

A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of *Helon Habila's Oil On Water*

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Abstract

This study, 'A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of *Helon Habila's Oil on Water*' examines how meaning is negotiated through the use of some cohesive devices in the text. Previous studies have concentrated on the treatment of environmental issues without much attention paid to how cohesive devices are coalesced in the text to produce meaning. Data for the analysis range from page one to one hundred of the primary text, *Oil on Water*. Also, the study focused on a qualitative research procedure and adopted Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesion theory as a theoretical model, since this work focuses attention on the deployment of the writer's mental schemata and use of lexical choices to affect meaning in a text. The study observes that words cannot stand in isolation, as they are related to each other in a text to produce predetermined meaning. This was achieved through the author's careful use of some cohesive devices such as: reiteration, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy and meronymy, which improve the textual quality of the text. The study concludes that, the author through the use of cohesive devices made reading of the text meaningful and easily understood by the reader.

Keywords: *Lexico-Semantics, Lexical Choice, Textuality and Effective Communication.*

Introduction

The choice of words determines to a very large extent the peculiarities of most fields of study. In an attempt to communicate to a group of people, individuals make recourse to a wide range of vocabulary items. This explains why Malgwi (2009) posits that anyone who uses a language knows the importance of vocabulary for effective communication. The idea of choice of words presupposes the inevitability of selection (Malgwi, 2009, p.84).

According to Essien (1983, p.11), "language is the thing with which we can best imagine, create, aspire, desire, feel and express our soul, enlarge our mental horizon and fulfill all that man is capable of". Language provides the individual with a tool for the exploration and analysis of his conceptual ideas and this is what distinguishes and gives humans a unique position in the world.

Edem (2005, p.14) maintains that one of the most important roles of human language is its role as a means of communication or interaction between members of the society. The source further notes that language helps man to establish social relations and other forms of network (See Edem 2022, p.1 and Oyeleye 2005,p.5).

Eyoh (2005, p.29) asserts that "every writer makes his own choices on the language he wants to use as well as how to use them". These choices constitute their style. In this case, style refers to the linguistic signature, stamp or the print of a writer and signifies the man. Linguists have generally agreed that the acceptable theory of grammar must have a fair component of phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics which deals with meaning of words and sentences. Therefore, this research focuses on lexical semantics as an aspect of

style in the semantics of language.

Lexical semantics also known as lexico-semantics, is a subfield of linguistic studies. The units of analysis in lexical semantics are lexical units which include not only words but also sub-words or units such as affixes and even compound words and phrases. Lexical semantics looks at how the meaning of the lexical units correlates with the structure of the language or syntax. This is referred to as syntax-semantic interface. The study of lexical semantics simply looks at: the classification and decomposition of lexical items, the difference and similarities in lexical semantic structure and the relationship of lexical meaning to sentence meaning and syntax. Geeraerts (2010) affirms that “the first stage in the history of lexical semantics runs from 1830 to 1930. The lexical semantics as an academic discipline in its own right originated in the early nineteenth century, but that does not mean that matters of word meaning had not been discussed earlier” (p.2).

Fundamentally, a writer taps from and exploits the vast resources of language for his imaginative creations. Lexical items help the writer to crystallize his thoughts, express certain emotions and create images all of which give literature its peculiar expressive beauty. This unique quality of a writer is best captured by Edem (2023) when he said, The author through the fecundity of his mental construct uses some lexical and semantic features to create meaning and cohesive elements in the text. The author achieves this through his effective deployment of words which create a heightened effect and originality in the text among his readers...

The author's lexical wealth and his proper usage, facilitates meaning sharing, cohesion and textual quality of the novel which provide ample opportunity for the core themes in the text to be foregrounded in the psyche of the people (Edem 2023, p.45).

In this regard, writers depend on lexical items and their connotative implications to convey their intended messages. Therefore, the writer must choose appropriate words to effectively convey the intended message and also to achieve aesthetic effect. This is clearly inevitable from the premise that a writer must use linguistic resources imaginatively to have the desired effect on the reader/audience. Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between 'Langue' and 'Parole' is particularly relevant here, in the sense that while langue refers to the abstract signifying system of given speech community which precludes a specific user's application in a concrete context, parole means the particular uses of this system that speakers and writers make on this or that occasion (Leech and Short, 1981, p.10). Wales (2001) adds that a language user is free to select features from available resources of language at his/her disposal and the choice is partly conditioned by the demands of genre, form or theme (or discourse). This explains why writers make lexical choices with great care to achieve the delicate target of conveying the intended meaning in a given context in the best possible way. In fact, an artistic effort must fuse words, meaning and imaginativeness in language use.

According to Beaugrande (1997, p.21), “the engine of language is to generate or convey meaning”. Lexical semantics is very critical to language or textual analysis in the sense that it encapsulates various shades of meaning which include denotation and connotation that is, emotive, social, figurative or transferred and contextual meanings, among others. However, it is imperative to underline the fact that lexical choices become meaningful only on concrete or pragmatic situations or contexts. According to Malinowski (1926), the text is extremely important but without the context, it remains lifeless. Alabi (2008, p.254) contends that:

...textual selection is largely constrained by context. Context in this regard is both a theoretical and socio-physical or non-physical or

circumstances surrounding a discourse. The choices a language user makes become meaningful and distinctive only when they are used under 'unique' and 'appropriate' situations.

This work sets out to examine the relationship that exists between lexical items in the text, identify lexico-semantic features created by the author through his mental schemata. It further examined the functions of the lexical cohesive devices used in the text and how these devices improve the textual quality of the text under consideration.

The goal of the study is to create the envisaged awareness of how language works in literary texts and also its usefulness not only to the students and teachers, but also to other researchers especially in the area of language and literature.

Words and Meaning

There is a very close relation between the meaning and the word. Word, as a matter of fact, is the messenger that transfers the meaning from one mind or person to others. Akinola (2017, p.94) asserts that 'meaning' is important to the concept of text because in judging whether there is texture or not in a text, we have recourse to some feelings about how much the sentences do actually interrelate in meaning. It is the cohesion that makes the meaning of element interpretable. They went further to add that cohesion is inevitable where the interpretation of any item in the text requires making reference to some other items in the text.

Meaning, according to Ikpotokin (2017, p.21), requires the words. Without words, they would only be a part of imagination. Meaning is the struggle of human mind and thinking to understand the world and the different phenomena in the world. It is the framework through which the human mind interacts with the world. Without this framework, it is very difficult to comprehend the world and its logic. The relationship of words and meaning is so strong that sometimes it is not easy for most of the people to see them separately. They walk hand in hand in the process of communication and can be termed as "twin brothers". However, it should be noticed that sometimes they may resemble each other to a large extent but at other times may be totally different from each other. To understand the gap between the meaning and the words, it is important to understand the process of communication. As a first step of communication, meaning emerges in the mind; then a word or set of word is chosen for the meaning and then those words are communicated to the second mind. The second mind receives the words, not the meanings. Now, the receiving mind derives the meaning from the words and then responds to that meaning, which completes the process of communication. When the meaning is transformed into words, it can be termed as encoding (see Udofot 1992, p.24, Udofot 1998, p.22)

Cohesion

Cohesion is one of the text properties that contribute to the organization of discourse. Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of one element is dependent upon another in the text. It provides continuity that exists between one part of a text and another. That makes it possible for readers or listeners to rely on the continuity provided by cohesion to fill in the missing information, which are present in the text but necessary to its interpretation. Cohesion refers to the "semantic ties" within the text whereby a tie (a link) is established when there is some dependent connection between items combined to create meaning. The implication is that "the interpretation of a discourse element is dependent on another element that can be pointed out in discourse" (Renkema 2004, p.40). According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), who laid the foundation for text linguistics, the configuration of

cohesion makes as well as defines text. Cohesion constitutes the semantic, lexico grammatical and structural resources of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion.

Lexical Cohesion

Aboh and Uduk (2017, p.99) assert that, “lexical cohesion refers to the semantic network of the lexical elements in the text. Lexical cohesion has been considered the central device for making texts hang together experientially. It is different from others in that it is non-grammatical. McCarthy (1991) as cited in Hung and Thu (2014, p.3) states that lexical cohesion involves the repetition of a noun phrase or the use of another noun phrase which bears a relation to the antecedent noun phrase. It has two main types: reiteration and collocation. Reiteration is either restating an item in a later part of discourse by direct repetition or reasserting its meaning by exploiting lexical relations. Collocation pertains to lexical items that are likely to be found together within the same text or they tend to occur within the same lexical environment (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). Halliday and Hassan write that lexical cohesion refers to the “cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary” (1976, p.274).

Previous Related Works

In recent years, pundits and critics have paid much attention to the text basing their arguments on the environmental issues embedded in their works. Simon et al (2014) discussed “Environmental Degradation, Militancy/Kidnapping and Oil Theft in *Oil on Water*” and the attendant effect on the poor masses. Etuk and Okon (2018) examine language and ideology in Jeta Amata's *Black November* and concluded that, the different ideological inclination used by the major actors in the movie is as a result of the socio-cultural, economic and political factors prevalent in the society in which the movie is set. Also, Koussouhon and Dossoumou (2015) while Exploring Ideation Metafunction in Helon Habila's *Oil on Water: “A Re-evaluation and Redefinition of African Women's Personality and Identity Through Literature”* asserted that Helon Habila encodes journalistic experience through meanings to create, adopt and manage a gender-balanced and womanist perspective in the novel. Edem (2022) examines “Stylistico-Semantic Study of *Eyoh Etim's Virtual Chants*” and avers that, most writers who are style imbued intentionally borrow or deviate from the conventional way of writing, in order to capture the main thrust or hidden message intended.

From the above discussion, it could be seen that these scholars paid much attention on ecological, stylistics and gender issues raised in the texts studied. However, not much attention, to my knowledge, has been paid to the Lexico-semantic aspect of Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* which is the main focus of this paper. Ikpotokin (2017) however, looks at the Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which showcases how the writer deploys lexical items and lexical semantic structures in her work and how both help the reader to understand the cultural and historical ideology behind the text as well as appreciating her style. But the present study is similar to Ikpotokin's because they both examine lexico-semantic analysis of literary texts but differs in outlook, theoretical framework and data. Also the major concern is not on style which Ikpotokin's work dwells on, but rather the focus of the present study is to determine how lexical cohesion is achieved in the text under reference.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis for this research analysis is cohesion theory by Halliday and Hassan

(1976). The theory is suitable for this study because it is concerned with the relationship that exists between lexical items in texts. A text is cohesive when the elements are tied together and considered meaningful to the reader. Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of one item depends on the other. Cohesion is not only concerned with grammar, but also with vocabulary. Hence it is divided into grammatical and lexical but the concern of this work is on lexical cohesion.

Lexical cohesion develops into a cohesive claim through entire text by choosing different words to set up textual continuity. According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), the lexical cohesion is the most important part that contributes to the textual cohesion for it occupies forty percent of the total cohesive devices. Etuk and Urujzian (2019) assert that lexical cohesion has the following as its main kinds: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, meronymy and collocation.

Research Design

In this work, interpretive design is adopted.

Method of Data Selection

The cluster sampling technique was adopted to collect data for this study. This technique was best suitable for the study because it gives room to study large spread out populations since doing so individually would be costly and time consuming or impossible. It allows creation of clusters with a smaller representation of the population being assessed with similar characteristics (<https://www.scribbr.com>).

Data Analysis/Results

Lexical cohesion occurs when there is an established connection between words and how they cluster to establish lexical sets of strings. The following kinds of lexical cohesion: repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy and collection will be examined in the text under study to access the writer's purpose or core concern.

Repetition

Repetition is the consistent use of words to achieve a particular aim. As a cohesive device, repetition involves the use of the same word or phrase for emphasis or embellishment (Etuk and Urujzian 2019, p.80).

Excerpts One (1)

- Blue and green and blue-green misty (1)
- Appearing and disappearing (1)
- Wait till we are a bit surer of where we are! We could be lost you know... (1)
- They were wet from water spray coming off the sides of the boat (5)
- As we went deeper and deeper upriver, and farther and farther away from the sea (6)
- Stone, steps, stopping often to catch our breath (7)
- Rest-red roofs that formed this tiny river side village (10)
- Appeared and disappeared (5)
- You lucky, lucky boys always lucky from the day you were born (17)
- Zak's anger disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared (27)
- Sitting side by side, both of us having given up on sleep (28)
- Slowly sank out of sight (44)

- So, where were we, who is next?

Analysis of Excerpts One (1)

There is a clear repetition of some words, initial consonants and phrases in the texts. Habila employs these to create linguistic effects in the text. For instance, in excerpt one “After a while, the sky and the water and the dense foliage on the riverbanks all looked the same: blue and green and blue-green misty”. This sentence is repeated to create effect on the readers' mind and to picture how the sky and the water on the riverbanks look like. In the sentence, “they were wet from water spray coming off the sides of the boat”, initial consonant sound /w/ is repeated in the line of the words. “Deeper and deeper upriver and farther and farther up sea”, here, the sounds /d/ and /f/ are repeated. These words are used to show an extent to which Zaq and Rufus went into the river. Initial consonant sound /s/ is repeated often in lines of sentences below:

- Stone, step, stopping to catch our breath
- Sitting side by side, both of us having given up on sleep.
- Slowly sank out of sight (7).

There is a picture of how the villages in the riverside look like when the author makes use of these words: “Rust-red roofs that formed this thing riverside village”. Appearing and disappearing is repeated often in the text like in pages (1), (15) and (27) for emphasis and to create a special effect among readers as well as sustain interest.

Synonyms

Synonymy is a cohesive device that means similarity of meaning. It is a situation where two or more words express similar meanings. That is, where two or more words are closely related such that one can substitute for, or, be used instead of the other. The following are some of the instances of synonymy used in the text:

Excerpts Two (2)

- Wet and water spray (5)
- Looking/gaze (5)
- Camps and tents (6)
- A kind of despair, a lack of energy (30)
- Wanderers without a home (39)
- Paradise/small village (38)

Analysis of Excerpts Two (2)

“Wet/water”. This is used to describe what made Zaq and Rufus got wet, they got wet because of water spray coming from the sides of the boat.

Looking/gaze has a similar meaning. The author uses the words to illustrate how Mr. Rufus and the boy exchanged facial contacts when the boy was lost in thought: “The boy saw me looking at him and returned my gaze without self-consciousness”. There is an instance of synonym in the sentence, camps/tents used interchangeably in the line, “...locations of their camps, because their lives depended on that, and on the ability to pick up their tents...” And in the sentence, “A kind of despair/a lack of energy”, has a similar meaning. This is used to describe the kind of situation Zaq was at this point in time. It aids in the understanding of the scenario that took place in the text or helping the reader to visualize or have a mental picture of what transpired at the scene of the incident.

Antonymy – Antonyms are words which are opposite in meaning.

Excerpts Three (3)

- Adventure/misadventure
- Move/stop
- Appeared and disappeared (15, 27)
- The boy/the girl (25)
- Dirty/white (46)
- Light/darkness (62)
- Buy/sell (71)
- Good/bad (107)
- Men/women (107)
- Life/death (16)

Analysis of Excerpts Three (3)

The adventure/misadventure here in this page means two different things depending on the context of situation. The adventure here for Rufus signifies something good about the experience, while the misadventure again signifies the hardship, the storm he went through during the process of investigation. Using “move/stop” in the text provides the meaning that the journey was full of obstacles and setbacks. In “Appeared and Disappeared”, this is used to show the presence and absence of the girl who brought food for them. This device helps in holding the text and making it meaningful and aids in the cohesive ability and understanding of the text and how words are related to each other in a sentence.

Hyponymy

This refers to an umbrella term used in referring to class membership. The items which constitute the class are referred to as co-hyponyms. For example, the lily, the frangipani and the rose are flowers.

Excerpts Four (4)

- Blue and green and blue-green (1)
- Cooking pots, water pots (7)
- Women and children (10)
- Soap and detergents, tin of sardines, tins of milk and packs of biscuits (10)
- Bamboos and Raffia, palms, plywood (10)
- Pots and pans (24)
- The blue shirt, the black and white (29)
- Red and white (29)
- Green and red (30)
- The chairs and table and filing cabinets had the same look (30)
- Deaf, dumb and blind (34)
- Orange and peak colour (16)
- Living room, kitchen, bedroom, corridor (61)
- Green shirt and blue trousers (67)

Analysis of Excerpts Four (4)

In excerpts four above, (1) blue and green and blue-green, are hyponyms of colour,

while blue, blue-green and green are co-hyponyms of colour. “Cooking pots, water pot (7) and pans” (24) are co-hyponyms of utensil.

“Women and children” are the hyponyms of “human being” as seen in the text because there is a relationship between the two. In the words, Bamboos and Raffia palms, plywood; there is a relationship among these items because woods are used in building a hut in the text. The umbrella term for it, is wood which is superordinate term. In the sentence, “The chairs and tables and filing cabinets had the same look”, here, the words: Tables, Chairs and Cabinets are related to each other and they are in the family whose head is furniture. Also, “Deaf, Dump and Blind” are co-hyponyms of impairment which is the umbrella term of Deaf, Dump and Blind, as the author captures in the sentence, “The only way they could avoid being crushed out of existence was to pretend to be deaf, dump and blind” (34). These examples of hyponyms are used to show the relationship of inclusion where small items are a part of the larger set, thereby achieving cohesion and making the text meaningful.

Meronymy

A relation of meronymy is established when either a lexical item is presented as a whole, followed by a lexical or a group of lexical items regarded as a part of that lexical or when the sequence is reversed in which the part is succeeded by the whole. In semantics, a meronym is a word that denotes a constituent part or a member of something. For example, apple is a meronym of apple tree. This part-to-whole relationship is called meronymy

Excerpts Five (5)

1. The whole body

Biting our arms, face and ears (8)

Analysis of Excerpts Five (5)

The whole here is “Body”: arms, face and ears are related to each other. This statement signifies that the insect bit their whole body. Using part to represent a whole, helps in achieving cohesion in the sentence and improves the textual quality of the work.

Collocation

Aboh and Uduk (2017, p.101) aver that collocation refers primarily to the sense of a connected discourse created by the close co-occurrence or relatively low frequency words that tend to appear in similar contexts. Collocation deals with the relationships between words on the basis that these often occur in the same surroundings. Collocations are words that agree together and co-occur more often than would be expected by chance.

Excerpts Six (6)

- I was wet cold and hungry (1)
- Shoes, shirts and trousers (9)
- The blue shirt, the black and white striped tie: the well-polished black shoe (29)
- Whispering, winking, hissing (41)
- Smoked and drank ogogoro almost non-stop (65)
- Cleaning the office in the morning, washing the editor's car once a week, running errands (65)
- Hawkers, fishermen and market women (65)
- Dress in suits, ties and softy city shoes (67)
- Bush, broken and twisted (72)
- Broader, glossier, racier, cockier

Analysis of Excerpts Six (6)

In the text, “I was wet, cold and hungry” is used to elucidate the state of the speaker and to achieve cohesion in the text. “The blue shirt, the black-white striped tie, the well-polished black shoe”, all occur in the same surrounding and are mutually inclusive in a person's dressing.

Discussion of Findings

It is discovered from the data analysed in this work that, words cannot stand in isolation. There is a harmonious relationship between words in the text, and these help in achieving cohesion in Habila's *Oil on Water*. Using Halliday and Hassan Cohesion Theory (1976) as the basis for the analysis, hyponyms is the dominant cohesive devices used in the text, which is used to create a relationship between words in the text. Other cohesive devices such as: synonyms, antonyms and meronymy to a large extent also aided in cohesion, effective communication and above all, improve on the textual quality of the work. Our findings also reveal that the author's careful word patterning which is as a result of his mental schemata creates a synergy, suspense and sustains reader's interest in Habila's *Oil on Water*.

Conclusion

The study has helped to spotlight the fact that cohesion constitutes the bits and pieces of language which are combined meaningfully for linguistic expression and human communication to be realized. The critical point is that meaning is a distinctive element of language and consequently plays a key role in the production of a literary text as a form of human communication. The study has also helped to call attention to the fact that the construction of a literary text (or any other text) is a conscious or deliberate process; hence, any meaningful linguistic construct achieved through the mental schemata of the writer, is a product of a deliberate patterning of lexical choices within a specific contextual framework, which facilitates effective communication.

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