

## A PHONO-GRAPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF SELECTED NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

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### **Abstract**

*Problems based on the relationship between form and functions have remained a continual challenge. The article aims to contribute to the understanding of speech in Emecheta's narrative discourse. The focus is on the pragmatic and stylistic dimensions of speech. The data comprises extracts of speech isolated for analysis at the level of phonology and graphology. The result reveals the use of phono-graphological features to indicate contrastive stress and focus information. Stress, intonation, contractors and other patterns of speech also indicate informal situations in addition to disclosing themes. Theme structures in particular reveal the choice of various linguistic and situational clues to convey a focused and continuous flow of ideas centring on the author's gender interest. The analytic approach of the study contributes to the growing research on language and gender and reveals how phonological structures and systems bring out thematic issues in the author's gender interest.*

**KEYWORDS:** Speech, Choice, Gender, Systemic Functional Linguistics.

### **1.1 Introduction**

Bloomfield's linguistics is strong in the areas of phonology, morphology but weak in semantics. Halliday's systemic functional linguistics stresses context, semantics, communication and social aspects of language. Halliday sees meanings in the heart of everything in language (Bloor and Bloor 1995:2). Phono-graphology is a sub-system of the systemic function all linguistics (SFL). The article examines speech in Emecheta's discourse to reveal the phono-graphological choices she made to get across her gender message. The article presents a wide range of issues under the following sub-headings: systemic phonology, information and theme systems, analysis and results.

### **2.0 Systemic Phonology**

System phonology is an approach to the description of the phonology of a language. It emphasizes chain and choice relations of patterns of sounds with hierarchical networks of choices in meaning. The approach also accepts other different systems appropriate to different components of both language and its theory (Tench, 1992:6).

The hierarchical structuring of the features relates to collocations and helps in keeping the related items together and in ensuring that the iconic principle is upheld (Tench 1992; Leech and Short (1985).Choice

relations indicate how language is patterned. The relations display choices of meaning that are available to the language user at given point of structure. Phonological choices could be meaningful at the level of intonation but at other levels especially at the segmental level, they mostly reflect the form that the language takes at the level of spoken physical substances.

## 2.1 Intonation

Intonation is often realized in tone units consisting of a sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables but on occasion the unit may consist of a single pitch prominent syllable. Then peak of the greatest prominence is called the NUCLEUS of the tone unit (Quirk, 1976).

Word and sentence stress are aspects of intonation. "Sentence stress is achieved by the use of gliding pitch on one of the stressed syllables of the utterance. Normally, this gliding pitch occurs on the last stressed syllable of the sentence" (Adetugbo 1997:135). English stress also shifts from one word to another in a sentence in order to stress, emphasize, correct, focus or contrast something that someone has said in order to create another meaning (Jowitt, 1998, Williams, 1990).

The foot and more especially the tone groups play an important part in the construction of meaning. The English language has the Foot-Timing of Stress-Timing type of rhythm in which the tempo depends on the foot. As a structural unit, the foot consists of one strong or salient syllable with weak syllable (s) depending on it. There is a strong tendency in English for the salient syllables to occur at regular intervals so that all feet tend to be roughly the same length.

## 2.2 Information Theme Structures

The tone group realizes the unit of information in discourse. Rhythm and tone group organize discourse into information units, with each information unit comprising the functions of Given-New. The area of emphasis in a clause is shown by intonation and it is directed to what the addressee knows or what he does not know (Melrose 1995:33, Halliday 2000:59). The known information tends to precede unknown information in tone unit. The speaker usually starts speaking by giving information that is assumed to be shared by the hearer before giving the one that is "new" to the hearer. The principle of End-Focus is a rhetorical principle which facilitates the decoding of the message and influences different choices between different language systems.

Information structures relates closely with thematic structure. The speaker chooses the "Theme from within what is given and locates the focus, the climax of the new, somewhere within the Rheme" (Halliday, 2000: 299). Although they are related, Given+New, and Theme+Rheme are not the same thing. The theme is what the speaker chooses as his point of departure while the given is what the listener can recover from his previous knowledge. The technique of thematization enables us to achieve an important discourse function.

The Given information is usually represented by anaphoric elements and deictic elements while the New which has contrastive emphasis and carries the information focus is usually represented by contrastive deictic elements. Both however are speaker-selected. The speaker selects and relates each of them to their environment. The environment which often consists of rich verbal and non-verbal environment will "often create local conditions which override the globally unmarked pattern of theme within Given, New within Rheme" (Halliday 2000:300).

## 2.3 Phonology

Phonology is the study of how speech sounds form systems and patterns in human language. It acts as a link between the substance of a language and its form (Halliday, 1961:244). Some sounds in language change the meaning of an utterance, for example, light and right. Variation in the sounds of language can be subdivided into pitch, quality, loudness and length.

Prosodies are suprasegmental sounds, such as, pitch, melody, tempo, pause, rhythm, stress and these, work together with segmental sounds. Prosodies can include form, irony, emotion and emphasis. They could be seen in pragmatics, sentences in context and in expressive forms of language. Their domain is the syllable which is a collection of sounds grouped under ‘prosodic phonological structure’. Adetugbo(1997:70) describes a syllable as “a unit of pronunciation larger than a single sound but smaller than a word”. Vowels and consonant sounds, for instance, m, n, l, r can substitute a syllable. The prosodic phonology of a language is responsible for the rhythm in an utterance as it gives an utterance its area as a set of related units “interrupted by pauses” (Fabb, 1997:29).

### 3.0 Analysis and Results

The analysis centres on how Emecheta organizes her information and reveals meaning in the speech of her characters. It is guided by Halliday’s systematic phonology consists of the English sound system, intonation, the rhythm units and graphology, which consists of the sentence, word and letter.

#### 3.1 Stress in Words, Syllables and Phonemes

Emecheta places the nucleus in the speech of her characters so as to focus on a theme. This placement of nucleus is often signaled by graphological features as in the contrastive stress on the word ‘tutorial’ in “he sees her last so that they can have a longer ‘tutorial’ than the normal time allowed...” (DY, 146). The single quotation marks emphasizes the close relationship between NKO and Professor Ikot. Similarly, the pitch placement on the personal pronoun ‘You’ in “I thought you were on my side....” (DY, 99), reflects Ete’s negative attitude towards the relationship between Nko and the Professor. The use of capital letters in the word *Anxeria Nervosa* in “... some unfortunate girls in their desperate efforts to be admired, ended up being victims of Anorexia Nervosa” (DY, p.103) creates a contrast between a normal disease and this strange one which afflicts girls who starve themselves to get slim. *Presence* in “one could feel it, one could be directed by it; unconsciously at first, until it became a reality, a Presence” (SCC, p.1) is also an indication of stress placement using capital letters. The focus of these words places the “flavour of spoken” emphasis on them. Repetition of consonants, syllables and the omission of vowels in contracted forms also feature prominently in the utterances to give her works a poetic effect and a ‘spoken flavour’. The sound patterns reinforce meaning. The phonemes /r/ and /b/ in ‘Religious Revival’ and ‘breast beatings’ are repeated in

“Oh Allah, on whose side is he now? Have you got a girl friend there at the Religious Revival? One minute you condemn them, the next you want us to go and listen to their wailings and breast beatings” (DY, 69).

Similar repetition of the phoneme /b/ appears in utterances like “Gosh”, you are a brain box” (DY, 27). The choice of /r/ and /b/ rather any other sound is significant because the sound, are alternatives within sets “by virtue of being a distinct sound in the English sound system” (Bloor and Bloor, 1995:242). A system is set of paradigmatic choices which according to Tench (1992:10) indicates powerful ways of “displaying choices in meaning”. Similarly, the repetitions of the following syllables, “dam” in “Oh, dam the Madam!” “ba” in “... he was going to continue talking banalities until Ubani was ready to tell him what the matter was...” and the repetition of the bound morphemes, *-ing* + *s* in “wailings and ...beatings” bring a contrast between these repeated morphemes and others in the text. The inflectional morphemes carry the grammatical meanings of plural while also indicating “arbitrary union of sound and meaning”.

Contracted forms also feature the omission of vowels as exemplified with *won’t*, *don’t*, *I’d*, and *you’ll*. The ease with which Emecheta uses contracted forms in the informal speech for her characters reflect her high

stand on the scale of bilingualism in view of Jowitt's (2000:64) remark that the Nigerian English is a restricted English lexically and syntactically because of "the underuse of contracted forms and contrastive stress".

### 3.2 Onomatopoeic Words

Onomatopoeic words in the utterances are used for effect. Words that imitate sounds are indicated in this short conversation between two friends, Akpan and Ikem who watch their other friend, Eke, open a letter from his girlfriend, NKO.

#### Dialogue

"Is it from her?" A voice shouted at him from the other side of the room.

"Sh sh sh," came another voice in an elaborate strange whisper. "He is in a deep meditation" (DY, p.41).

The sound Sh sh sh imitates the whisper sound made by one of Ete's friends. The effect is that of caution because the two friends are trying to be careful, so as to watch Ete in his unconscious state of mind. The sounds *tik-tock* in her "brain worked tick-tock" (SCC, p. 49) also echo the sounds the words refer to, that is, the talking-clock. The effect is that of anxiety and fear. Ada's heart beats fast as she thinks she thinks of her sick child. Similarly, the sound 'gbim, gbim, gbim' in "Her heart was going "gbim, gbim, gbim" imitates the quick beating of Adah's heart and it also euphorically refers to the sound made by "a Nigerian wife pounding yams in her Odo" (SCC, p. 125).

### 3.3 Elongation of Sounds

Emecheta elongates sounds for effect. She elongates the phoneme /a/ and the syllable 'fy' in "Ehem! Naaaa-fy," (JOM, p.83). The effect is that of amusement because of the imitation of the white woman's pronunciation of the Igbo name, Naife which in itself is an abbreviation of any of the Igbo names meaning father of ifechukwu which is initiated by the syllables "I" plus "fe". The abbreviation produces names that are pleasing to the ears and easy to pronounce. The elongation of sounds features often in pidgin English which forms part of the idiolect to her literate and non-literate characters as exemplified in "Na so for me ooo" Emecheta (1982, pp. 145-146).

Emecheta also elongates sounds in order to indicate pause for reflection as in "Hmmm" in DY (pp. 64, 100). In JOM, p. 83, Naife elongates sounds to reflect his own inability to pronounce the white woman's name, Mrs. Meers. He pronounces *Meers* as "Miiass". Apart from the initial phoneme /m/, he lengthens all other phonemes in order to reflect his own idiolect. There is a transfer of features here from his mother tongue, Igbo, to the English language. In the Igbo Language the way a word is spelt tells a lot about how it is pronounced unlike in the English Language in which spelling is not a guide for correct pronunciation, spelling features as the trace of a word and pronunciation as its linguistic form (Fromkin and Rodman (1986:156).

### 3.4 Graphological Study of Speech

Graphological features in the speeches indicate the characters' idiolect and highlight the themes. The salient punctuation marks are the exclamation marks, quotation marks, the question marks, italics, ellipsis and dash (es).

### 3.4.1 Punctuation Marks

A character's idiolect is often indicated by punctuation marks. Let us consider these utterances

“Stop at once”! What do you call this, bravery”? You make my stomach turn.” JOM, p.23.

“You will live to rock your children's children, daughter of Agbadi and Ona. Go, daughter, and bring your father's best drink; and here, fill my pipe, also”. JOM, p. 28.

“You are a fool of a man, you are. Where will she take the money to? Her people, who did not even come to congratulate her on the arrival of baby Titi? Her relatives, who did not care whether she lived or died? The money is for you, can't you see? Let her go and work for a million Americans bring their money here, into this house. It is your luck. You made a good choice in marriage, son”. SCC, p. 77.

In these utterances, the pauses indicated by the various punctuation marks, such as the exclamation mark, the question mark, the full stop and the comma emphasize and highlight themes and the speakers' idiolect. In the first utterances, the lexical items, “ones”, “bravery” and “turn” which precede the exclamation mark, the question mark, and full stop receive the nucleus and reveal the situation that is, Agabadi's attempt to stop his son from killing the slave girl in fulfillment of a mundane cultural belief. The text reflects Agbadi's Igbo idiolect. *You make my stomach turn* is an Igbo idiom that is almost periphrastic (E na eme afom a na atu ari). Culture is seen here “a standardized and expected behaviour” (Thompson, 1991) of a society consisting of ideas, values, artifacts, practices, modes of thought, traditions, institutions, material goods, technologies and so on.

In the second extract of speech, the lexical items *children* and *daughter* receive the nucleus and feature two times each to reveal the expected role of women in the society, such as, that of mainly looking after children. In the third extract, Pa's idiolect is marked by salient patterns of speech consisting of the repetition of rhetorical questions and answers interspersed with punctuation marks which increase the tempo of Pa's speech. In Igbo culture, an old man is revered for his knowledge and wisdom especially as he is believed to be in constant communication with the ancestors. His speech is often characterized by instruction and admonition. And the nominal groups like *her people*, *her relations*, *money here*, *this house* make for an effective communication of the Igbo speech patterns of an old man. The lexical items *here* and *house* in the let construction “*let her... house*”, mark the climax of the speech and reveals Pa's attitude towards working class ladies whom he values for the wealth they bring to their marital homes. This choice of realistic speech represents certain features of speech encountered in life and appropriate to an Igbo man's idiolect. Ma's speech (SCC, p.7) and Pa's speech (SCC, p. 77) are metonyms used to refer to the attributes of old people's speaking voice. The speechless are also symbolic and represent generally accepted manner of speech of the aged.

The novel, according to Norman Page, (1988:98) recognizes six different uses of language in speech. The first marks individual characters of speech, such as, speech as identification; the second marks exaggerated or recognizable speech patterns, that is speech as parody, the third marks language used in real life, that is realistic speech; the fourth marks conventional, stylized or neutral speech which is speech as social idiosyncratic dialogue and is symbolic or metonymical; the fifth is speech as social behaviour and the sixth is token-speech which is dialogue of accepted equivalents which is usually not represented realistically. The different uses of language in speech are not mutually exclusive.

The speech extracts under discussion are an epitome of Emecheta's conversational style which is often punctuated to produce apt descriptive utterances reflecting strong views and emotions. Emecheta uses English to describe the language environment of her characters in line with Achebe's (1965) and Bamgbose's (1995:20) observation that as the English language expands into new language environment, it accommodates new cultures and behaviours resulting in the production of a new English like Nigerian English which is a variety of English enriched by nativization, creativity and the influences of literal, biblical and American English, including that of Nigerian languages. She writes to entertain both her Nigerian and European audiences by balancing her style so that it reflects her "very English" style and Nigerian English style.

### 3.4.1 Question Marks

Emecheta uses question marks as emotive elements for thematic purposes especially to appeal to a reader's reasoning. The questions function to rebuke and foreground one of the expectations of the Igbo belief system that a lady should speak with reservation.

### 3.4.3 Italics

Italics often foreground themes, idiolect and change in speech forms. The theme of insensitivity to the family's welfare is focused. The italicization on "*Mammy Waater*" in JOM, p.43 reflects Naife's lower class and idiolect. The spelling of *water* as *Waater* is a paradigmatic choice meant to reflect Naife's linguistic idiosyncrasy. The common name "*Mammy Waater*" is used to focus on the beautiful bride sent to Naife as a wife. In the Igbo belief system a beautiful bride is often cherished but the bridegroom needs not be equally handsome. Italicization in these texts often signals a change of speech form from the indirect speech to the free indirect speech. Uses of italics feature in SCC pp. 85, 103, 144 and JOM pp. 9, 13, 21, 24, 62.

### 3.4.4 Exclamation Marks

Exclamation Marks often feature with ironic effects to foreground themes. In *these women!* (DY, p. 71) Ete emphasizes the theme of 'double yoke' which modern women in contrast to the traditional ones often carry. *Mr.!* in "And some of those highly qualified surgeons in the Medical school call themselves just *Mr.!* reflects the simplicity with which these Professionals address themselves in contrast with others like "Sister, Dr. Mrs. Ngana Edet" (Ibid.).

The exclamation marks foreground Dr. Edet's love of titles and background the title *professor* by not writing the letter *P* in capital letter. Emecheta chooses this device possibly to prevent the Professor as a person with a moral question. Most male characters in Emecheta's texts are not given positive faces.

Similar uses of exclamation for thematic purposes manifest in this short conversation between Nnu Ego and the crowd who gathered around when she wanted to commit suicide.

### Dialogue B

**Nnu Ego:** "But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore. The child is there, dead on the mat. My *chi* has taken him away from me. I only want to go there and meet her..."

**A woman:** "She is not mad at all", the woman took it upon herself to inform the crowd in her imperfect Yoruba. "She has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren". (*Joy of Motherhood*, p.62)

Nnu Ego's speech which is in direct speech form starts with an emotive and ironic tone to reveal her sense of loss of being. Though the exclamation mark, Emecheta crafts into the discourse the actual feelings of Nnu ego- that a woman's value is simply measured by her production and retention of children. Nnu ego, too, typically prioritizes the needs of her husband over hers which reflects her mode of thought and that of her tribe.

### 3.4.5 Ellipsis and Dash (es)

Emecheta frequently uses ellipsis to deliberately omit some of her message so that the reader is left to guess its other meanings. The elliptical utterances "No woman has the right to talk to me like that... my mother wanted me to marry, you... you can't talk to me like that" changes the value of the utterances from a statement to an illocutionary act of warning. Ete expects Nko to behave appropriately and appropriately, too, in view of the knowledge that his mother and no one else wanted to marry her. Extended family members have a say in marital relationships and virginity in women before marriage is cherished in the belief system of the Igbos; however, men are not expected to be virgins. Other elliptical marks to highlight themes feature in DY, pp. 24, 112; SCC, pp. 22, 23, 66. Emecheta often uses dashes to draw attention to her themes and for stylistics purposes. These uses could be seen in DY, pp. 67, 70 and JOM pp. 24, 39, 43, 63, and 70.

Hence, forms of language use convey meanings in Emecheta's discourse and together with situation help in the decoding of meaning in her texts. Similarly, graphological features, such as, capital letters also create different effects and meanings in discourse and reveal characters' idiolect.

## 4.0 Conclusion

The article studies phono-graphological features in selected narrative discourse. The focus is on the pragmatic and stylistic dimensions of speech in the narratives. The concept of discourse-stylistics exposes texts as pieces of information and reveals how utterances are intelligently used for the purpose of communication. Systemic functional linguistics is based on the functions language user makes. The result of the study indicates the use of contrastive stress to reveal the expected role of women in the society. Similarly, repetition of consonants syllables and the omission of vowels in contracted forms give a 'spoken flavour and poetic effects to the utterances. Moreover, onomatopoeic words induce in the reader a particular state of mind. Emecheta's use of form of informal style enables her to communicate much using gender rhetoric to appeal to the reader. The items of language here provide new messages on existing patterns of language and form part of the choices she makes in order to transmit information from her characters to the reader.

Graphological features reveal social aspects of language indicating the characters dialect and idiolect as well as highlighting themes, social situations and culture. The culture cherishes children and expects every woman to bear and have children. The features also reveal patriarchal structures and call for reflection on the problems of culture, gender, inequality and the use of women as 'baby machines'.

Punctuation marks increase the tempo of some characters' speech in order to reveal strong view points and identities. There are also marked uses of italics to indicate changes in speech forms and focus on themes, such as, insensitivity of the male characters and the foregrounding of the ideology of feminism particularly in *Double Yoke*. Exclamations feature frequently to craft the feelings of heroine characters into the discourse as exemplified with the heroine character, Nnu Ego, in *Joy of Motherhood* who wants to commit suicide because she feels she is no longer a woman. These phono-graphological features help in unveiling meaning. The patterns and meanings also arouse interest and reflect gender messages. Other kinds of speech could be studied in terms of prosody and comparism for more findings.

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