

# STYLE AS IDIOLECT IN EHIKHAMENOR'S "IGODOMIGODO MUST NOT COMATOSE"

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## Abstract

Art becomes meaningful when it examines succinctly the dynamics of the particular society from which it springs, and by this, effects a positive change in the society. This research examines style as idiolect in the text: "Igodomigodo must not comatose". The text written on the 21st of January, 2011 by Victor Ehikhamenor, a columnist at *NEXT* (an online magazine), mimics and ridicules Honourable Patrick Obahiagbon's complex and unnecessary use of flamboyant expressions while he served as a member of the lower chamber of the Nigerian National Assembly. To adequately analyse this text, the paper explores the various linguistic levels, style markers, the context of situation and the function of this kind of text to its readers. Systemic functional grammar has been adopted as the theoretical framework to discuss how linguistic elements, employed in the text, are formulated to assuage the requirement of "whos and whats" (context-function). The paper reveals that at all the five linguistic levels; diverse features have been employed for style and effect. The responses of readers of the text under study have shown that Ehikhamenor's text has in a subtle but effective manner emphasised the use of simple expressions in place of flamboyant ones, especially, to satisfy the primary need of communication and perhaps, to enhance social acceptability.

**Key Words:** Style, Idiolect, Mimicry, Language, Systemic Functional Grammar

## Introduction

The medium of communication in most fields of discourse is language. Language makes communication easy; it provides the

medium by which an oral exchange or written text can be achieved: "The mere thought of a world without language elicits depressive boredom and retrogression" (Urujian and Etuk, 2023: 271). According to Etuk and Akpan (2023: 69), "it is through language that emotions, desires, thought, religious and socio-political views and beliefs of individuals, groups of individuals and that of an entire community of people are expressed". Similarly, Etuk and Urujian (2018: 87) opine that "humans use language, in a distinct way, to communicate their feelings, desires and beliefs". For communication to be said to have taken place, the decoder must be able to understand what the encoder encodes. This informs the undertaking, to examine how linguistic resources are employed in various fields of human endeavour to communicate meaning or emphasise a point of view. Here, the primary purpose is on how linguistic features are employed or how language is used "...in the wider context of cultural and social aspects" (Etuk and Okon, 2024: 90) and not mainly on the content of a text. Linguistics, a scientific study of language, according to Leech and Short (1981: 5) has as its major purpose "a tendency to explore for pattern and system below the surface forms of language; to search for the principles of meaning and language use which activate and control the code". The branch of linguistics that concentrates on this is stylistics.

Stylistics is generally viewed as a scientific study of style (Leech and Short, 1981; Enkvist, 1987; Clark, 1996; Verdonk, 2002; Ayeomoni, 2003). It is "the analysis of distinctive expression in language and the description of its purpose and effect" (Verdonk, 2002: 4). To arrive at an elaborate definition of stylistics, it is pertinent to investigate what style is.

Style has been defined by various scholars in different ways. According to Crystal and Davy (1969: 10), style is that which helps in the analysis of:

language habits with the main purpose of identifying, from the general mass of linguistic features common to English as used on every conceivable occasion, those features which are

restricted to certain kinds of social context; to explain, where possible, why such features have been used, as opposed to other alternatives; and to classify these features into categories based upon a view of their function in the social context.

Crystal and Davy here espouse the manner of deployment of linguistic elements in consonance with the context of situation and to achieve a certain value as style. Kolawole (2003: 4) equally views style as depicting “the cohesive working of the different components of language in a text and the creative employment of every possibility grammar offers”. The way language resources are made to unite in a text as well as the significance of the creative use of language is what Kolawole stresses here. Style, according to Enkvist (1987), is concerned with the oftenness of grammatical elements in a text as constrained by social context. The number of occurrences of linguistic elements in a text is what constitutes style, if we are to adopt Enkvist’s views.

Owing to its multidisciplinary nature, it is difficult to adopt a single definition of stylistics. For the purpose of this work, what forms the central idea of stylistics is its concern with the ‘how’ of language use (its textness). Consequently, of all the multi-dimensional approaches to the study of style, style as idiolect serves as the approach that has been adopted as the framework for the examination of the text entitled “Igodomigodo must not comatose”, written by Victor Ehikhamenor and published in an online magazine, *NEXT*.

### **Style as Idiolect and Its Relation to the Text?**

Leech and Short (1981: 167) see idiolect as “the linguistic ‘thumbprint’ of a particular person: to the features of speech that mark him off as an individual from those around him”. A careful examination of any given text may reveal that certain features of speech or writing habit are unique to a specific person. Such features are likely to distinguish the author from other users of the same language or the same language variety. Where an author has, embedded in his texts, a

certain voice distinguishing attribute or handwriting, such stamp would generate the fundamental assumption for his identification. In some cases, an author's trait may comprise familiar words or structural patterns which could provide the grounds for his identity. This distinguishing trait in writing or speaking could lead to phonetic and graphic peculiarity of any type.

Of great importance to this work is the description of idiolect by Crystal and Davy (1969) as: an alien voice quality or style of handwriting for some purpose (for example, the mimicking of a famous person to make a humorous point), but such usage would have to be described in terms of a very different set of presuppositions" (Emphasis theirs) (67). Crystal and Davy's assessment clarifies that the mimicking of another writer to achieve an effect could equally be known as idiolect.

The text, "Igodomigodo must not comatose" was written by Victor Ehikhamenor and published on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, 2011 in an online magazine, *NEXT*. A thorough assessment of Victor's works (always entitled "Excuse Me" but with different riders) reveals that Ehikhamenor does not use grandiloquent words. His articles, "Excuse me: let us pray" (published on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2011), "Excuse me: the great debater has come" (published on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2011), "Excuse me: beggars' lane (published on 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2011), "Excuse me: clapping for madness" (published on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011) and even the more recent ones, all show that this columnist uses the normal, everyday language common to all, to encode his message. The common trait in his writing, however, is his presentation of a satirical/humorous look at serious issues affecting our society in order to effect a desired change.

Glaring features (as would be highlighted in the course of this study) abound to prove that Ehikhamenor's language in this piece is aimed at mimicking Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon (a name he mentions frequently in the text) and his use of language in the lower house of the Nigerian National Assembly. In the next few sections, attempts are made to assess the motive behind this text and what the writer seeks to achieve by writing like this, for "Writers, in the process of displaying

creativity, craft a new taste in language by introducing, creating or forming new words, colouring and flouting rules of grammar in order to make it more potent for an intended result” (Etuk and Urujian, 2024: 188). However, before that, there is need to identify a theoretical framework suitable for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory adopted for this paper is systemic functional grammar. This model of grammar which evolved in the 1960s was propounded by Michael A. K. Halliday (Feng, 2013). One valuable quality of SFG is the possibility it provides to speakers and writers in their attempt to interact as it, “offers the speaker (or writer) a choice of ways of expressing meanings” (Bloor and Bloor, 1995: 2). These possibilities are interpreted in line with the subject matter or form of the language used. Also important in SFG are the fundamentals of language: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. The ideational has to do with the use of the components of grammar to express the experiences of the speaker or writer. It is equivalent to Halliday’s “field of discourse”, the content of a text and use according to context.

The interpersonal function of language corresponds with the tenor of discourse. It motivates the reason some lexical items are selected in place of another in a communicative event involving two or more people. It is a useful tool for defining the relationship that exists between people involved in a communicative event especially as that relationship could account for a change in tone or word use. Tenor comprises three key areas: the distinguishing trait of the speaker/writer, proximity or otherwise between interactants and relative social status. Textual metafunction is parallel to mode, the structure and form of a text.

The central theme of this theory is to underline how meaning is interpreted in texts (both spoken and written) and how language functions in accordance with the parameter set by the particular society.

Succinctly put, Urujzian and Etuk (2024: 313) aver that "M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, (is) a theory suitable for the exploration of the function of language as used in a certain context". SFG does not consider language as a separate constituent but as that which functions together with the wider socio-cultural context, as "socially semiotic"; the aim is "to look into language from the outside and specifically to interpret linguistic processes from the standpoint of the social order" (Halliday, cited in Trappes-Lomax, 2005: 138).

Therefore, SFG tilts towards speaker-oriented meaning as facilitated or constrained by context as well as the meaning generated from language in use, rather than the concentration on formal linguistic structures. Language in use extends to accommodate the fact that "Language serves as the impeccable register of a society's collective memory, recording and preserving historical facts concerning the people, their worldview and perceptions" (Etuk 2021: 3). This research will be guided by both the interpersonal and the textual metafunctions of language, as stipulated in SFG. This is as a result of the need to examine why certain words are used in place of others, the linguistic thumbprint as well as the status of the writer (or the person being mimicked, in this case) and the structure of the text (owing to this mimicry) in order to accentuate the communicative intent of the writer.

### **Contextual Background to the Text and Its Function**

The employment of stylistic techniques serves varying purposes in a text. "Style does not arise out of a vacuum but that its production, purpose, and effect are deeply embedded in the particular context..." (Verdonk 2002: 6). Thus, a writer could examine a situation, present it in a work of art with an approach of style that could help him to communicate meaning and effect a change or achieve a particular purpose.

In "Igodomigodo must not comatose", Victor Ehikhamenor, the columnist, looks at the unnecessary use of grandiose expressions by politicians. By means of satire and mimicry, Ehikhamenor produces a

text scripted after Hon. Obahiagbon's manner of communication. Patrick Obahiagbon was a Federal lawmaker representing Oredo Federal Constituency of Edo State in the Nigerian House of Representatives from 2007-2011. Even though the writer frequently mentions Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon in the text, the context of the text is enough to help us understand the writer's purpose and the individual(s) to which he refers. Verdonk (2002: 12) notes:

a possible reason for this quick recognition may be that our socialization, part of which may be described as lessons in social survival, has trained us to immediately perceive the purpose and intended effects, i.e. the social function, of most texts have some practical function in that they have intentions which can be related to the real world around us.

It is the same reason that aids the understanding of the text by some readers like Yommi, who comment on *NEXT*'s website thus:

Viktor, (sic) am (sic) lost at a point if you are reciting some of Obahiagbons (sic) old presentation or work or you are learning to talk like him. There's always a time for everything and the time to weed of (sic) lemons from the National assembly is now. It is a monumental waste to have Obahiagbon representing a community for the singular purpose of comedy as the NASS is a hallowed place for law making (sic) and not for comedians...kindly be remembered (sic) that whilst his constituency suffers he is busy serving as a source of laughter....

Ehikhamenor, in this text, re-echoes the submission of George Orwell (1946) who writes against ostentatious, jargony and unclear grammar of political office holders in his essay entitled, "Politics and the English Language". To ensure a simple and clear text, Orwell provides six rules among which are that writers/speakers should avoid flowery and hackneyed expressions, long, unfamiliar, technological or jargon words. These are the rules which Hon. Obahiagbon would never follow. The questions that arise are these, what is the use of language if not for communication? And what is communication if one's hearers

do not understand one? Little wonder Ehikhamenor concludes his text thus:

I bawl out to every non-apolitical personage without timorous tendency to augment support and reposition the great Igodomigodo, a politician with cacophonous communicative prowess, a man whose consternation could re-arrange one's homily faculty...that is the only way we from the Niger area can snicker again at our wanton encumbrances while the country lingers on like a malfunctioning choo-choo locomotive.

Those lines reveal the writer's dissatisfaction with Hon. Obahiagbon who seemed to have abandoned his primary duty of law-making and effective representation for specialised, generally incomprehensible jargons, thus making his representatives a source of amusement. Of course, we cannot neglect the context of *NEXT* which has provided a platform for experimentation like this. An estimated one million people read postings on *NEXT* daily. Thus, this online publication affords the opportunity for creativity and charts the path for progressive change in the society.

### Data Analysis

It is pertinent at this juncture to examine the various style markers in the text. Areas of focus will be the five levels of language description: Graphology, Phonology, Morphology/Lexis, Syntax/Grammar, and Semantics. This analysis will be carried out with the aid of the systemic functional grammar model of analysis.

- (a) **Graphological Level:** The text has its title in bold letters and on the top page before our eyes rest on the web address which is embedded in slants. The above style draws attention to the title as the most important item (considering its print and position) and the web address as the "second-in-command."

The text is neatly arranged in paragraphs. There are eight paragraphs in all. The first paragraph is the shortest of all. This probably was done for a purpose--to serve as an



introductory paragraph. Quite noticeable in the opening paragraph is the lack of a comma. This suggests that the writer does not want us to pause for air or to have a break. The paragraph is to be read at a go. The only punctuation marks are the dot after “Hon”, the hyphen that joins the compound word “arm-twist” and the terminal marker.

Apart from the word “the” which begins the first paragraph, six other words have their initial letters in capital: “Edo, Benin” – to represent location; “Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon, Igodomigodo” – to represent whom the article is all about. Thus, from the first paragraph, the structure of the text provides information about “where” and “who” in order to prepare the minds of the readers. In this case, the textual metafunction is employed to provide coherence to the discourse.

Paragraph II, which is well-punctuated, has three compound words joined with the use of a hyphen. It equally contains a possessive noun “motherland’s”, and as well has eighteen words whose initial letters begin with a capital letter.

Paragraph III is shorter than the second paragraph but longer than the first. It has only “Igodomigodo” and “China” as words with the first letters in capital. This could be consciously done to show that these words are in comparison in the text. In the Nigerian society, interactants usually associate the word “China” with anything that is fake, unreal or imitation. Thus, “Igodomigodo” representing Hon. Obahiagbon is indirectly referred to as someone who is unreal and unsuitable to represent his constituents. Again, the textual metafunction of Halliday’s systemic functional grammar plays a pivotal role in providing this meaning.

Paragraph IV has only three interrelated words foregrounded: “Hon. Obahiagbon” (Igodomigodo), “People’s Democratic Party” and “Edo State”. These are the words that suggest object, agent and place respectively. For instance, it is possible to have “the People’s Democratic Party has dismissed Hon. Obahiagbon in Edo State”. Even a novel word like

"igbanaka", which should have its first letter in capital is deliberately ignored to foreground those three words.

Paragraph V has words from other registers and foreign origins foregrounded: "Phoenixial", "Encephalo". Notable names also have their first letters in capital: Webster, Brutus, et cetera; so are words in novel usage: "Atikuated", "Nwodonized".

The last three paragraphs are replete with compound nouns: "ex-legal", "metro-political", "Shark-infested", "bird-at-hand", "none a political" and the like. The above graphological features pointed out underline the writer's background as a journalist who must provide the necessary information of 'who the discussion is about', 'what needs to be communicated', 'where the event in question took place' and 'how' to buttress how the event happened. Thus, the graphological features accentuate the writer's employment of a unique journalistic style to deliver a creative text. It is also pertinent to add that the structure and form of the text contributes to the understanding of the text. The textual metafunction is glaring as through the form of the text, whom, where, and what the text is about is revealed.

**Phonological Level:** When a text is read aloud, the sound pattern of the words in the text becomes explicit. Often, the recognition of sound attributes of the written word could be more complex than that of the spoken word. It is pertinent to examine some of the sound components in the text.

1. **Rhythmic words:** Igodomigodo, abracadabra, and Iyemen. These words account for mellifluousness through their syllable structure.
2. **Alliteration:** This is when the same letter or sound occurs at the commencement of neighbouring or closely related words. Examples as used in the text are: "ostensible mandibles" (paragraph I); "hard hat", "jaw-jaw", "Webster ways" (paragraph II); "miscalculated political calculus", "fibular...feeble in federal financial finagling", "disingenuous china dashed on igneous rock" (paragraph III), "convoluted

compilations”, razzle, dazzle”, “palace peacocks plumage”, “profundity of profitable politics”, “high horse”, “discombulate or corroborate such hasty conclusiveness”, “cohobate to cohabit”, (paragraph V); “metro-political”, “geographical”, “calcium carbonate”, “Iyemen o iyemen o”, “defibrillator...fibrillation” (paragraph VI); “debilitating debacle”, “fiasco that finagled his fathomless”, “palatable palatial palace” (paragraph VII).

3. **Onomatopoeic word:** “lions that roar”, paragraph VI.
4. **Use of first person pronoun:** In paragraph II, the first person singular, “I” is repeated five times. Its varying use in the text accounts for rhythm and music.

### C. Morphological/Lexical level

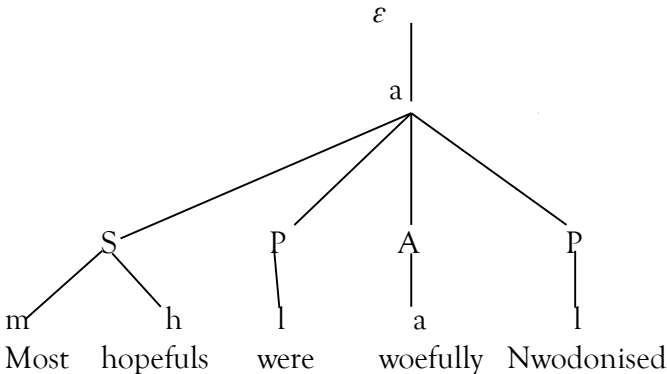
There is no denying the fact that the text “Igodomigodo must not comatose” comprises deviant word formation, novel coinages/neologisms and borrowings. The following are very conspicuous:

1. **Difficult words:** The text is filled with difficult lexical choices as opposed to simple ones. This is deliberately employed to mimic the persona. Examples of these words are: “ostensible”, “mandibles”, “juggernauts”, “masticated”, “encumbrances”, “fibrillation” et cetera.
2. **Word formation:** Another striking feature is word formation where there is a great inventiveness in compounding. Such hyphenated words are: “arm-twist”, “jaw-jaw”, “double-dipping”, “ex-legal”, “metro-political” and the like.
3. **Novel coinages:** “hard hat”, “Atikuated”, “Nwodonized” et cetera.
4. **Borrowings:** “Obeche trees”, “Igbanaka”, “phoenixial”, “Encephalo”, “cranium bifidum”, “Brutus”, “Iyemen O”, and “Edegbe”.

At the morphological level, the use of deviant word formation techniques and difficult words as opposed to simple ones is intended as a stylistic device to mimic Hon Obahiagbon who often would use same

in his day to day expressions. This typifies the interpersonal function of language. The fact that Ehikhamenor does not always write like this, as revealed by his previous columns, indicates that the change in word choice is to disclose the linguistic trait of Hon. Obahiagbon, the persona in the text.

(D) **Syntactic/Grammatical level:** There is an overwhelming use of complex as opposed to simple sentences in the text. In fact, the text has only one simple sentence ~ the last sentence in the fifth paragraph: "most hopefuls were woefully Nwodonized". Using the systemic grammar model, the above structure has just an alpha clause which can be represented on a tree diagram thus:



Syntactically, the paragraphs of the text follow the normal word order in sentence construction. They each begin with the subject followed by the predicate, with either the adverbial or the complement coming after the predicate, except in the second paragraph where the adverbial begins the paragraph. The complex sentence structures in the text are a stylistic device aimed at buttressing the complicated political journey of Hon. Obahiagbon who after being denied a ticket by the People's Democratic Party to return as a law maker had to defect to another party. Again, the complex sentences in the text which are sometimes undecipherable serve to define the confused state members of the

public are usually thrown into when Hon. Obahiagbon speaks. In this case, both the tenor of discourse, as indicated by the linguistic thumbprint of Hon. Obahiagbon, as well as the complex structures buttress the activation of the interpersonal and textual functions for a connotative understanding of the text.

### (E) Semantic Level

The writer of the text under study makes use of deviant coinages, unusual collocations, complex and long sentences, wrong lexical choices and ironic expressions et cetera in order to achieve his ultimate purpose which is to mimic and satirise language use by Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon. The text begins with these meaning-filled words: “the ostensible mandibles...” Ostensible means “seeming or stated to be real, when this is perhaps not the case”. Mandible is “a jawbone used for crushing food; beak in bird; either side of an insect’s mouth”. Mandible here could equally be said to relate to difficult language if we are to go by the writer’s use of “jaw-jaw” in paragraph II. Thus, the combination of these two words shows that while Hon. Patrick thinks his language is elevated, it serves no meaning.

Another sentence worth looking at is “though egregiously **high falluting**...”. The highlighted is wrongly spelt. The correct word is high-faluting, meaning (often disapproving) trying to be serious or important, but in a way that often appears silly and unnecessary. This suggests how the writer views the persona. The deliberate misspelling of the word is aimed at depicting the incompetence of Hon. Patrick. It is mimicry of his often misuse of words.

In the same paragraph II, the writer sees Hon. Patrick’s “means of communication” as “highly flamboyant” and a “comical academic exercise for those who are learned in the Webster ways”. An academic exercise is a serious and formal thing, not comical. The word “comical” itself stands for what is funny or amusing because of being strange or unusual. The sentence is intended as a satire.

The last sentence of paragraph II has “while in the house most makers of law fundamentally found his coagulated British Lingua Franca and legal Latin jargon hard juggernauts to digest and often times caused them gastronomical malady”. If something is coagulated it means it is thick and heavy. Coagulated then could signify Hon. Patrick’s spoken English which is always thick and different from how native speakers use language.

In case there remains any form of doubt that the writer is mimicking Hon. Patrick’s use of language, the last two words that end paragraph II clear this doubt: “Igodomigodo’s lingo”. Lingo is one’s particular way of saying something. The use of lingo gives the writer out. It confirms that all along the writer has been referring to Hon. Patrick’s use of language. This much is buttressed by the tense in the past which is employed to recount the activities of the lawmaker while in the Lower Chamber. According to Udoka, Umoh and Etuk (2020: 58), “Tense is a category that locates the action of a verb on a timeline in relation to the time of speech relating to the action in question”. To equally corroborate Hon. Obahiagbon as the referent is the line in the fifth paragraph: “Igodomigodo was not a Charlatan...romanticizing Webster’s convoluted compilations...” The line is ironic. It refers to the persona as being a charlatan ~ one who claims to have knowledge or skills that they do not really have.

Unusual collocations are predominant in the text. For instance, in paragraph two, a sentence reads: “you usually wear hard hat whenever Hon. Obahiagbon jaw-jaw with his oral cavity”. This is transliteration, with “jaw-jaw” accounting for informality. Another striking example is “while in the house most makers of law fundamentally found his coagulated British Lingua Franca...caused them gastronomical malady”. The underlined words are oxymoronic. How could “gastronomical” which is the practice or art of choosing, cooking, and eating good food, be used side by side with “malady”- a disease or ailment?

Equally worth noting is the wrong use of word combination. For instance, in paragraph III there is “like disingenuous china....” Though

disingenuous is an adjective, it is not grammatical for it to be used before a noun. The same goes for “I qualm...”, still in the third paragraph. “Qualm” is a noun but here it is used as a verb against the rule of sentence construction. The text is embedded with series of markers like these that help in uncovering meaning and the intention of the writer. Thus, the writer of the text, Victor Ehikhamenor, stylistically selected some words in place of others, employed words and sentences in a manner that is different from how he used to, buttressed the linguistic habit of the referent in order to underline the interpersonal meta-function of language, in line with Halliday’s systemic functional grammar. Equally, the structure and form of the text which reveal the use of complex sentence structures as well as difficult words in place of simple ones show the deliberate distortion of structures and form in order to indicate how textual meta-function conveys meaning.

## **Conclusion**

Since the writer is part of the society and shares in the same social situation, he reproduces societal happenings in a set context as would be understood by his readers. Be it in an art form, a text, or whatever means, the writer’s aim would be to achieve a particular aim or function with his text. Thus, context and function are intertwined. Context and function aim towards a common goal. Context could be defined according to the function a certain type of communication performs.

Victor Ehikhamenor is a writer who understands this role. In his text, he imitates the wrong use of English by Hon. Patrick Obahiagbon cum politicians and through this act of mimicry, seeks to emphasise the use of simple expressions for social intelligibility and international acceptability. To achieve this purpose, the writer employs some style markers that are both suggestive and symbolic, emphasising the interpersonal and textual meta-functions of language, in order to make the embedded meaning decipherable by everyone. As shown in

the analysis through the responses of readers like Yommi, the text has registered an effect and there is no doubt that it has achieved its purpose.

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