Exploring Textual Metafunction in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*: A Gender-Based Analysis of Female Roles in Contemporary African Society

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Abstract: This article aims at exploring Systemic functional grammar with an emphasis on textual meaning, in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*. Indeed, this is one of three meta-functions of language propounded by scholars like Halliday (1985a, 1989, 2004), Eggins (1994), Hasan (1996, 2009) for the study of language in terms of how it functions and how it is structured in a fictional / non-fictional text. The exploration of the grammar of textual meaning helps uncovering the deep messages conveyed in the selected extracts from the novel. In this regard this paper considers the selection of two extracts from the novel under study, thereafter applies the grammar of Theme / Rheme to them in the process of describing their meanings about the experiences, the social relationships between interactants as well as the rhetorical structure of their discourse. The very deep messages conveyed through the novel concern the colonial women and their changing roles in the society either they find themselves dealing with politics or as wives at home.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), grammar of textual meaning, theme patterns, patriarchy, assertiveness, gender issues.

1. Introduction

A lot has been written and is still being written about the way men take advantage of their sexual advances to settle domination over women. In this, women are portrayed as ignorant, non-assertive, less able, less skillful and less intelligent in male-centered discourses. In this perspective, Koussouhon (2009b) has noted that female experience is excluded in early male-authored texts. This social injustice perpetrated against women by patriarchy has given rise to gender theories such as dominance and difference approaches pioneered by Lakoff (1975), Montgomery (1995), Tannen (1986, 1990, 1994) to name but a few. But when women made their entry into the arena of writing from the sixties onwards, they have seen literature as a means of righting all the wrongs against them. They reject women’s subjugation, domination and exploitation in various ways. It is in this vein that Milicent Yengkangyi (2009: vii) in a move to scrutinize “Feminism in *Une si Longue Lettre* by Mariama Bâ and *Anowa* by Ama Ata Aidoo” contends that: “...since the emergence of African women writers in the negro-African literature, there has been an important transformation on the image of the African woman”. In fact, a handful of contemporary African female writers and male sympathizers as well have made a shift in their fictional oeuvres from the phallocentric perspective to the woman-centered perspective or to a blend of both, otherwise called the human-centered perspective. One of these writers is Akachi Ezeigbo, a contemporary Nigerian female writer.

This study then surveys Akachi Ezeigbo’s alignment along this trajectory and examines how she portrays, in her novel, assertive female characters that launch real fights against patriarchy and patriarchal prejudices so as to allow them have a say in the society. In this article, we attempt to apply the grammar of textual meaning to two excerpts extracted from Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones* in order to pinpoint the author’s new perception about female gender formerly dimmed by writings before sixties. The discussion deriving from the analyses will eventually reveals how
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Akachi Ezeigbo discloses the dialectical roles African women hold as an individual in the society and as a wife in their husband’s house.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

From previous works published in this field, SFL/SFG appears to be a useful analytic tool. Unlike other linguistic theories such as the Chomskyan theory, for instance, the SFG theory pays more attention to language (as a system and the way it functions) and culminates with establishing a relationship between language and social class in a given socio-cultural context. It is obvious from the foregoing that a text (written or spoken) is inextricably linked to a specific culture (Widdowson, 2004). Moreover, the same author contends that a text influences and is in turn influenced by the context surrounding its occurrence or production. Systemic scholars highlight three types of context, viz. context of culture (or genre), context of situation (or register) and context of ideology (Eggins, 1994).

Recently, some scholarly linguistic research works have been carried out on both fictional, real-life and non-fictional artefacts cf. Dooga, (2009); Koussouhon, (2009; 2009b); Cunanan, (2011); Koussouhon and Koutchadé, (2011); Treimane, (2011); Bilal, (2012); Koussouhon and Koukpossi, (2013); Koussouhon and Allagbé, (2013); Koussouhon and Dossoumou, (2014); Koussouhon, Akogbéto and Allagbé, (2014)…, etc. While some of these works explore such grammatical aspects as Transitivity, Mood and Theme which realise such semantic dimensions as Ideational/Experiential, Interpersonal and Textual Meanings or Metafunctions in texts, others are practically devoted to the exploration of contextual properties as Field, Tenor and Mode which lexico-grammatically enact the context (cultural, situational and ideological) within which patterns of meaning are negotiated in texts. To the best of our knowledge, none of these previous scholarships has explored the Textual Metafunction in Akachi Ezeigbo’s *The Last of the Strong Ones*.

The methodology chosen to carry out this study follows the principles of the qualitative method paradigm. In the process, the extracts have been selected from the novel, analyzed through the foregrounding of the various topical (unmarked/marked), textual, interpersonal, structural and multiple themes developed in the fictional text. The findings of the analysis are summarized and distributed in a table in order to facilitate their discussion. The keys used for the analyses read as follows: \([Th: Utp]\) = Unmarked topical theme; \([Th: Mtp]\) = Marked topical theme; \([Th: Str-tp]\) = Structural topical theme; \([Th: tx]\) = Textual theme; \([Th: Int]\)= Interpersonal theme; \([Th: Str]\)= Structural theme; \([Th: mpl]\)= multiple themes.

3. RESULTS

See full texts of the practical analysis of theme patterns in appendices.

The identification of the themes in each extract has been done in line with the keys suggested by scholars (Koussouhon & Allagbé, 2013; Koussouhon & Dossoumou, 2014) and systemicists especially Suzanne Eggins (2004).

Table 1 below displays the occurrence of the various theme types and their percentage in each of the two extracts

**Table 1. Distribution of Theme types in the extracts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme types</th>
<th>Extract 1</th>
<th>Extract 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topical</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarked</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>63.12%</td>
<td>61.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marked</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>08.12%</td>
<td>11.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>04.37%</td>
<td>02.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textual</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>15.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>05.62%</td>
<td>05.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>02</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>01.25%</td>
<td>11.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Themes</strong></td>
<td><strong>160</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above gives an account of the statistic distribution of theme types in the two extracts. As the practical thematic analysis exudes, the thematic analysis carried out in the extracts revealed a preponderance of topical themes in both extracts (i.e. 75.61% in extract 1 and 75.92% in extract 2). This entails that the extracts are over-topicalized. The over-topicalization of the extracts under study
entails that the issues discussed therein are topical and burning. The textual themes rank second in both extracts followed by interpersonal themes in the first and structural themes in the second. Structural themes in extract 1 and interpersonal themes in extract 2 come in last position. This ranking gives room for a critical analysis of the extracts.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE SALIENT LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE EXTRACTS

4.1. Critical Discussion of the Findings from Extract 1

The theme identified in this extract reveals that it includes a total of 160 themes. Out of this figure, one hundred and one (101, viz. 75.61%) are topical whatever their positions of unmarked, marked or structural. Twenty-eight (28, viz 17.5%) are textual; while nine (09, viz 05.62%) are interpersonal. The lowest number of theme identified is that of structural (02, viz. 01.25%). The thematic choice made by the author gives account of the way the main characters get organized to go against the colonizers’ imperial progression on their land. As a matter of fact, some names such as Ejimmaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme, Chibuka, some collective nouns such as Obuofo, Oluada, Kosiri to name but a few and some pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘they’ in extract1 account for most of the thematic distribution in the text. ‘We’ refers to the oluada, the top women representatives who meet at Ejimmaka’s house to decide about the attitude to be taken at their meeting with Obuofo (men representatives), and ‘they’ refers to the warrants chiefs whose presence beside the white man is seen as an act of betrayal. Kosiri may sound strange but it connotatively refers to the white man in general. This foregrounds that there is a clash between two people from different cultural backgrounds, which gives rise to the issues of violence, aggression, dominance and resistance demonstrated by the author through the novel and noted within the females’ idiolects. This is what explains the paucity of interpersonal themes in the extract. The predominance of textual themes in the extract suggests that the clauses are combined in a way to make a faithful account of the events.

By and large, this extract reveals women’s participation in the political life of their country. In fact, to avoid being merely decorative objects besides men, Umuga women get themselves into a well-structured association in vein of contributing to the political development of their country. If the whole chapter is considered, it would be read that two important decisions have been taken at the meeting. The first one is that: “…….oluada agreed to participate more intensively and vigorously in obuofo and continue to represent the women actively in the political body” (p.12). The second one is that: “Oluada refused to cooperate with any power or anyone that planned to undermine the culture, the traditional judicial system and the economic well-being of Umuga.”(p.12). These idiolects testify to women’s crusade against their traditional roles in the society by rivaling with men on political ground.

4.2. Critical Discussion of the Findings from Extract 2

It has been identified in this extract a total number of 185 themes. Out of this number, 125 (i.e.75.92%) are topical themes ranking first, 28 (i.e.15.13%) are textual themes, 21 (i.e. 11.35%) are structural themes and 11 (i.e. 05.94%) are interpersonal themes.

The use of the pronouns “I”, “he”, “they” in thematic position in this extract implies that there is a shift in the course of narration. “I” refers to Chibuka, the one narrating her own marital experience, “he” to her husband, Iheme, “you” refers to the other oluada members listening to her marital experience, and “they” to her parents. It is then clear that we are no longer in presence of the narration of the cultural clash between Umuga people and the Kosiri but the narration of the ups and downs of marital life. The recurrent use of the pronoun “I” serving as the point of departure of most clauses in this text suggests that most of what is said is about Chikuba. She is the one that is listened to and the listeners’ attention is required. This strategy used by the author goes back to the old days when some middle-aged people display their folksy wisdom to pass on audience cultural and traditional values through folk tales to educate young ones. This technique shows the linguistic complexity used by the author in the novel which draws all its artistic value from the recollection of past events. The relationship to the previous extract is that the author makes a breach into the life of oluada to disclose the readers what marriage used to be in Africa before the arrival of the colonizers and how women were treated within the couple. The analysis made of all this suggests that colonization has not brought much change to women’s already devastating situation.
All in all, we are here in presence of a female character that contributes to the political life of her country through oluada but has been ill-treated by her husband in the past. This is a paradox associated with female gender in African society. While African women re-create or re-examine themselves in the light of political and economic independence, their marital situation remains controversial and depends on the man they are associated with. By getting into association, they make themselves instruments to be used to mobilize people on this way of victimizing women within marital settings.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To sum up, this article has used systemic functional grammar as the backbone to shed light on the way the author encodes meanings in her novel. The practical analysis carried out therein has explored the grammar of textual meaning in two extracts. The data stemming from the linguistic description has been discussed against the backdrop of African feminist guidelines. As the analysis exudes, the almost equal proportion of occurrence of interpersonal themes in the two extracts (05.62% and 05.94%) is indicative of how gender equity should be henceforth observed in social interactions, including workload sharing, between men and women. Womanhood should no longer be regarded as a handicap preventing women from accessing high-level professional and social positions and subsequently inflicting some predicaments on them. Nor shall it be validated against some outdated, de-facing and degrading social schisms. This has been profusely illustrated by the recurrent use of names, ad hoc description and recoverable references in the selected extracts.

The identification of theme types corroborates the message the author conveys through the novel. In the light of the linguistic application carried out in the novel drawing on the grammar of textual meaning, our study displays the dominance of topical themes in both extracts. This linguistic salient feature displays a number of elements in thematic position and as such foregrounds the message conveyed through the novel. The organization of the message has allowed us to understand that language has been structured to make meanings about women during the colonial period, on the one hand, and the issues related to their marital status, on the other hand. In fact, during that period, women have taken active part in the resistance against the colonizers’ settlement besides men so as to preserve the distortion of Umuga cultural values. Here we see some assertive women with dominant speech features committed to contribute to the political life of their natal home. The gender roles assigned is reversal to women’s language characterization Lakoff identifies as being unassertive, tentative or trivial. However, the way these female leaders are treated within couple life implies that African feminism still has battles to win. African female writers have recently understood that African feminism need not be oppositional to men (Ogundipe Leslie, 1994:225). Here women are seen in a position of subordination with a possibility of rejecting men’s domination over them or negotiating to unburden and off-load those patriarchal prejudices weighting over them. It is then to be understood that African female writers are taking optimistic view about change by creating Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka Obioma, 1999) or Snail-sense feminism (Akachi Ezeigbo, 2002) which calls for negotiation, cooperation and dialogue with patriarchy for an improvement of women’s conditions not only in the society but also in their marital settings.

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Appendices

Theme analysis in extract 1 (pp.4-8)

Before dawn [Th: Mtp], we [Th: Utp] had gathered at Ejimnaka’s house for a meeting of oluada. The message dispatched to each of us [Th: Utp] had been urgent and unambiguous. We [Th: Utp] had been told to be there by the first cockcrow. We [Th: Utp] were the first to arrive, my fellow observer and myself. Ejimnaka [Th: Utp] was already up and about, arranging chairs in front of her hut. We [Th: Utp] could not see her face clearly in the twilight. The prevailing dimness [Th: Utp] was still pervasive. However [Th: tx], we [Th: Utp] recognized her figure. Its solidity and comeliness [Th: Utp] arrested our attention. Though [Th: tx] she [Th: Utp] was middle-aged, she [Th: Utp] had the figure of a younger woman.

“Dee Nne,” we [Th: Utp] greeted, accepting the chairs she offered.


“Dee Nne,” she [Th: Utp] said, encompassing us with her greeting. She [Th: Utp] was carrying a water-pot.


She [Th: Utp] positioned the pot on her head and [Th: tx] tilted it fully so that [Th: tx] it [Th: Utp] lay on its side. She [Th: Utp] walked away, her right hand grasping delicately the gaping mouth of the pot to prevent it from falling.


“Kosiri [Th: Utp] have brought us nothing but trouble,” Chibuka [Th: Utp] put in, shaking her head. Her head-dress [Th: Utp], made from some coarse cloth, came undone, revealing her thick grey hair. She [Th: Utp] gathered the two loose ends from her shoulders and [Th: tx] quickly wound and [Th: tx] tied them round her head.


“Who right you are, daughter of Umuga,” said Chibuka, turning to Chieme. The guest who turns rude and aggressive [Th: Utp] will surely leave the host’s with a bruised body...”


**Theme analysis in extract 2 (pp.132-136)**


Iheme, my suitor [Th: Utp], did not believe in prolonged marriage negotiations. He [Th: Utp] prepared to be in a hurry and [Th: tx] wanted to complete the ceremonies in the shortest time. However [Th: tx], my parents [Th: Utp] insisted that [Th: str] things [Th: Utp] had to be done according to custom. The First time [Th: Mtp] I [Th: Utp] was sent to him and his people for familiarization visit, I [Th: Utp] got to know that [Th: str] //both his parents [Th: Utp] were dead. He [Th: Utp] lived all alone in a big compound. His sister [Th: Utp] had to come from her own home to stay with us during my visit. She [Th: Utp] was like a watchdog, solely there to ensure that [Th: str] Iheme [Th: Utp] did not take me to bed.


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