

## Nigerian Poetry: A Systemic Functional Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*Within the vast landscape of Nigerian literature, evolving into three principal literary genres, the critical study of poetry has been somewhat neglected, especially when contrasted with the substantial analysis devoted to drama and novels. This is partially attributed to the language used in poetry, its nature which is steep in semantic indirection and its method of pedagogy which often problematizes its appreciation. This study contributes to the study of poetry by exploring Nigerian poetry within the tenets of M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic, and qualitative and descriptive design. The analysis focuses on a selected corpus of written Nigerian poetry in the English language, by Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Psalms Chinaka, and Obari Gomba, which spans the oeuvres of three distinct generations and serve as exemplars of their respective generations. The study provides valuable insights into the significance of language, the evolution of Nigerian poetry, and its styles and functions. It is supported by tangible examples that showcase various elements, such as cohesion, deviation, and code-mixing. It offers a crucial understanding that the use of English in Nigerian poetry is not just a colonial legacy. It is a choice shaped by postcolonial reality. Its deployment is not incidental but a deliberate act of appropriation, protest, and a call for change. This is by the amplification of the voices of marginalized groups within Nigerian society such that language as a socio-semiotic system is deployed to tackle multifaceted issues that plague Nigerian society. The study submits that there is a nuanced tapestry of ideological and stylistic dialogue that connects and differentiates the first, second, and third generations of Nigerian poets. This intergenerational dialogue highlights a continuum of thematic and aesthetic concerns, with notable shifts reflecting the evolving socio-political landscape of Nigeria.*

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### 1. Introduction

A considerable number of contemporary Nigerian poetry is written in the English language today. However, it is important to note that Nigerian poets also express themselves in other indigenous languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Izon, Efik, and Ibibio. While the use of the English language has gained acceptance in Nigerian literature, it is pertinent to note that it is not the only language through which Nigerian poets express themselves. Functionally, the English language only offers a decolonial and postcolonial ideational role as a broader platform for literary expression that might not be achievable with indigenous languages. The implication of the foregoing is that Nigerian poets use English not only to demonstrate their proficiency but also as a means to represent their historical consciousness, and political concerns, or to capture the cultural experience of people in new linguistic garments.

For instance, a Yoruba person armed with the Yoruba language can recreate their world using the Yoruba lexicon, just as an Igbo or Izon person can do the same with their respective languages. When a Yoruba man comes across a word written in Yoruba in Soyinka's poems, he can easily process the information. However, an Igbo man who may not be familiar with the Yoruba language will be handicapped by this linguistic gap and would need a Yoruba translator. This is why people get excited when they hear their language being spoken or written. Although there is still a debate among scholars on the origin of language and its utilitarian value in solving problems, it cannot be overemphasized that language use is a signature of human progress.

The use of the English language in Nigerian poetry has been stylistically domesticated in a way that it is influenced by Nigerian sensibilities, worldviews, and innovation. Chinweizu et al., (1980) refer to this process as “a deliberate and calculated process of syncretism” (see *Towards the Decolonisation...* 239). This process values contributions from various cultures and employs inventive genius to create a healthy and distinct linguistic synthesis. This linguistic design performs several semiotic functions such as enabling Nigerian poets to recollect the past, make critical observations, participate in present events, talk about the future and make sense of written expression. This underscores the socio-semiotic role and power of language in Nigerian communities. Thus, whether you are in the palace of the Alaafin of Oyo, the Oba of Benin, or within the streets of Port Harcourt, Lagos, or Suleja, individuals who are skilled in the art of language are highly regarded. This is why village town criers, bards, and oral-literary sages, who served as interpreters, secretaries, and custodians of history in traditional kings' courts, are respected. In modern times, On-Air Personalities, Masters of Ceremonies, rappers, and spoken word artists are recognized as experts in word combinations and repertoires of the oral or scripted history of a community.

Language usage is so essential in literature, especially in poetry because a poet's use of language underwrites how images are conjured, and readers are inspired for social action and national thinking (Aswad et al., 2019; Rahman, 2016; Sukmawaty et al., 2022). This language use could captivate, attract, enchant, and appeal, whether it is phonic (sound features like tone, stress, rhyme, rhythm, and onomatopoeia) or orthographic (written form such as images and symbols) (Zakaria et al., 2021; Yaumi et al., 2023; Andini et al., 2022; Yaumi et al., 2024). Because of the significant role of language in constructing human experience, it becomes crucial to note that when analyzing a poem, language usage is one of the significant factors to consider. Poems such as “Hurray for Thunder” by Christopher Okigbo, “A Song for Ajegunle” by Niyi Osundare, “For Every Home Land” by Obari Gomba, or “Thoughts of a Daughter” by Margaret Fafa Nutsupko demonstrate the power of language in inspiring social change and national progress.

In the past, poetry was highly regarded and considered as the primary literary form. It is as ancient as human existence. Even drama, as we know it today, was essentially a theatrical representation of poetry during the classical era of Cicero, Demetrius, Bede, and Quintilian who delved into the intricacies of language craftsmanship in poetry within the Euro-Western tradition. And in Africa, poetry is deeply ingrained in the communal spirit and resilience. In contemporary times, it is still difficult to define poetry as it keeps evolving using language with rhythm to imitate life through the use of metaphors, similes, and symbols. Poetry is also known for its brevity, which makes it complex, as it says a lot in a few words, without requiring an extensive use of words like in prose and drama. Poets have the freedom to choose words from a finite set of vocabulary to create stanzas with lines. This convention is evident in both written and performed poems.

In reading or performance of poetry, there is its universal presence, unlike the novel, which is a relatively modern invention responding to bourgeois ideals in the face of modernity. This quality transcends cultural boundaries; a characteristic inherent in mankind- the capacity to spread and take new forms. Today, it thrives as a vibrant artistic enterprise, evident in the emergence of various spoken word groups and young poets who have authored numerous poetry collections. Understanding poetry necessitates a meticulous examination of its language for students delving into this literary genre. The collocation principle, where words are strategically placed side by side, becomes a focal point. Essential inquiries should arise: Why did the poet choose specific words, and what prompts their repetition? The analyst should also be alert to the selection of a title for scrutiny, as its connection to the poem's theme is pivotal. The analyst should also be open to connections in the word choices which point to a potential correlation between a poet's personal experiences and the poem's message, as well as identifying societal or historical underpinnings, enhances comprehension. There must also be a need to unravel the voices within a poem, whether singular or multiple personas and discern the intended audience to further elucidate its context. These inquiries serve as contextual clues, dispelling the notion that poetry and its analysis are inherently challenging.

Interestingly, the assumed complexity of poetry apart from its compressed form of saying so much in a few words, can also be a result of its semantic indirection. This is why a close look and analysis of poetry would reveal its semantic indirection. This is why it can be interpreted from many perspectives. The literal meaning of the words is just one interpretation; there may also be a deeper, connotative layer of meaning that can be revealed. The way a poem sounds, including its meter, rhyme, alliteration, and other sound elements, can also contribute to different interpretations. To understand these aspects, it is important to have a good grasp of phonetics and phonology to understand how the poet's voice: accent and attitude, tone, can construe meaning. The ideas shared here underscore poetry as a complex puzzle realized through language.

Thus, language, while serving a universal communicative purpose, exhibits a unique and identifiable pattern within the genre of poetry, distinguishing it from its use in prose or drama. Echetebeh (1988) highlights this distinction, noting that the application of language in poetry is markedly different from its use in prose or drama (11). A defining feature of poetic style, absent in prose or drama, is the strategic use of brevity and the structuring of stanzas. This concise use of language, a hallmark of poetic style, plays a critical role in either enriching or diminishing the craft. Chinweizu and colleagues further illuminate this point, arguing that when language and style compromise the integrity of a poetic work, they obstruct the audience's understanding (164). Specific questions are posed in this study such as how can Nigerian poetry be identified and whether it possesses identifiable features that set it apart from the poetic traditions of other nations. To what extent does it share commonalities with the poetry of these diverse nations? What are the unique aesthetic designs that define the craft of Nigerian poetry?

## **2. Methodology**

There are various ways to approach Nigerian poetry. One perspective is to consider it geographically, as the poetic expression of individuals either within or outside the geography of Nigeria, who aim to represent Nigerian experiences. However, this view risks oversimplifying the distinctiveness of poetry that originates from nations within Nigeria before the country's formation in 1914. Another way to understand Nigerian poetry is through a linguistic approach called Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL is a theory of language that believes language is a social semiotic system designed for communication. Developed by Michael Halliday in the late 20th century, it offers tools for analyzing how texts achieve meaning in specific contexts. SFL proposes that language has three functions: ideational (representing experiences and the external world), interpersonal (enacting social relationships and identities), and textual (organizing language into coherent messages). These functions are realized through different linguistic choices at the levels of grammar, vocabulary, and discourse.

The systemic functional linguistic (SFL) framework is a valuable tool for analyzing Nigerian poetry and other works of literature. This is especially true given the cultural and linguistic diversity of Nigeria. By examining how Nigerian poets use language to construct and express cultural identities, the ideational function of language can offer insights into the diverse cultural landscapes of Nigeria. SFL also enables researchers to explore how Nigerian poetry engages with social issues, critiques societal norms, and positions itself and its readers in relation to themes such as colonialism, post-colonialism, gender, power, and inequality. This can reveal the role of poetry in societal conversations and resistance.

In the context of Nigerian poetry, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) helps to uncover the diverse nature of languages present, which includes not only English but also multiple local languages and Pidgin. This provides a rich ground for SFL analysis, highlighting how poets blend and navigate these linguistic resources to create unique poetic voices and how these choices contribute to meaning-making and identity construction within the poems. SFL also provides insights into how Nigerian poets manipulate generic conventions and textual structures to suit specific communicative purposes and contexts, which includes structuring poems to appeal to, challenge or communicate with specific audiences, and how they fit into broader literary and cultural traditions. It is an excellent tool for education, particularly in enhancing reading comprehension and writing skills. By applying SFL to analyze Nigerian poetry within educational settings, teachers can help students appreciate the complexity of poetic texts, understand the nuanced ways in which language shapes meaning, and develop their own critical and creative writing abilities.

In this context, it encompasses the poetry of those residing in the areas amalgamated by the British into Nigeria. Thus, poetry from diverse linguistic communities such as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Kanuri, Efik, Ikwere, Izon, or Ibibio can be considered Nigerian poetry. However, the allegiance to Nigeria as a nation and citizenship becomes a determining factor, as individuals from groups like the Hausas in Cameroon or Yorubas in the Benin Republic may not identify their poetry as Nigerian due to their lack of allegiance to the nation. Examining the historical roots of Nigerian poetry further, it can be classified as either traditional or modern, depending on its oral or written form. Regardless of the classification, Nigerian poetry has consistently served as a crucial medium for communicating the oral history of its people, relaying the latest village gossip, and portraying the diverse social realities confronting the nation. Themes and styles add additional layers to the understanding of Nigerian poetry, encompassing a broad spectrum from cultural nationalism, the impact of war, the challenges faced by women, migrant experiences, environmental degradation, and leadership failures, to the effects of globalization and syncretism in the twenty-first century. In essence, Nigerian poetry serves as a dynamic means of articulating and representing the multifaceted facets of the Nigerian experience.

### 3. Result and Discussion

Traditional poetry in Nigeria is typically performed during festivals, childbirths, rituals, and other occasions. These songs have a unique feature of call and response, with a chorus that is repeated as a refrain. Yoruba traditional poetry, for example, includes various forms such as *Ijala*, which is a poem performed during hunting; *Oriki*, which is praise poetry; *Ewi rara iyawo*, which is a poem for a newly wedded woman; and *Egungun* song, which is a poem performed during the *Egungun* festival. The Fulani creation myth about *Dondari* is also a traditional poem. What should be known is that as long as there are different cultural groups in Nigeria, there will be different forms of traditional poems to reflect these cultures. These poems can be playful, mournful, or even incantatory. Interestingly, Nigerian poetry has evolved in contemporary times with great emphasis on written poetry.

Modern Nigerian poetry can be categorized into five phases: pioneering, transitional, post-independence, alternative tradition, and contemporary. During the pioneering phase, poets such as *Nnamdi Azikiwe* and *Denis Chukude Osadebe* played crucial roles. These poets wrote in English but incorporated elements of traditional Nigerian oral poetry. They were educated and did not experiment much with the English language, unlike the modern poets of postcolonial Nigeria such as *Soyinka*, *Okigbo*, *J.P* and *Achebe* or *Okara*. The poems written by Nigerian poets during the pre-independence era were not difficult to comprehend as they used a simplified English language with local images. Though they had a nationalistic perspective, they were not revolutionary in their writings. Their objective was to demonstrate to the "white man" that they could also write in English and express Africa's concerns. These poets were pioneers who were among the first Nigerians to write poems about Nigeria and Africa in English before independence was achieved in 1960. The poems written by Nigerian poets during the pre-independence era were not difficult to comprehend as they used a simplified English language with local images. Though they had a nationalistic perspective, they were not revolutionary in their writings. Their objective was to demonstrate to the "white man" that they could also write in English and express Africa's concerns. These poets were pioneers who were among the first Nigerians to write poems about Nigeria and Africa in English before independence was achieved in 1960.

During the period leading up to Nigeria's independence, Nigerian poetry went through a transitional phase. This stage is also known as the beginning of modern Nigerian poetry. The poets during this time are known as the first-generation Nigerian poets or post-independence Nigerian poets. Their primary concerns were national pride, cultural identity, and the struggle against colonialism, all of which were reflected in their early works. These poets also began to blend English with local imagery and originally used English. Notable poets from this group include *Soyinka*, *Okigbo*, *Okara*, and *Clark*. However, these poets faced challenges with their writing style. *Chinweizu et al.*, (1980) noted that *Clark*, *Okigbo*, and *Soyinka's* language was archaic as they patterned their language after 19th-century or even 16th-century British writers, using imported imagery and archaism. They seemed to be more preoccupied with impressing Western audiences than with expressing themselves.

In a bid to respond to some of the complaints associated with the writing styles of the first-generation poet, there emerged the second-generation poets of the alternative tradition. The second generation or post-independence poets like *Ojaide*, *Ofeimun*, and *Osundare* who go by the term the alter-native tradition championed a new paradigm in Nigeria's poetic tradition through their socio-realistic representation of life and their linguistic simplicity. These contemporary Nigerian poets operate from a wider poetic canvas. Among these contemporary poets can be also some female poets, trying to break grounds hitherto occupied by men. They include *Catherine Acholonu*, *Remy Asiegbu*, *Jumoke Verismo*, *Sophia Obi*, *Margaret Fafa Nutsukpo* and a conundrum of spoken word artists who ply their trade on Facebook. for example, the group known as *Poets in Nigeria*. The female poets project their poetic vision with unabashed boldness, unruffled raw creative energy while engaging their commitment and above all their trending on the ground which may be seen as conservative, particularly on the issue or theme of sex, and romance in Nigerian poetry. *Jumoke Verismo* stands out in this. While for the men's folk, *Chinaka* is an emerging voice within the contemporary Nigerian poetry landscape. His poems *Nigeria We Hail Thee* and *Apocalyptic Gong* are a biting satire, a comedic representation and a sad truth of the state of the nation. Another contemporary Nigerian poet is *Gomba*. He is a several-time Association of Nigerian Authors award winner. With several collections of poetry to his credit, each reflecting Nigeria's reality the way he experiences them, he remains one of the finest voices from the Niger Delta.

*Soyinka* is one of the major influences and pioneers of modern Nigerian poetry. Especially as one of the few crops of Nigerian poets who emerged in the early phase of post-independence Nigerian poetry. His language is also unique and *Maduakor Obi* notes that *Soyinka's* language as evidenced in *Idanre*, is characterised by mournful, meditative and tragic undertones... with a disjointed syntax (1-6). What *Maduakor* calls a "disjointed syntax" in *Soyinka's* poetry is a linguistic mannerism which manifests as the violation of selectional rule, at the level of collocation. This is a

conscious rhetorical design, which foregrounds his text. This style is couched in the mould of the modernist and imagist movement of the Euro-western tradition. And it is marked by linguistic experimentation and syntactic subversion, it attempts to convey the world-view of an African humanist or the fragmented nature of human existence which is also evident in the poetry of Eliot the "Wasted Land". However, despite Maduakor's blunt comment on Soyinka's poetry, one must acknowledge that in the poem "Idanre" Soyinka showed his language dexterity in adapting the myth of Ogun in a contemporary setting. This is one important remark Biodun (2004) attempts to make concerning Soyinka's poetry while quoting Fraser because it appears Soyinka's works (poems) have been ignored by many critics (225). Soyinka's poetry is an illumination of life's philosophical questions and contradictions inherent in human existence too. Though it is argued that Soyinka is a difficult poet, I would say that he is difficult not in the sense of a man who does not do justice to his craft, but in the sense of the heavy burden of his social commitment, as a chronicler, an activist, a politician, a philosopher, a global citizen, an African and a man, it is not an easy task to assume and express all of these roles without a language transformation.

Okigbo is another experimentalist in Nigerian poetry. He is an artist with great energy and creative vibe. James Gibbs quoting Nwakanma (2010) notes that his "poetry enchants and it has a distinct lyrical impetus which emphasizes the poet's consciousness of himself as a craftsman" (135). This quality as noted by Gibbs is emphasised through Okigbo's language and style. This is particularly so, especially with the poem "The Passage". This consciousness, noted by Gibbs, is a social commitment of the poet as a member of society. This mannerism can also be seen in "Path of Thunder". According to Okuyade (2008) "Path of Thunder" occupies a seminal and inaugural position in the criticism of Nigerian war poetry. While it "maps the topography of the war, succeeding generations of Nigerian poets broadened the horizon" (130). Some of the predominant issues raised in Okigbo's poetry, according to Romanus Egudu are: "religious suppression, anti-Christianity, religious revival, and literary struggle (3). Nwoga (2000) on the other hand contends that Okigbo's poetry attracts critical attention because of its "striking individuality" (1). Thus, it is worthy of mention that Okigbo is one of the pioneers of revolutionary-cum-war aesthetics especially in Nigeria's poetry, which assumed the nature of the intellectual militant after his demise.

The intellectual militant and poet-activist tradition inaugurated by Okigbo gave birth to the likes of Osundare, Ofiemun and Ojaide in Nigeria's poetic landscape. The doyen poet of the alter-native tradition, Osundare offers a simplistic rendering of poetic language which functions in terms of contrastive pairs as evident in the poem "A Song for Ajegunle". In this poem, Osundare re-constructed the nature of social stratification in Nigeria where riches and poverty co-exist side by side. Osundare poetry, particularly his love poems as seen in *Tender Moments* uses beautiful and engaging language in a manner that extols love, elegance and plainness. Ofeimun is an important poet in the evolution of Nigerian poetry within the alter-native tradition. Okunoye (2011) opines that the import of his art consists in its ability to affirm the capacity of poetry to enlighten and inspire action. His poems were written in the seventies during the military era (67). No doubt, the military era informed his ideological stance and stylistic approach such that he wrote in such a way as to enlighten the masses. This feature is also noticeable in the poetry of Ojaide, which Uzoечи (2010), calls "resistance poetry" (17).

What may be called contemporary Nigerian poetry is an amalgam of several poetic experiences, a continuation of a tradition or influences. These contemporary poems are unique in terms of issues, language, location of the poet— as a poet must not necessarily be in Nigeria or write about Nigeria alone to be called a Nigerian poet— and the broadness of poetic vision in terms of globalisation. Some of the contemporary poets still re-echo the lamentation and woes treated in the poetry of Ojaide, Ofeimun and Osundare. For example, Chinaka's *Apocalyptic Gongs and Nigeria We Hail Thee* reflect the issue of leadership failure. Gomba's *Thunder Protocol* continues the threnodies of the plight of the minority in the Niger Delta (2017).

And, there is a noticeable semblance in the poetry of Ojaide, Ofeimun and of Gomba. This can be noticed after a careful comparison between Gomba's *Pearls of the Mangrove* (2011), *The Length of Eyes* (2012), *Thunder Protocol* (2015), and Ojaide "Delta Blues"; Ofeimun "Children of the Creeks". This is first in terms of thematic concerns, region, commitment and ideological affinity. Other sublime semblance is in terms of artistic cadence and the bitter tone and angry mood, of the poet-activist stance. There is also a relationship between Chinaka's "Apocalyptic Gong" and Okigbo's "Hurray for Thunder". They also share a dialogic consciousness in terms of shared thematic concerns, tone and attitude. It appears that Chinaka continued from where Okigbo stopped as messengers or minstrels of the apocalypse as evident in *Apocalyptic Gong*.

### 3.1. Language Style and Functions in Some Nigerian Poems: Practical Examples

#### a. Deviation

The term deviation is a deliberate linguistic manipulation of words, as opposed to their conventional form and usage to draw attention to a truth or meaning. It constitutes a common feature of the language accoutrement in poetic discourse. The overall purpose is to remove the sheen on what seemingly appears normal or is accepted as truth, such that attention is drawn to a poem's underlying presupposition. Deviation functions in such a way that words which do not fit into a normal syntactic structure are combined to mean creation. Deviation can be analysed when the structures or expressions of a poem are subcategorised. However, the function of such language and stylistic form as deviation is to mean foregrounding of the poetic craft. Some Nigerian poets like Soyinka, Okigbo, Gomba, Ojaide, Ofeimun and Chinaka use deviation by their violation of selectional rule restriction which stipulates the semantic features of word entries.

For example, in Soyinka's *Idanre* the following are deviations at the lexical level, "When the road waits famished" line 25, in "Death in the Dawn". A road is a nominal group with a componential semantic value of -inanimate, -inhuman, it is imbued with a quality or attribute which is +animate, +human. Thus, the road is depicted as capable of exercising a human attribute of patience. But this patience is employed to unveil a deeper truth, about the road, and it is the fact that the road, though described as inanimate, is famished, or hungry. The road also suggests life's experiences which can swallow one. The question is, what is the road waiting famished for? The answer lies in the African concept of reality where things and objects are seen as having an existence of their own and as capable of exercising being. The implied truth is that the road "eats" humans, in terms of accidents, and death. In another sense, the road is a recurrent archetype in African literature which implies experience. This has been effectively construed within the tenets of postcolonial literature by the likes of Okri in the *Famished Road*, Ngugi in *Petals of Blood*, and Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Other features of deviation drawn from Soyinka's *Idanre* are: "The dog-nosed wetness of earth" line 3, of "Death in the Dawn". The earth, which has a componential semantic feature of -animate is also imbued with the +animate feature of wetness like the nose of a dog. This is metaphorically rendered to depict the presence of a liquid substance on earth such as the rain.

The stylistic implication is the engagement of the human mind to participate in the everyday reality or lived experience peculiar to Nigerian society. Other examples are evident in "Death the scrap-iron dealer" in line 18 of "In Memory of Segun Awolowo", "Night harshly folds her" in line 15 of "A Cry in the Night", and "The Ground is wet with mourning" in line 21 of "Abiku". While from other poems we have: in Okigbo's *Labyrinth*, the following are the are examples of selectional rule violation which also generate lexical and semantic deviations, "The death sentence lies in ambush" in line 9 of "Come Thunder", "the myriad eyes of deserted corn cobs" in line 16 of "Come Thunder". In Ofeimun *Generals*, "Maps drawn in yawning blisters" lines 13-14 of "Let's Consider", "...blackness that gave each of our dead a week's wages" lines 28-29 of "Memory II". In Gomba's *Homeland*, "our maggots with fine garments," in Line 111 of "Is Pun Risky of a Resque" and in line 17 of "A Lover's Delight" we have "the wind tugs at things", in line 8 of "To Firefly", there is the deviation in "The road runs ahead of you." In Chinaka's *Apocalyptic Gong* the following samples of lexical and semantic deviations are evident: "the sun blazed and spat fire that froze my heartbeats" in line 16 and "oppression died" in line 31 of "After the Two in the Field". In another instance, there is a deviation in the expression "fear hides from danger" in line 37 of "In Vain the Watchman". There is also "Africa's sun turns pale with grief" in line 1 of "The Solipsist's Bequest". In Ojaide's *Delta* lexico-semantic deviation manifests as: "streets echo with wails" in line 36 of "Wails", another is "a column of helmet-dressed Anthills marched through his youth" line 6 of "Journeying", "history will take its revenge" in line 28 of "On Solidarity March" and "the ironwood that torments the executive axe" in line 16 of the "Prisoner".

#### b. Cohesion

Cohesion is an important function of language functions. It refers to how the parts of a text are joined together using linguistic resources. Even though human thoughts and language learning can be gradual and fragmented, they come together to form a sentence using grammar rules. Halliday's social semiotic theory suggests that the social environment and structures of language users, like poets, affect cohesion. Cohesion is achieved by combining grammatical units in a rank scale, including nominal, phrasal, clausal groups and larger sentences, to create meaning for the audience. The social semiotic theory allows for the identification of this structure and how it communicates social experience, unlike the TGG which focuses only on grammaticality. In poetry, cohesion can be achieved through various types of cohesion, such as lexical, grammatical, and even phonological.

Referential cohesion: which is the use of pronouns (anaphoric and cataphoric referencing) or determiners to refer to the known nouns in a text. It could manifest as an anaphoric, exophoric, or cataphoric reference. For example, the boldfaced words in the excerpt show examples of backward or anaphoric reference or cohesion. In Gomba's For Eve Homeland it is demonstrated by the boldfaced nominal groups in the second stanza of the poem "Water, Fire and Wind" in lines 7-10:

**Data 1**

Our **voices** are different but our songs can be one,  
Enter oh teller of tales. Enter oh singer of songs.  
Our **tongues** are different but our souls can connect.  
Enter the house, O singer of tales

The lexical entry "tongues" evident in the excerpt above refers to a voice, which is not just a vocal expression but an existential articulation of one's being. Thus, the nominal item "tongues" (noun in its plural form) as used in the text is an anaphor that refers back to the nominal group "voices". Such cohesive feature also occurs in Chinaka's Apocalyptic in the opening stanza of "The Harbinger's Elegy IX" lines 1-7.

**Data 2**

For all my siblings who care to listen,  
**Mother earth** is too old and sick!  
**Her** confrontation is disintegrating.  
**Her** concealed age is known to none.  
Those weird lightnings are **her** wrinkles.  
Bizarre tremors signal **her** body language  
Opening a long line of tragic traffic.

From the above excerpt, the term mother-earth; a nominal group in its compound morphological form is reiterated using the first-person pronominal form her as an anaphoric reference. This enables the co-text (a text existing within a text) to stick together as a unit and also avoid the clumsiness associated with the repetition of mother-earth at every interval where the pronominal her occurs in the excerpt below.

**Data 3**

**Mother earth** is too old and sick!  
**Her** configuration is disintegrating.  
**Her** concealed age is known to none.  
Those weird lightnings are her wrinkles.  
Bizarre tremors signal her body language  
Opening a long line of tragic traffic.

In Okigbo's Labyrinths, referential cohesion is deployed to call attention to the elephant as used in the poem "Hurray for Thunder". The boldface words are used to explain such a type of cohesion.

**Data 4**

The **elephant**, tetrarch of the jungle:  
With a wave of the hand  
**He** could pull four trees to the ground;  
**His** four mortar **legs** pounded the earth

Wherever they tread.

While the pronominal *he* is an anaphoric reference to the elephant, they refer to the legs of the elephant. In Soyinka's *Idanre* it manifests as the use of the pronominal *he* in the excerpt from the poem "Idanre".

**Data 5**

**He** (Ogun) made a mesh of elements, from stone  
Of fire in earth fruit, the womb of energies  
**He** (Ogun) made an anvil of the peaks and kneaded  
Red clay for **his** (Ogun) mould. In **his** (Ogun) hand the weapon  
Gleamed, born of the primal mechanic.

The nominal group *he*, as used in the poem refers to Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, metal and of war. In Ofeimun's *Generals*, referential cohesion is demonstrated in the poem "Go Tell the Generals".

**Data 6**

**The armoured cars** cockroached through empty alleys  
Bored, waiting for the sit-at-homes to burn out.  
**They** will burn out, said the General, at dusk  
**They** will burn out their lights, crawl out in gangs  
Bicker over rights to the stinks of garbage dumps.

The use of the pronominal serves as a backward referencing strategy and it refers to the armoured cars. It implies that they enable the co-text to stick together. While in Ojaide's *Delta* referential cohesion is construed in the poem "Odebala"

**Data 7**

**Odebala** boasts he is rich,  
I only hope **he** knows what wealth provides!  
Odebala swaggers puffs out **his** shoulders  
Because **he** daydreams, he's rich.  
We know he inherited debts from **his** father  
And **his** hands are neither strong nor fortunate.  
The term **he**, **his**, refers to the persona Odebala.

**c. Code-Mixing**

Code-mixing is a combination of two or more languages in a communication exchange, either written or oral. It shows how the poets deploy the resources of language to consolidate group solidarity and bridge both cultural and linguistic boundaries in interlocution. In the six poetry collections, only three (that of Gomba, Ojaide and Soyinka) exhibit code-mixing. This is evident in Soyinka's poetry collection *Idanre* where it is represented by the use of English and Yoruba language in the poem "Malediction" but it is deployed at a minimal level. The Yoruba language is represented in the line "Orogbo egan, gege l' eke arugbo"/ Also in Ojaide's poetry collection *Delta Blues*, it manifests as the blend of Urhobo and English language in the poem "My Drum Beats itself". This is also at minimal usage as shown in the expression "Iye iye, iyeiye / Iye iye. Iye iye / Iye iye, iyeiye". While in Gomba's *Homeland* There is a code-mix of the English language and Eleme language. This is evident in the opening stanza of the poem "Water, Fire, and Wind". This is also at a minimal level.

**Data 8**

Awia nmajue Kuru nene,

kuru nene Awia nmajue  
Kuru nene, kuru neneAwia nmajue  
Kuru nene, kuru nene.

The poets' continuous use of English and minimal use of their local language especially for Ojaide, Soyinka and Gomba suggest a level of consciousness and commitment to the communication of the themes and perspective, especially to the local audience. It also suggests that the English language which is prominent in the six collections as a social code of expression constitutes a major established semiotic form of expression or social mediation in Nigeria.

#### **d. Affirmation, Assertive ness**

Rhetoric devices are also deployed to construe narrative perspectives in poetic craft. This is conveyed or told from varied angles of vision. The resources of linguistics are crucial in this regard as it is deployed to indicate the persona or voice of the addresser and also secure the participation of the readers. This narrative process is also known as point of view. Point of view makes it easy to identify the voice ((persona) in poetry and the amount of information it communicates especially from an authorial standpoint which is available to the audience. In poetry, this voice or persona is the narrator, addresser. The viewpoint is conspicuously evident in the texts in two dimensions: the limited third-person point of view, and the first-person point of view.

The first-person viewpoint is underscored by the use of the first-person pronominal "I" which serves a deictic function of identifying the person (persona) in a discourse. Its linguistic implication is highlighted by the fact that it is a veritable resource for the affirmation of selfhood by the persona either about a sociological, ecological or transcendental self within a geospace. An observation of the poets' deployment of the first person "I" viewpoint is shown in the table below in boldface.

#### **Data 9**

Soyinka's *Idanre*

I am the squirrel teeth, cracked  
The riddle of the palm; remember  
This, digs me deeper still into  
The god's swollen foot. ("Abiku")

Your hand is heavy night, upon my brow  
I bear no heart mercuric like the clouds, to dare  
Exacerbation from your subtle plough. ("Night")

Contested moments to keep  
Faith in a resilient people,  
Brave in the traffic of time  
I knew why folks wore  
The raiment of pain  
With so much gait. ( Gomba, "For Every Homeland")

...naked I stand  
Before your I walked through every

watery presence

Under your power wait for I... (Okigbo "The Passage")

Now that my drum beats itself,

I know that my dead mentor's hand's at work.

This sound I lisp and others think is mine

Could only come from beyond this world—

I foresee a thunderstorm breaking out in my head—

I wonder how I can contain the gift in lines

That I must chant to earn my griot's name.

I bow to the master who never forgot my service. (Ojaide "My Drum Beats Itself")

I am not here for lachrymal songs

Enough of fading memory

Obsolete dirges of the Niger Delta

Of decapitated fauna and flora

Too many clips on CNN, AIT, Aljazeera

But do not bother NTA!

"The largest TV Network in Africa"

The Beautiful Ones are not yet born! (Chinaka: "Macabre Dancers")

In the maw of a minibus headed for my city by the lagoon

I write between the crush of the artisan I work clothes

And the obese mammy in dissent in owambe beads

Licking her moin-moin leaf so hard my tongue protests

With a hunger that has no name telling of simple needs

And pleasures I cannot share with you, lonesome in jail.

( Ofeimun "A Letter to Makurdi Prison")

The first-person pronouns are usually accompanied by verbs that express an active, affirmative, or existential sense of self. This way of speaking portrays the self as a distinguishable and recognizable entity and emphasizes that the voice being heard belongs to the self. In Okigbo's "Passage", the self is that of a penitent soul who approaches Mother Idoto humbly after experiencing an awakening. The underlying idea is that this persona is capable of being defined as a subject or an object, despite the overwhelming feeling of alienation that comes from being disconnected from one's true self, traditions, and roots. In Soyinka's "Night," the persona is announced by using the existential auxiliary verb together with the first-person pronoun "I am." The self-being presented is that of an Abiku, who affirms that it is indeed him and not another entity that is acting. Gomba's use of the first-person affirmative viewpoint creates a self that is empathetic and socially connected to the immediate environment, to the point where it can identify with it as an "I." Chinaka's use of the first-person pronoun constructs a self in the mould of an activist, thus conveying a defiant tone and critical stance. Ofeimun's and Ojaide's use of the first-person pronoun is a stylistic strategy that represents the voice of the Niger Delta people and the socio-economic problems they face.

The third-person limited viewpoint is a narrative technique used by poets to convey a narrow perspective of a social situation. This technique situates the persona as an observer who is also a participant in the discourse. The poets use the third person pronoun to achieve this effect, as exemplified in the works of Soyinka, Gomba, Okigbo, Chinaka, Ofeimun, and Ojaide. In this narrative style, the personae are limited in their perception of reality and articulate their observations from the viewpoint of an observer.

This form of representation is based on observations, which means it has limitations as it cannot account for a person's inner thoughts or persona. In Soyinka's "Idanre," this is reflected in the use of the pronoun "his." Although it functions as a determinant for the headword "head," it also reflects a third-person observatory stance. The persona notices the features referencing Ogun. This is within the purview of the persona's observation. In "Hurray for Thunder," the third-person limited perspective is demonstrated with the positioning of "he" and "his." "He could pull four trees to the ground; His four mortar legs pounded the earth." The pronominals "his" and "he" are substitutions for the elephant, which is a metaphorical configuration of power despots and bad leaders. This is also evident in Ojaide's "Sleeping in a Makeshift Grave." The lexical item "she" is a pronominal group used as a signification for the nation of Nigeria. Particular attention should also be given to the gender it reflects. Nigeria is portrayed or described as a female capable of procreation, and the bold-faced words below indicate this.

#### **Data 10**

**Nigeria** sleeps in a makeshift grave.

If **she** wakes with stars as **her** eyes,

The next world will be brighter for me and my compatriots.

A gunful of **children** broke the tetrarch's legs

& the elephant that once pulled the forest along for a path has fallen-

Can **she** get up before she's covered for dead? ("Sleeping in a makeshift grave")

The lexical selections: "she", and "her", children are semiotic icons which suggest Nigeria and her citizens.

In Gomba's "She Reminds Me of Hecuba" the persona observes the plight or condition of a member of a society which triggers a remembrance. It enables the persona to draw a connection between the classical Greek character Hecuba to the plight of the woman in the poem, who may be a representation of the plight of women in contemporary realities. Hecuba is the wife of the king of Troy (Priam) in classical Greek mythology. She is also the mother of Paris and Hector who was killed during the battle of Troy. After the destruction of Troy, she is taken, prisoner. Legend has it that she died of grief and despair as a result of the great loss of her husband, children and family. The pronominal "she" as used in the poem is not a reference to Hecuba, but to the individual, a female whose grief shares an affinity with that of Hecuba in classical Greece.

In Ofeimun's "Children of the Creeks" the third person pronoun "they" is deployed to reflect the persona's observation of the plight of the children of the creek using the word "they".

#### **Data 11**

The children of the creeks

Cried for hands to raise

The sky that loomed

Too close to the earth

**They** prayed for the old days

Of timber and palm oil

To return to the mangroves. ("Children of the Creeks")

In "The Vatican City" by Chinaka, the term is used to refer to tourists who visit the Vatican for entertainment or academic purposes, rather than for religious reasons.

## Data 12

Where pilgrims are converted to tourists

Spiritual social forum for adventure

**They** are here for the Pope but not God

Here the Papacy palpitates the city's heartbeat

As it inhales, the world sighs with relief

The city of men thirsty for adventure. ("The Vatican City")

The first-person and third-person limited viewpoint of view functions or enables the reader to see the text from two dimensions, one from a reporter, an eyewitness or an observer and from the view of the participant in the social events of the poem. This leaves the texts at the mercy of subjective interpretations as the third and the first-person viewpoints are not from the same angle of vision. The former is from the angle of vision of a participant/witness while the latter is from the angle of vision of an observer even though they complement each other.

The nature of language use by Okigbo and Soyinka at best could be described as elevated and it focuses more on impressionism. There is a manifest presence of linguistic experimentation and the influence of euro-western poetic cadence in their craft, even though the issue they treat focuses on cultural assertion, like "Idanre" and "Heavensgate". And their style is mythocentric and sage-like.

Ojaide and Ofeimun's styles differ greatly and their craft marks a shift or distinction from that of Okigbo and Soyinka in terms of language use. Ojaide and Ofeimun's use of language is less elevated compared to Soyinka and Okigbo, and also their style is more expressive and communication-oriented. Their style could be described as populist as it is geared towards advocating for the rights and privileges of ordinary people. Gomba and Chinaka on the other hand espouse a style which is "modern". By modern, we mean a style which transcends the barrier of geography and culture, it is Universalist as it explores human society through a linguistic frame which is both prosaic and also reflects modern terms for reality. Thus, the stylistic shift or discontinuities manifest in terms of a shift from a mythocentric sage-like style of Soyinka/Okigbo to a populist/vulgar literary style of Ojaide and Ofeimun, to a Universalist and prosaic style of Gomba and Chinaka.

At the level of continuity, the style of the poets converges or finds similarities and confluence in terms of the use of descriptive adjectives, code-mixing, and the use of lexico-semantic deviation. In the style of Chinaka, one can notice the stylistic tone, mood and apocalyptic descriptions similar to that of Okigbo. In the poetic commitment of Gomba in terms of poetry which confronts the human conscience and calls attention to the ills and challenges of the minority, one can still find the voices of Ojaide and Ofeimun. Other levels of stylistic continuity manifest in terms of the use of eponymous titles. From the analyses carried out, the lexico-semantic deviation is a major stylistic trend at the level of continuity which has been sustained in Nigerian poetry as it cuts across the six selected poetry collections. Another one is code-mixing and the cohesive strategy of repetition/refrain and allusion.

## 4. Conclusion

This study analyzes a selected corpus of written Nigerian poetry in the English language by Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Tanure Ojaide, Oda Ofeimun, Psalms Chinaka, and Obari Gomba. These poets span three distinct generations and serve as exemplars of their respective eras. The study offers insights into the significance of language, the evolution of Nigerian poetry, and its styles and functions. It provides tangible examples that showcase various elements, such as cohesion, deviation, and code-mixing. The study concludes that the use of English in Nigerian poetry is not just a colonial legacy. Rather, it is a deliberate act of appropriation, protest, and a call for change. Through this language, marginalized groups within Nigerian society amplify their voices and tackle multifaceted issues. The study highlights a continuum of thematic and aesthetic concerns through an intergenerational dialogue that connects and differentiates the first, second, and third generations of Nigerian poets and notable shifts reflecting the evolving socio-political landscape of Nigeria. The study submits that the language in poetry is wide-ranging and has the feature of mutability, as no two poets have the same language style. Importantly, while the English language remains a major linguistic form in the representation of Nigerian poetry; there is a need to explore the poetry of indigenous linguistic groups in Nigeria to sustain their language and promote the ideas they espouse.

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