful and coherent texts which should be relevant in the specific contexts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

Of special relevance to this paper are the structural choices, the implications of such choice codes and the effects of such choice patterns on the characters and readers as social beings. The functional classifications of language are also very important since such functional language use incorporates the use of language to reproach, to unite, to solidarise and to collaborate.

Conceptualising Ben Okri’s *Tales of Freedom*

Ben Okri’s *Tales of Freedom* is a book divided into two halves. The first half contains a short story entitled *Comic Destiny* while the second half is made up of thirteen short stories called ‘stokus’. A stoku is a short story written in the mode of a haiku. A haiku itself is a Japanese poetic tradition patterned along three lines of measured syllables and usually “thematizing” season or natural objects. While the only story in the first half of the text takes slightly more than half of the book, the stories in the second half are between two and four pages long.

The first half of the book, entitled *Comic Destiny*, is a novella chronicling a group of people who are lost in a forest including an escapee from an asylum, an old man and woman and their slave, Pinprop. They speak in fragments, alternately and discordantly like characters who are confused, in a dream or trance or in a ritual. This pattern of dialogue is symbolic and through it, the author communicates his salient messages of love, family and ambition. The dialogic mode makes the novella appear play-like and characters living and speaking into emptiness while the terse lines give the work both a dramatic and poetic colouration. Just as the dialogues are symbolic, the setting and, indeed, everything in the novella are symbolic. Words and sentences are carefully crafted and deployed to create a unique literary code laden with paradoxes. Therefore, the narrative technique is unique as it is a strange combination of poetry and prose, of strange symbolism and commonplace experiences.

The second section of the book which contains thirteen short stories captures a unique moment in the characters' lives. Highly symbolic and carefully crafted as the first part, they chronicle more familiar experiences, easier to understand and with more clearly perceived plots. The stories, which are witty, touching and thought-provoking, chronicle flashes of moments: visions, insights or paradoxes in the characters' lives as they differently navigate the journey of life. Gray (2016: 4) maintains that Okri's *stokus* treat a number of 'esoteric subthemes as rejuvenation and validation ('The message'), overcoming prejudice and social stratification ('The mysterious anxiety of them and us' and 'The racial colourist'), innocence and poetic justice ('The secret castle'), self-knowledge ('Belonging'), the futility of war and the virtue of selflessness ('The war healer')'. Such sub-themes, bordering on human life as a journey and the dialectics involved in the quest for freedom, are the focal points of the masterpiece under investigation.

Generally speaking therefore, the book is centred on the concept of freedom. It is a meditation on the condition for true freedom as it "thematizes" freedom, the constant dialectics between freedom and slavery, liberty and servitude, human life as a journey and

the mundane struggles of humans in their strange world. The work encourages readers to exhibit resilience and focus while confronting the avalanche of challenges bedeviling humanity. It is in the light of the above thematic focus that the current research investigates the contributions of the syntactic structures to meaning generation in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. The paper holds that the instances of syntactic structures in the text are important signifiers of meaning and aesthetics as they help to foreground the central notion of freedom.

Co-Construction as Unity and Freedom Marker in Okri's *Tales of Freedom*

In Okri's *Tales of Freedom*, the author deploys co-construction as a dialogic strategy between characters to achieve unity and "thematise" freedom. In the following excerpts, co-construction is further strengthened by the use of a special type of imperative sentence referred to as command with 'Let'. Some of the examples of this pattern of co-construction are presented and discussed below.

'Let's go holding hands.'

'Dreaming about wonders.' (Okri, 2009: 69)

The above, when read, appears as a single contribution as it reflects the utterance of a character, though uttered by two characters. The command with Let type of imperative used in the expression gives the impression of a joint task to the actions. Therefore, the actions in the utterance are inclusive of both the speaker and hearer. This alone suggests unity of actions between the two characters. Co-constructing the utterance also suggests unity of thoughts, ideas and cooperation between the characters. Re-written as a character's utterance, we have:

Imp. P A

'Let's / go / holding hands, / dreaming about wonders.' (Okri, 2009: 69)

While the young woman utters the first expression which in itself is a complete clause (**Imp. PA**), the contribution of the young man (**A**) constitutes an expansion of the idea in the first part, which aids collaboration. This, in the long run, gives the characters freedom in their relationships as they freely relate and agree on issues. Another instance of co-construction in the text under study is seen below:

‘Let’s go, then.’
 ‘In unity and love.’
 ‘Let’s just go.’
 ‘In peace and tranquillity.’ (Okri, 2009: 70)

The above contributions are uttered in turns by the young woman and the young man. Both the second and the last expressions, uttered by the young man, are simply uttered as expansions of the first and third clauses uttered by the young woman as if they are produced by a speaker. Similar to the previous example, these expressions start with the imperative (command with let) and, the second and fourth contributions of young man perform expansion functions. In other words, the young man’s contributions are expansions of the thoughts of the young woman. They therefore enhance collaboration and cooperation in dialogue, foster unity in conversation and enhance free association. Rendered by a speaker, the clauses would read:

Imp. P A A
 ‘Let’s / go, / then, / in unity and love.’

Imp. P A
 ‘Let’s / just go / in peace and tranquillity.’

Noteworthy is the fact that the clauses indeed spell out the ingredients for freedom (unity, love, peace and tranquillity) as seen in the examples above. Yet another similar pattern of co-construction occurs in the interaction between the duo as follows:

While some of the new contributions are clauses, others are only nominal and adverbial groups. Again, the excerpt begins with the imperative pattern as in some previous examples. Observed above is that each new contribution is an expansion of the previous contribution. The cooperation and collaboration between the characters in producing the utterances reflect in the free-flow of one syntactic pattern progressively into another without any hindrance. In this specific instance, the co-constructed structure has given room for a syntactic deviation: where up to six adverbials are seen modifying a verb/clause.

Therefore, the syntactic freedom observed in the sentences-in-progress and the deviation (as a result of the overuse of adverbials) remind readers of the freedom the author foregrounds in the text. Another example is presented below:

‘Let’s play again,’ said New Woman.
 ‘As on the first day.’
 ‘When we were the garden.’
 ‘And the garden was us.’ (Okri, 2009: 106)

Imp.	P	A	A	A
Let’s /	play /	again /	as on the first day /	when we were the garden and the garden was us.

The example has been re-presented as a speaker’s utterance such that the four syntactic contributions, alternately rendered by the two speakers, appear like a sentence, since the second and third contributions (adverbial group and adverbial clause) progressively add to the first contribution while the last completes the clause. The free coordination of the contributions is a function of cooperative minds and thought processes between the characters. The characters are therefore free in thought and minds, just as the structures are freely connected to enhance a meaningful whole.

All the above examples are similar in pattern because they are all initiated with an imperative sentence (command with *let*) which in itself suggests collaboration and unity. They are instances of expansions, since the second speaker's utterances in each case are seen as expanding what the first speaker says into a new and longer syntactic unit. The type of co-construction observed in the above instances are expansions facilitated by the deployment of adverbials (adverbial groups, adverbial clauses). In all, they function to enhance collaboration, unity in speech and freedom in association.

Both Old Woman and Old Man take turns to react emotionally to Pinprop's act of insubordination in the following excerpt:

'I suggest a chaining, a skinning and a hanging.'
 'All at once.'
 'With great celebration.'
 'And relief.' (Okri, 2009: 83)

In the above, each successive turn is a continuation of the previous one such that the four turns come as a single turn produced by a speaker. Rewritten, the four turns appear as:

S P C C C A A
 'I / suggest / a chaining, / a skinning / and / a hanging / all at once, / with
 great celebration and relief.'

The above shows evidence of coordinated minds of the characters as they collaborate in carrying out conversational tasks, even when they jointly collaborate to propose a punishment for another. It shows that each speaker can read the mind of the other and they share similar thought processes. This portrays the characters as collaborating and cooperating in unity. The unity of thoughts and of utterances as seen in the excerpts breeds freedom between the characters (Old Woman and Old Man) since their agreements in thoughts and sayings depict unity. Further, in syntactically connecting one's thoughts or

speeches to that of another smoothly and without structural hindrances or lack of coordination, there is freedom. No wonder the characters do not argue or fight between themselves, but often argue and fight with Pinprop.

In a similar incident but to show ironic affection, both Old Man and Old Woman co-construct clauses as shown below.

‘We still love you, Pinprop.’

‘We always will,’ said Old Woman.

‘That is why you shall forever be our slave.’

‘Even in sleep.’(Okri, 2009: 85)

The above four expressions are alternately uttered by Old Man and Old Woman in an attempt to convince Pinprop of their perpetual love for him, but they both declare that he will be their slave forever. Old Woman’s contributions occur as expansions of Old Man’s earlier statements, such that her statements are emphatically reinforcing the statements by Old Man. Re-presented:

S P C S A P
We / still love / you, Pinprop. We / always / will.

S P C A
That / is / why you shall forever be our slave / even in sleep.’(Okri, 2009: 85)

As seen above, the first part portrays the duo as jointly constructing their sense of perpetual love towards Pinprop, their slave. Ironically, the second part also co-constructed portrays the duo as giving the reason why they will always love Pinprop: as long as he remains their slave. The co-constructed structures above therefore foreground the dialectics between freedom and slavery, between liberation and oppression and, between master and servant. In other words, both Old Man and Old Woman, through their expressions, are united in

assuming that they are masters who are in charge of Pinprop's freedom while Pinprop is their slave and, that they will continue to love Pinprop as long as he agrees to remain their slave. Therefore, while the co-constructions above foreground the unity between Old Man and Old Woman, the structure also foregrounds the dialectics between freedom and oppression among human beings. Earlier in the text, between the young woman and the young man occurs the conversation below, which is sustained through the use of co-constructions.

'The only reason I might get up from here,' said the young woman, 'is if I know that at some point we might find a place where we can just be.'

'A place to learn how to dream again.'

'A place to learn how to forget.'

'A place to be compassionate.' (Okri, 2009: 65 - 66)

The above presents a complete clause uttered by the young woman followed by three nominal groups in succession, all co-constructed by the two characters, as re-presented below.

S

P

A

The only reason I might get up from here / is / if I know that at some point we might

A

A

find a place where we can just be. / A place to learn how to dream again. / A place to

A

learn how to forget. / A place to be compassionate. (Okri, 2009: 65 - 66)

There is indeed only one clause in the above as the other three contributions are only nominal groups. In other words, the first contribution is a clause while the others are nominal groups

functioning as adverbials. The nominal groups are expansions of the ideas and thoughts of the first speaker, such that we have a longer syntactic unit. The subsequent contributions show the characters' cooperation and collaboration in thought processes such that unity in conversation and freedom of association is enhanced. As in some previous examples, there is an overuse of adverbials in this example. It therefore seems that since co-construction comes with an expansion or completion of the foregoing syntactic structure, it allows for syntactic deviation (overuse or preponderance of syntactic categories).

In all the examples above, the full-stops between one syntactic contribution and another seem to depict a stop, separation or constraint. Despite this however, the syntactic structures still go out beyond the constraints to cooperate. Further, in many of the examples above, the co-constructed patterns are preceded by a specific type of imperative (Command with Let) which functionally includes the speaker and hearer(s) in the action of the imperative sentence. This type of command also necessarily enhances collaboration and unity. Generally speaking therefore, the mutual cooperation and collaboration observed in the excerpts bring about unity and freedom. Finally, this paper perceives that co-construction allows for deviation of syntactic patterns (overuse or preponderance of syntactic categories) as a way of showing the freedom enjoyed by the patterns.

Conclusion

The research which holds that thematic preoccupations, meanings and messages in literary texts do not only reside in the lexico-semantic level but can also be deciphered at the other levels of language such as the syntactic has examined the nature, forms and functions of co-construction and delved into the resourcefulness of co-construction in coding the major themes in Okri's *Tales of Freedom*. With insights from MAK Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, analysis has shown the resourcefulness of co-construction as a syntactic category in "thematizing" freedom, unity and, dialectics between freedom and slavery, as the author deploys co-construction in the text under study to

produce grammatically coherent structures, enhance cooperation, seek collaboration and, to present a collective statement. All these are geared towards unity and freedom. The paper concludes that co-construction, as a syntactic category, has been very resourceful in coding the central themes in Ben Okri's *Tales of Freedom*.

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