
Creativity in the African Novel: A Stylistic Exploration of Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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Abstract

This paper aims at applying the techniques of linguistics to explore the stylistic value of Habila's *Measuring Time*. Principally, the artistic values of this novel are stressed. To achieve the present result and since this study is non-experimental and not based on statistical measurement but purely text-based and case study, the ex-post facto research design, the primary and secondary data collection methods, the context or textual system of data analysis and the Hallidayan Theory of Systemic Functional Grammar were employed and it was revealed that Habila has re-established the literary conventions of Achebe and his literary sons and daughters with more gusto. His skilful use of language makes his messages lucid and appealing. Specifically, he embellishes his *Measuring Time* with Nigerian English, Pidgin, foreign and specialized terms, deviant collocations, sound effects, inversion of syntactic rules, African folk tradition and so on to unearth, the aridity, drought, emotional atrophy, sense of fragmentation, loss, exile, feeling of loneliness and despair which define the fictional Keti community, Nigeria and indeed Africa.

Key Words: Literature, African Literature, Creativity, Style, Stylistics and Foregrounding

Introduction

Literature is the Sum total of all works of imagination, oral or written, which manifest and project the life and culture of people. Obichukwu (2009) opines that literature explains human experiences and conducts; in his past and his present, while peering into his future. Williams in Emezue (2012) is of the view that the literary artist; especially the novelist expresses all his views through language. This means that there is an irrefutable bond between language and literature. Thus, Fowler, Leech and Short and Osundare in Emezue (2012:2), argue that:

An ideal critic must be grounded in basic linguistics... must know how language operates... Every writer must be a linguist. If as a writer you don't know anything about linguistics, you are like a sculptor who doesn't understand the language of the wood he is using.

Hence, literature is language in use and Emezue (2012:2) concludes that "man's supreme use of language is discovered in literature." In the light of the above, literature involves the manipulation of language for creative purposes but stylistics serves as a 'buffer' between literary criticism and linguistics.

Whereas the artist can confine himself within the structural boundaries or "background" of the language to select different forms germane to his communication needs, he is at liberty to indulge in the use of deviant forms or "foreground" for aesthetics or to

achieve “uniqueness” or “creativity”. This, Osundare (1982:7) delineates as a mark of creativity and inventiveness in the literary artist in the following words:

... the remarkable writer is one who has been able to bend or break the preset rules of language, the linguistic outlaw who has flouted its hallowed thou-shall-nots. Every Language has within its system a loophole, an elastic edge for the adventurous user to widen and stretch...

The above piece is a good example of the stylistic principle, which Osundare (1982) attempts to explain. First, there is what Lawal (1997:31) calls “Desententialisation” in “**Thou-shall-nots.**” It violates a morpho-syntactic rule because it pluralizes a sentence, “**Thou shall not**”. In “flouting” the rule and “liberating” his style, Osundare employs the morphological process of compounding to reconstruct a sentence into a compound word, which he then pluralizes as “thou-shall-nots.” This is an excellent example of foregrounding, a breach of the linguistic rule. This leads to style as deviation from the norm as Enkvist in Khaled (2012) had stated.

Statement of the Problem

The major challenge of the African literary artists is what medium to use in expressing their literary views. Ngugi and Wali in Ayeleru (2011) support the use of African languages; for they believe that by writing in the European languages, African literary writers enrich European culture at the detriment of African culture. Besides, European languages cannot express the complexity of African experience and culture adequately; and for African literature to be authentic and be worth the name, it must be produced in an African language, which is the language of the people addressed. On the contrary, Achebe and Irele in Ayeleru (2011) feel that the European language can bear the burden of African experience but it has to be “new English” which is the English language that has been modified to suit African surrounding. This ultimately led the Old Generation African writers to express African thoughts in English, French and Portuguese. They depended essentially on the manipulation of the foreign languages to capture their cultural, social and linguistic background. The old generation Nigerian novelists in particular have imbibed the domestication and nativization of the English Language in their literary works. What about the new generation writers? This study therefore, aims at investigating how Helon Habila of the new generation novelists has used the English Language to communicate his views to the world.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, this investigation seeks to find out:

1. if Habila belongs to the Achebe school of thought in African literary writing
2. if he belongs to Ngugi’s school of thought in African literary writing
3. if he has a peculiar style of writing,
4. those linguistic features which he manipulated for literariness
5. whether those distinctive features serve as limitations or inhibition to the English language or the message of the author.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is revealed in the linguistic competence of the non-native speaker of the English Language who is operating in a heterogeneous speech community such as Nigeria still he is able to manipulate the second language to communicate his thoughts to the world. Again, it reveals the nature of style and stylistics in African literature and how stylistics has aided the interpretation of Habila’s *Measuring Time*. It also provides insight into the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar and its application to the *Measuring Time*. Most significantly, this study enables the readers, scholars and other

researchers to appreciate the works of Habila as he seems to pursue the ideologies of justice and equity to build a peaceful, unwavering and progressive Keti, Nigeria, and indeed Africa.

This study explores the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar to show how it serves as a dependable analytical model for the interpretation of the *Measuring Time*. Again, it reveals the lexico-semantic and syntactic features of the *Measuring Time*, which enhance the creative manipulation of the English language to suit African existential experience.

Research Questions

To achieve the objective of this exploration therefore, the following research questions were designed to guide this examination.

- (1) To what extent can Helon Habila be said to belong to Achebe's school of thought in African literary writing
- (2) To what extent can Helon Habila be said to belong to Ngugi School of thought in African literary writing
- (3) To what extent can Habila be said to operate an independent or a unique literary style
- (4) What are those linguistic features he manipulated for literariness?
- (5) To what extent do these distinctive linguistic features serve as inhibition and limitation to the language or the message of the author?

Theoretical Framework

This exploration adopts the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar, which highlights the functionality of language and thus implies that each individual utterance in a given context has a particular function. Bloor and Bloor (2004) demonstrate this with the expression "Good afternoon" and maintain that a speaker can say 'good afternoon' as a means of greeting a friend at the appropriate time of the day. Also, "good afternoon" can be used to reprimand when, for example, a student is late for morning lectures and misses part of the first lesson, the teacher might sarcastically say 'good afternoon.' This indicates that the same word can have different communicative functions in different situations. Asiyanbola (2012), then, projects systemic functional grammar as a functional approach to language and he envisages that adults use language to perform three primary functions, which Halliday christened 'metafunctions', ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Ideational metafunction uses language to organize, and express our perceptions (experiences) of the world around us and about us. Interpersonal metafunction uses language to establish and maintain all human relationships while the textual metafunction uses language for the internal organization of texts. Thus, language is used to express meaning and to perform various functions in different contexts and situations of our daily life.

Methodology

Since this study is non experimental but purely text- based, the ex-post facto research design, the primary and secondary data collection methods, the content or descriptive or textual system of data analysis, and the simple random sampling technique were employed in this work.

To further add value to the goal of the study, the next section of the study presents a discussion of the two major concepts which sustain the work.

Creativity

Literary creativity involves a manipulation of language for beauty and signification. Creativity involves the production of novel, useful, surprising and unpredictable works. In other words creativity entails the creation of something different from others. This idea makes Goodman and O' Halloran (2006:10) to say that: "Artistic creativity is a product of exceptional people ..." They maintain that the main element of literary creativity is

foregrounding and “foregrounding is a stylistic device, which is concerned with defamiliarization of everyday speech.” In line with this, foregrounding has been defined simply as “to bring to the front.” This means that writers arrange words in such a way to attract the attention of their readers or audience. Goodman and O’Halloran maintain that the major element of foregrounding is deviation. Deviation entails making stylistic choices that depart from the canon of everyday language. Affirming this view, Jacobson in (Goodman and O’Halloran 2006) describes literature, especially poetry as “organised violence committed on ordinary speech” because words, phrases and other grammatical structures depart from what is expected. Accordingly, they describe deviation as “expected irregularity in a text” while Mukarovsky in Goodman and O’Halloran (2006:60) describes it as “a deviation from the standard”. An instance of grammatical deviation is observed in E. E. Cummings poem “**Love is more thicker than forget**” Goodman and O’Halloran explain that E.E. Cummings breaks the grammatical rule for forming comparative structures in the English Language by doubling the comparative. What is grammatically acceptable is “**Love is thicker than forget.**”

Creativity is of no exceptional characteristics in African literature. The African literary artists therefore arm themselves with the western literary cannon mingled with the African folklorism and nativization.

Style and Stylistics

In the view of Bloomfield (1976) stylistics is the study or interpretation of the distinctive linguistic elements in writing of a text. It explains the peculiar choices made by an individual or social group in the use of language and it examines both written and oral texts. Initially, stylistics investigated only literary texts but Brown (2005) hints that nowadays it inquires into various kinds of texts such as, recipes, novels, advertisements, films, news reports, songs, lyrics, religious and political speeches as well as road signs. Again, Lawal (1997) defines stylistics as the study of style. Ordinarily, style is a general way of doing something but technically, it refers to some or all the language habits of one person or group of persons such as the style of Dickens or Adichie or the way language is used in a particular genre (poetry for instance), period, school of thought, writing or some combinations of these as in epistolary style, or the style of the New Generation Nigerian writers.

Analysis of *Measuring Time*

Lexical Features

Habila assimilates a lot of historical events, people and monuments in Nigeria, Africa and the world at large in his *Measuring Time*. This particularly highlights Habila’s versatility.

In the first place, he alludes to notable philosophers like: Plato , Aristotle, Frantz Fanon, Napoleon, and Mungo Park, a Scottish explorer who discovered the River Niger. The writer also, makes allusions to African leaders and warlords as Nelson Mandela, the first South African black president, Muammar Gaddafi , a Libyan revolutionary leader, Charles Taylor former Liberian president who was indicted for war crimes; Mansa Musa , Former ruler of Mali , Julius Nyerere and others. Habila also innovatively makes reference to some African countries and cities such as, Timbuktu, Bamako, , Dares salaam, Egypt , Botswana, South Africa, Guinea , Senegal , Morocco, and so on. Again, Habila laces his *Measuring Time* with names of notable monuments, such as the Egyptian pyramids (P.87), the Berlin Wall (P.89) and so on. He also makes reference to the African Rivers: Nile (P.114), Niger (P.114), Senegal (P.114), Congo (P.114), Orange (P.114), Limpopo (P.114) and Zambezi (P.114). He makes an admixture of history and fiction to whet the interest of his audience and this gives the contagious grasp, which captivates his readers until the end of the story.

This, therefore, has given the *Measuring Time* a spark of originality, personality, innovation, resourcefulness and cosmetics.

Foregrounding in Habila's *Measuring Time*: Sound and Meaning

The most interesting foregrounded element in Habila's *Measuring Time* is his use of sound and meaning in his linguistic construction for aesthetics. This exploration is required because messages are associated with or attached to them. Specifically, we consider assonance alliteration, onomatopoeia and parallelism as they function as stylistic elements which convey meaning in Habila's novel *Measuring Time*.

Assonance

Assonance is another sound and meaning device used by the author in *Measuring Time*. This is the repetition of identical vowel sounds. They are

/ʌ/ income, and some (P.15), flew **u**p and **u**t (P.145)

/u:/ in two **u**edroom and a living **u**om (P.222), to **u**ot and **u**oot, (P.138);

In all these examples, Helon Habila has manipulated the vowel sounds to foreground aspects of meaning and coin appealing values.

Alliteration

Another sound device employed by Habila in his *Measuring Time* is alliteration. This is the use of the same consonant sounds at the beginning of nearby words. Examples in the *Measuring Time* are

1. He thought of his childhood, **o**f the **o**feeling of abandonment, he and his brother always felt when waiting for weeks for their **f**ather to return. (P. 183)
2. ... which they had borrowed **f**rom **f**riends and failed to return (P.120)
3. ... **f**ar away from her **f**riends (P.168),
4. I fell **f**rom the **f**arm tree (P.297)

The selection of the labio-dental fricative sound /f/ which comes on successive accented syllable imposes a repetitive pattern of

(f-f-f-f-f-f-f) on the first example,

(f-f-f) on the second example

(f-f-f) on the third example ,

(f-f-f) on the fourth example.

Leech in Fowler (1981) maintains that in other types of discourses these would be "fortuitous" and of no communicative value. But, Habila however, has used them to capture the strong feeling of abandonment, negligence, disillusionment, alienation, loss, exile, restlessness, loneliness as observed in (P.66, 118, 119, 184 and 300)

Onomatopoeia

Again, going through the *Measuring Time*, one observes that Habila has used Onomatopoeia, a phonological device of stylistics where sounds suggest the meaning of words or expression. Thus, onomatopoeia is the imitation of natural sounds by words.

Now she was at the window; she hammered at it with her walking stick, tap ...tap...tap, till gradually the glass began to crack under the insistent hammering (P.30)

Habila uses onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance to create a conspicuous sense of realism, signification, complexion, grandeur and music, which is an influence of oral tradition in his *Measuring Time*.

Parallelism

Yankson in Yeibo (2011:1065) contends that “one of the stylistic effects of linguistic parallelism is to confer lexical items with the same value in the three levels of language organization - syntactic, semantic and phonetic.” Habila uses this repeatedly in his *Measuring Time*. Typical examples are

- She looked different **slimmer, thinner** (P.262)
Both words share the same final weak (Schwa) sound /ə/ and the same stress pattern or stress isochrony of two syllables.

These words are verbs. They have two syllables and the words end in the velar nasal consonant sound /ŋ/.

- There were **more** parties **mostly** at the **same** venue **mostly** with the **same** people **mostly** for the **same** reasons: birthdays for girl friends (P.250)

Principally, Habila uses these parallel structures for aesthetics and to bring to light the rot in his society as perpetrated by even the custodians of the culture of the people, the traditional ruler (the Mai) and the (Waziri) and political office holders such as the governor and his subordinates who would rather spend the meager resources of the state on frivolities to the utter negligence of the people’s needs- water, schools, good roads, electricity and so on.

Deviant Collocations

Another aspect of foregrounding observed in Habila’s *Measuring Time* is the use of deviant collocations. The deviant collocations in the novel are usually portrayed through the author’s use of metaphorical modes such as paradox, oxymoron, antithesis, personification and so on to distort reality. These figures of rhetorics produce contradictory and incongruous ideas and these represent Habila’s society. Therefore, structures of language as used in the *Measuring Time* stand for Habila’s ideological orientation. Thus, he uses deviant collocations in *Measuring Time* to picture the perplexity in keti in particular, Nigeria and Africa in general.

Personification

Personification confers human and animate features on non-human or inanimate objects, and this is a breach of Selection Restriction Rule. A few examples of personification will be examined below.

- (1) Tabitha was only seventeen, and the bloom of her youth sat on her cheeks like a rainbow. (P.19)

The verbal group or phrasal verb (VP) ‘sat’, usually picks a nominal group with the feature /+animate+ human/, but here, the nominal group (NG) ‘cheek’ is meant to collocate with ‘sat’. Thus, there is the substitution of an animate nominal group with an inanimate one. Therefore, “the bloom of youth” which is inanimate has been made to sit on ‘cheeks’ as if ‘cheeks’ were seats.

- (2) His appetite came rushing back (P.287).

There is an aberrant juxtaposition here; making for a breach of selection restriction rule because the inanimate nominal phrases (NG) “appetite” with the characteristics (-animate-human) is conferred with the quality (+animate + human). So, the noun phrase (NP) “appetite” associates with the verbal phrase (VP) “came rushing”. So, “appetite” an inanimate, abstraction, has been allowed to behave like an animate being who naturally will “come rushing.” In addition to the above function of personification, it adds to paint Habila’s *Measuring Time*. Habila uses this literary troupe in his language to underline the theme of generational conflict between parents and their children, husband and wife, which has led to breakdown of the family, disappearance of family values parental love, care, support and affection and powerful mother love and bonding.

Paradox and Oxymoron

Other metaphorical frames Habila has used to interrogate reality are paradox and oxymoron. Despite the contrary nature of oxymoron, it has some latent truth. Helon Habila has used these literary devices to emphasize the social contradictions in his “keti” society. Therefore, He uses such modes to emphasize the illogicality, flaw, conflicts, ambiguities and denials in his society. A few examples will be discussed below.

The “glow” on their mother’s cheek hid the incipient dark tinge of “sadness” and “apprehension” (P.19)

While the noun phrase “glow” is semantically affirmative, there is a semantic contrast between it and the noun phrases “sadness” and “apprehension” which are semantically negative.

Grotesque Scheme

This is another aspect of deviant collocation. Here, there is purposeful deformation of semantic elements for theatrical effects. It is a stylistic plan, which uses exaggeration, distortion or humour to expose and ridicule human vices or social situations (Kamalu, 2008). Specifically, Habila uses elements of distortion as an artistic form to mock and devalue reality. A few examples from *Measuring Time* are listed below:

1. Their eyes tightly shut, their limbs stiff as if with rigor mortis, their ears focused like radars towards the tapping on the window. (P.27)

2. The only person they would have said goodbye to was Auntie Marina, but they knew that if they did, her tears like chains would tie them to the earth and they wouldn’t be able to fly. (P.48)

In the first example above, the glued eyes of the twins and their stiff limbs are equated with body stiffness after death (rigor mortis), while their ears are compared with radars (detectors or locating system). This structure tests the reader’s imagination and intuition as he or she is expected to make an intellectual interpretation of that interface between their shut eyes and stiff limbs and rigor mortis, and “ears” and radars before he or she can understand what is meant. Habila, especially in the *Measuring Time* uses the stylistic elements of distortion, to project his satirical attack on his society.

Hibridity

This is another bizarre element, which blends the features of two or more different entities to form an inexplicable one. This makes way for physical features of animals and sometimes of plants to be bestowed on humans or vice versa, as cited from the *Measuring Time*.

1. I can’t forget it; he was crying and mewling like a cat (P.44)

2. We were days and days in the water and mud like fish. (P.44)

In all these examples, there is semantic incongruity as human beings take the features of animals, and sometimes, plants. This bestows on them, an unusual semantic feature /+animal+ human+plant/. Helon Habila uses these metaphorical distortions to depict the beastly behaviour of some humans, especially the ruler towards their fellow humans (the ruled). This is evidence in the approach adopted by the Mai, the Waziri, the governor and his subordinates, who squander the resources meant for the development of society for frivolities, the birthdays of their girl friends.

All the deviant structures employed in Habila’s *Measuring Time* symbolize the chequered state of affairs in Keti, a town characterized by aridity, emptiness, devastation, and Lamang’s family, where there is dearth of love, care and warmth, all culminate in LaMamo’s disappointment, as he comes home after twelve years of fighting as an intenary soldier in various wars in countries in Africa, led a revolutionary riot and died in the process.

Pidgin English

Another stylistic feature, which Habila has used in his literary pieces, especially in his *Measuring Time* is the Pidgin variety of the English Language. Habila incorporates the Pidgin variety in his *Measuring Time* thus:

So you tink say you fit come here waste my time, abi? You de craze? We say we want eighteen years minimum, and you come here with sixteen years minimum - you tink say army job na for small pikin? Oya get out before I count three. One...two...Are you still there? I go handle you O... (P.60 - 61)

He uses this for humour and as an avenue to satirize and ridicule discreditable values of his society. For instance, he uses Pidgin for class distinction, as the above extract was used by a recruiting army officer. It is also used to depict illiterate speech of illiterate characters in his works. Habila's aim is also to satirize the negligence and the denial of all-important father and mother love bonding suffered by the twins, Mamo and LaMamo.

Style and Concord

Helon Habila has closed his eyes to all "thou shall nots" of grammar for creativity to take precedence; as seen in the following expressions in his *Measuring Time*.

- a. **"We speaks English,"** the scout said impatiently interrupting Idrissa's hesitant translation (P.63)
- b. **We likes people speaks** good English (P.63)
- c. **Tomorrow we leaves. We goes** to Chad, **if you survives** Chad, after... (P.63)

In sentence (a), the subject "We" is plural and should take a plural verb. So, in Standard English this sentence should read:

"We speak English", the scout said impatiently interrupting Idrissa's hesitant translation."

In sentence (b), the subject "we" is plural and object "people" is also plural and should have taken plural verbs but Habila uses singular verbs "likes" and "speaks". In good English, the sentence should read.

"We like people who speak good English"

Sentence (c) does not also abide by the rules of concord. So, in Standard English should read.

"Tomorrow we leave. We go to Chad, if you survive Chad, after..."

Habila intentionally ignores the dictates of grammar to show class distinction, because the users of the deviant statements are school dropouts and to bring to light the neglect and abandonment meted to these youths by society and their parents.

Inversion of Syntactic Constituents

As a result of the poetic liberation offered him, Habila indulges in the inversion of syntactic elements basically for stylistic effects, especially in his *Measuring Time* as exemplified in the sentences below:

1. Some people they are medical workers. (P. 129)
2. The Police they attacked them. (P.174)
3. The people you saw yesterday, they are the who's who of this state, they make things happen. (P. 149)

In the above sentences, there is the inversion of the basic Subject, Predicate, complement, Adjunct (SPCA) structure of Systematic Functional Grammar. There are two subjects before the predicate, thus, producing SSPCA sentence structure instead of SPCA as illustrated below:

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------------|---------------|
| S | S | P | C | |
| Some people | They | are | medical workers | |
| S | S | P | O | |
| The police | They | Attacked | Them | |
| S | S | P | C | A |
| The people you saw yesterday | They | Are | who is who | in this state |

These sentences typify “Hausa English”. In Hausa ontology, these sentences make sense to the Hausa speakers, but in the English language arena, they are clearly faulty. They are clear imposition of Hausa structural pattern on the English language. Habila has used these sentences on purpose to identify with his Hausa “siblings”, to highlight the disjointed and muddled life of LaMamo and to enhance the aesthetic flavour of his story.

Aligning themselves with the sentence structure of Systemic Functional Grammar, these sentences should be arranged thus:

- (1) They are medical workers.
- (2) The people attacked them.
- (3) The people you saw yesterday are the who is who in this state.

| | | | |
|------------------------------|----------|-----------------|---------------|
| S | P | C | A |
| They | Are | medical workers | |
| S | P | O | A |
| The people | Attacked | Them | |
| S | P | C | A |
| The people you saw yesterday | Are | the who and who | in this state |
| OR | | | |
| S | P | C | A |
| They | Are | who is who | in this state |

This type of structural inversion is common in oral discourses and it indicates Habila’s alliance with the grammatical structure of African oral tradition.

Lexical Transfer

Habila also laces his works with a lot of local words from Hausa language for a stylistic mode. Examples abound in the *Measuring Time*.

- Tuwo (P. 30) - rice pudding
- Buba (p. 75) - woman’s wrapper
- Langa langa (P. 83) - slim and tall/long person /object
- Baban riga - Men’s flowing cloth

This is an excellent instance of “Hausanizing” the English language or “Englishzing” the Hausa language. This is a way of showing his sense of local rootedness.

Conclusion

Habila cleverly exploits the resources of both written and oral modes of artistic interpretation. Particularly, he, just as other new generation writers, embellishes his

Measuring Time with African folklore traditions, Pidgin, Foreign and specialized terms, collocational deviant forms and inversion of syntactic rules to unearth the aridity, drought, emotional degeneration, disintegration, loss, exile, loneliness and hopelessness which characterize the fictional keti society, which is a paradigm or a template for Nigeria and indeed, Africa.

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