

## TEXTUALITY AS A VERITABLE TOOL OF MEANING IN NIYI OSUNDARE'S "THE POLITICIAN'S TWO MOUTHS"

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### Abstract

*The textual function of a language is no doubt significant in the production of a logical and cohesive piece of discourse that constitute text as a poetic work. The textual function is concerned with the creation of text in a discourse. It implies a speaker's or writer's ability to organise a text into meaningful discourse. In the analysis of data for the study, Halliday's (1996) textual metafunction is deployed to examine Niyi Osundare's "The Politician's Two Mouths" for the purpose of determining the significant contribution of this linguistic tool to the interpretation and understanding of the poem. The employment of textuality as a veritable tool for analysis explores Osundare's adamant rejection of a corrupt political system which has been the bane of democratic stability and socio-economic and political development in Nigeria. Findings show that a Hallidayian linguistic approach to the study of a literary work is capable of contributing to the meaning and understanding of poetic discourse. It further reveals the significance of the approach to appreciating the endemic political corruption and socio-economic problems as the major obstacle to the achievement of sustainable development goal in Nigeria. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for the citizens and the political class to embrace an attitudinal change as well the political will that will make the nation attain good governance and democratic stability.*

**Key Words:** Meaning, textuality, linguistics, political system, political class.

### Introduction

A major objective of Osundare is to make his poetry accessible to the generality of the people. This explains why he believes in the simplicity of language for meaning encoding. He asserts that for a poem to be meaningful and for the message to be understood, a poet must eschew obscurity and arcane language of the pre-civil war poets. In his first publications, *Songs of the Market Place* (1983) which is regarded as his poetic manifesto, he buttressed this assertion by declaring and spelling out his intentions and outline the goals of his poetry:

Poetry is  
Not the esoteric whisper  
Of an excluding tongue.  
Not a claptrap  
For a wondering audience.

Not a learned quiz.  
Entombed in Grecoroman lore  
Poetry is  
a lifespring  
which gathers timber  
the more throats it plucks  
harbinger of action  
the more minds it stirs  
Poetry is  
man  
meaning  
to  
man *Poetry is*  
'SMP p.4

One of the linguistic devices that contributes immensely to the meaning and understanding of Osundare's poetry is textuality. The textual function of language is no doubt significant in the production of a logical and cohesive piece of discourse that

constitutes a 'text' as a poetic work. It is text that assists us in explaining language either in its spoken or written form. This is predicated on the fact that the role of the text is significant because the entire work of linguistics is the establishment of meaning. Every use of language is therefore textual because it is meaningful.

From the foregoing, the analysis of textuality as the veritable tool of meaning in the poem being investigated will in a long way enhance the understanding of the poet's application of the poem to social meaning in the Nigerian political environment. Osundare's poems are not only associated with events, the environment and culture, but they are also associated with economy and politics. His adamant rejection of a corrupt political system resulting in economic depression, class segregation, social injustice and oppression of the downtrodden masses is firmly established in this poem. As a social crusader, he is concerned about the reconstruction of the Nigerian political and economic systems for the purpose of bringing about a peaceful and prosperous society and a level playing ground for all.

### Literature Review

The textual function of a language is an aspect of the metafunctions that is significant in the production of a text into a logical and cohesive piece of discourse. Textuality as one of the major tools of holding the properties of language together has become an established norm in the critical analysis and interpretation of written discourse. For example, different linguists such as Halliday (1994), Halliday and Hasan (1976), Enkvist (1973), Bloor and Bloor (1995) have developed it as a tool for analysing literary and non-literary discourses.

Halliday ((1996:58) in his linguistic approach to the study of language distinguishes the textual function of language among the metafunctions. The textual function implies the speaker's or writer's ability to organise a text. In fact, when we use language to link other stretches of language or to help our ideas "come together," we perform the textual function. Halliday emphasises that the "functional sentence perspective" plays a major role in the actualisation of the textual functions of language and is key in the construction of the sentence as an instrument to convey information. It is through the textual metafunction that language makes links with itself and with the situation, and discourse becomes possible because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader can recognise it is a text.

Enkvist (1973, 111) suggests making a terminological distinction between text linguistics and inter-phrasal linguistics (although he admits some coincidence in this regard). He characterises the first as the science dealing with texts and the second as the science dealing with those properties of the sentence requiring a reference beyond the sentence. Such an approach to the grammar of the supra-phrase units has made it apparent that the traditional grammar should go beyond the sentence and cover the issues related to the linking sentences within text.

Osundare opens up a window of linguistic creativity to generate meaning by employing textuality in his poetry. Buttressing this assertion, Jones (2003:3) acknowledges Osundare's use of logicity and cohesiveness which are important elements that bring about textuality in any given text.

His unifying intelligence, like that of the English metaphysical poets

before him, is capable of yoking seemingly contrary ideas to produce a new insight into a familiar subject.

Jones explains that Osundare demonstrates the above assertion in one of his poems in his seemingly lighthearted tribute to Donne where he says the “legs” of a pair of compasses become Donne’s legs, which at first bare his licensed hands and no doubt rove over the contours of his mistress, then soberly and “now trousered” enable the reformed man to pursue his priestly functions. The wit, says Jones, lies in capturing all of these suggestions in a single image.

Then your compass legs (now trousered) completed the circle SMP. 16.

Textual metafunction as Daramola (2015:111) states, complements the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions by creating what is commonly referred to as relevance, that is, relevance to the environment, both situational and cultural. He states further that through the textual metafunction, language is imbued with the potential not just to create text, but to relate itself to both the context of situation and to the preceding and the succeeding texts.

Ellis (1987:144-145), in his contribution to the textual function of language, explains that the textual function is alone among the functions of systemic grammar in having devoted to it, outside the systemic model, a whole new discipline, a branch of linguistics generally which goes under the names of text grammar, discourse analysis, etc. He posits further that systemic grammar is least among what we might term the deep grammar school of linguistics in its treatment of the other functions, and in its perspective of integrating the textual with them. What explains these singularities, in Ellis opinion, is the fact

that, as Halliday puts it, the textual function is an enabling function in relation to the other functions which are directly extra-linguistic in their extrinsic functions.

Following the idea of textuality derived from the above linguists’ use of the concept, we deploy textuality in Niyi Osundare’s, “The Politician’s Two Mouths” to examine the qualities that make a poetic work a text and not a disjointed piece of discourse. These qualities are enhanced with the use and ordering of appropriate items in a logical and cohesive manner.

### **Theoretical Background**

This study adopts textual metafunction of Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the theoretical framework. The textual function of language, in the view of Halliday (1996:58-59), is concerned with the creation of a text. It is a function internal to language, and for this reason is not usually taken into account where the objects of investigation are extrinsic; but it came to be specifically associated with the term ‘functional’ in the work of Prague scholars who developed Buhler’s ideas within the framework of linguistic theory.

Linguists have approached the study of English from different points of view. As some have tried to account for formal aspects of the grammar divorced from meaning, others have attempted examining words and sentences (language forms) and then asking for how the forms of the language represent meaning. For Halliday, the only approach to the construction of grammars that is likely to be successful will be one that recognises meaning and use as central features of language and tackles the grammar from this point of view. It follows from this that Halliday’s

grammar is semantic and functional (Bloor and Bloor, 1995:2). He thus came up with a grammatical model known as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). In this grammatical model, Halliday identifies three basic functions of language, that is, ideational, interpersonal and textual, which are simply referred to as metafunctions.

The ideational metafunction deals with those aspects of grammar and semantics that are involved in the representation of the world and its experience. The interpersonal function is that function of the language that enables us to participate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles and to express and understand feelings, attitudes and judgements. The textual function is concerned with the creation of text. Since the textual function is adopted for the analysis of data, this aspect of metafunctions is thus our main focus in this section of the study.

### **Textual Function**

The textual function of language, according to Halliday, is concerned with the way language is organised to convey social message. Halliday ((1996:58-59)) asserts that it is through this function that language makes links with itself and with the situation, and discourse becomes possible because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader can recognise it is a text. A 'text', according to him, is an operational unit of language, as a sentence is a syntactic unit, it may be spoken or written, long or short, and it includes as a special instance a literary text, whether haiku or Homeric epic. It is the text and not some super-sentence that is the relevant unit for stylistic studies; this is a functional semantic concept and is not definable by size. In Halliday's opinion, the textual function

is not limited to the establishment of relations between sentences; it is concerned just as much with the internal organisation of the sentence, with its meaning as a message both in itself and in relation to the context.

The major part of the textual function is the Theme as it plays significant roles in organising a text into a cohesive piece.

### **Theme in Textual Function**

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, theme forms part of the textual metafunction. As earlier stated, textual metafunction has to do with the organisation of the clause as a message for meaning encoding in the communication process. In Halliday's functional grammar, two parallel and interrelated systems of analysis that concern the structure of the clause are identified. The first type is called information structure and involves constituents that are labeled *Given* and *New*. The second is called Thematic structure and involves constituents that are labeled *Theme* and *Rheme* (Bloor and Bloor, 1995:68). It is worthy of note that the way information is structured in communication is an extremely important aspect of a metafunctional grammar (Opeibi, 2004:61).

In order to communicate effectively, the speaker must bring to the hearer's attention some elements of shared knowledge. This shared information which is usually found at the beginning of a clause is labeled 'given information'. Most clauses also include information that serves as the focus of the speaker's message and is considered 'New' and this is found in the second part of the clause. These two elements constitute what Halliday refers to as 'information unit'.

The thematic structure is similar to information structure and it operates at the level of the clause. The first part of the clause contains the theme which

is considered as 'the idea represented by the constituent at the starting point of the clause'. This has been expressed by Halliday as 'the point of departure of the message'. Simply put, a clause begins with the realisation of the Theme. This is followed by the realisation of the Rheme, which serves as the rest of the message. It can thus be inferred that in many clauses, there is a parallel equivalence between *Theme* and *Given* on one hand, and between *Rheme* and *New* on the other (Bloor and Bloor 1995; Morley, 1995; Halliday 1985; 1994; 1996; 2004; Opeibi, 2004).

Other elements of the thematic structure are topical themes, textual and interpersonal themes, unmarked and marked themes, simple and multiple themes. The Topical Theme in any clause is the first constituent that is part of the meaningful structure of the clause. It always represents the participant, circumstance or process and it is always realised by one of the following elements: Subject (S), Predicator (P), Complement (C), or Circumstantial Adjunct (A).

A Textual Theme is when speakers in a conversation are commenting on the previous speaker's text. However, when speakers address listeners directly by using a name or a term of affection, it is referred to as Interpersonal Theme.

A Theme is said to be unmarked when a subject is in the Theme position in a declarative clause. Other elements that are frequently found in Theme position are said to be 'marked'. When a clause has one Thematic constituent, it is said to have a simple Theme. A Theme is said to have multiple Theme structures when the clause has more than one Theme.

### **Methodological Framework**

The selected poem of Niyi Osundare that serves as the primary

source of data is employed as the research instrument for this study. Our data for the analysis was collected and collated from a critical and analytical reading of the primary text. The poem was first organised into clauses and then arranged into tables. Thereafter, the various concepts that highlight the features of the text were identified and described.

The method adopted for the analysis of data was largely descriptive and interpretative. Thus, the poem was subjected to systematic descriptive analysis by the use of linguistic principles to reveal how Osundare projects the African socio-political landscape.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was considered relevant to this study because it contains functional orientations that enable us to describe poetic language as a resource organised according to the functions it has evolved to serve and the meaning of the message. Here the study accounts for the textual metafunction, which serves as the tool that is used to organise the message in a text and this corresponds to Theme/Rheme and information focus.

In the investigation of how the message in the poem was organised into texts, we accounted for the number of topical and non-topical themes which were also presented in tables. The inclusion of this dimension complements our efforts in determining the language patterns of Osundare. This method of analysis also brings about detailed fact finding and precise description.

In summary, the components of linguistic analysis in terms of functional theory of textual structure played significant role in interpreting and understanding the message of Osundare in projecting Nigerian socio-political landscape.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

In order to effectively carry out the analysis of this poem to determine its textuality and provide the meaning of the poet’s message, the poem was first organised into clauses and subjected to critical analysis in tabular forms. This is followed by the descriptive and interpretative discussion of the poem.

1. The politician’s mouth has two edges like *Esimuda’s* sword
2. it is murder both ways
3. Is it not the politician who sees a snake
4. and hails an earthworm?
5. He prostrates for a vote
6. but his mind squats like a hungry dog.

7. Alas, a thin membrane covers the belly
8. we cannot see the inside of a lying wolf.
9. When the man of power tells you his tale
10. ask him to wait till you bring a sieve.
11. whoever believes what the politician says his ear is blocked by the carcass of truth.
12. A politician tells you to wait
13. and you heed his words?
14. Ah! friend, your soul will tell you the biting pains of folly
15. The politician has two mouths both sharp like the white man’s razor

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| The politician’s mouth | has two edges like <i>Esimuda’s</i> sword |
| Theme                  | Rheme                                     |

2.

|       |                     |
|-------|---------------------|
| it    | is murder both ways |
| Theme | Rheme               |

3.

|                          |                  |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| Is it not the politician | who sees a snake |
| Theme                    | Rheme            |

4.

|       |                    |
|-------|--------------------|
| and   | hails an earthworm |
| Theme | Rheme              |

5.

|       |                       |
|-------|-----------------------|
| He    | prostrates for a vote |
| Theme | Rheme                 |

6.

|           |           |                          |
|-----------|-----------|--------------------------|
| But       | his mind  | squats like a hungry dog |
| Theme (1) | Theme (2) | Rheme                    |

7.

|           |                 |                  |
|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| Alas      | a thin membrane | covers the belly |
| Theme (1) | Theme (2)       | Rheme            |

8.

|       |                                       |
|-------|---------------------------------------|
| We    | cannot see the inside of a lying wolf |
| Theme | Rheme                                 |

9.

|           |                  |                    |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------|
| when      | the man of power | tells you his tale |
| Theme (1) | Theme (2)        | Rheme              |

10.

|           |       |                                |
|-----------|-------|--------------------------------|
| Ask       | Him   | to wait till you bring a sieve |
| Theme (1) | Theme | Rheme                          |

11.

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| whoever | believes what the politician says his ear is blocked by the carcass of truth. |
| Theme   | Rheme   |

12.

|              |                   |
|--------------|-------------------|
| A politician | tells you to wait |
| Theme        | Rheme             |

13.

|           |           |                |
|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| And       | You       | heed his words |
| Theme (1) | Theme (2) | Rheme          |

14.

|            |           |               |
|------------|-----------|---------------|
| ah! Friend | your soul | will tell you |
| Theme (1)  | Theme (2) | Rheme         |

|                           |
|---------------------------|
| the biting pains of folly |
| Rheme                     |

15.

|                |                |
|----------------|----------------|
| The politician | has two mouths |
| Theme          | Rheme          |

|                                       |
|---------------------------------------|
| both sharp like the white man's razor |
| Rheme                                 |

### Discussion

The above clausal analysis shows how the poet organises information in the clauses of the texts. In this subsection, we attempt to provide further explanation on how the clauses in the poem function as messages vis-a-vis the Theme and Rheme structure. It is observed that the poet gives some

elements special status by positioning them as Theme.

The first clause of the text begins with a Topical text where the Theme - **the politician's mouths** conflates with subject. This is an unmarked Theme which immediately focuses the attention of the audience on the poet's message. The New information is

encoded in the Rheme – **has two edges**.

Clause 2 contains a simple Thematic structure. The Theme is a pronominal element and is unmarked - **It**. The metaphor ‘murder’ is part of the elements that constitute the Theme of the clause – **is murder both ways**.

In clause 3, the Theme in the unmarked interrogative is realised by the negative tag and the subject together - **is it not the politician**. The rest of the message is developed in the Rheme. This message which focuses on the description of the deceitful character of the politician continues in the next clause (clause 4) where the adjunct – **and** serves as a marked Theme.

Clause 5 is another simple Thematic structure. The Theme is **he** and it also functions as the subject. It is a marked Theme. The Rheme explains what the politicians do to deceive the people to vote for them.

Clause 6 has a two-part Theme. The adjunct - **but** functions as a marked Theme while **his mind** serves as the unmarked Theme. Other elements of the clause constitute the Rheme.

Clause 7 has a multiple Theme structure. The mood adjunct – **Alas** functions as the textual Theme. It is a marked Theme, since while the clause is an exclamative clause, it is not the subject and hence it is foregrounded and helps to recognise it as thematic. The topical Theme which also functions as subject, **a thin membrane** is an unmarked Theme. The message is completed in the Rheme - covers the belly.

Clause 8 is the continuation of the information provided in the previous clause. The plural noun **we**, functions as the Theme, indicating a sense of common destiny where both the poet and the audience are at the

receiving end of the deceitful actions of the politicians. It is an unmarked Theme. The rest of the message is encoded in the Rheme which further explains how dangerous the politicians are. This is confirmed in the message of the poet when he uses ‘a wolf’ as a metaphor, comparing a politician with a wild and dangerous animal.

Clause 9 is another multiple Theme structure. The mood adjunct - **when** functions as a textual Theme. It is a marked Theme. The second Theme is – **the man of power**, which identifies the person that carries out the action. It is an unmarked Theme, being a nominal group, it also functions as subject. The rest of the message is encoded in the Rheme.

The incomplete information provided in the previous clause is carried to the next clause (clause 10). The clause which is identified as a multiple clause begins with – **ask** as the Theme and it is a marked Theme. The singular pronoun – **he** serves as the unmarked Theme in the second Theme of the clause. The advice of the poet to the audience on what they should do if the politicians ask them to wait is provided in the rest of the message as the Rheme.

In clause 11, the interrogative pronoun – **whoever** serves as the Theme and it is a marked Theme. The rest of the message which constitutes the Rheme, contains the warning of the poet to the audience not to be deceived by the sweet words of the politicians.

Clauses 12, 13 and 14 are the continuation of the poet’s warning to the politicians. In these clauses that carry the same information, both marked and unmarked Themes are identified. The unmarked Themes include:

A politician -  
Clause 12

You -  
 Clause 13  
 Your soul -  
 Clause 14  
 Marked Themes in these clauses are as follows:  
 And -  
 Clause 13  
 Ah! friend -  
 Clause 14  
 The thematic elements in each of the clauses encoded the rest of the message which expresses the warning

of the poet to the people not to trust the politicians.

Clause 15 which concludes the poet’s message contains the nominal group - **The politician** as the Theme. This Theme which also functions as the subject can also be regarded as Interpersonal Theme, since it identifies the person involved in the action. The message is then completed with the description of the politician’s deceitful character.

**Summary of Topical and Non-Topical Themes in Text 3**

| Non- Topical Themes ( marked) | Topical Themes (unmarked) |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 6                             | 11                        |

In our analysis of the Theme – Rheme structure in the text, we presented the Theme as the prominent element and the Rheme as the information that serves as the focus of the poet’s message. This has enabled us to have the knowledge of the texture as well as how the clauses are organised as messages of the poet in sensitising the audience and arousing the passion or the anger of the people, leading them to action.

**Findings and Conclusion**

Theme corresponds to textual meta-function which relates to meaning in messages as relevant in communication process, that is, to the communication of the clause as message. The analysis has shown that the message contained in a text can be meaningful only when the text is organised in a cohesive manner. This is only possible with the application of Theme/Rheme.

The analysis carried out in this study has shown that a Hallidayan linguistic approach to the study a literary work is capable of contributing to the meaning and understanding of

poetic discourse. It further reveals the significance of the approach to appreciating the endemic political corruption and socio-economic problems as the major obstacle to the achievement of sustainable development goal in Nigeria. Osundare’s employment of textuality has to some extent, aided the meaning and understanding of this poem as his adamant rejection of a corrupt political system resulting in economic depression, class segregation and social injustice.

Since the attainment of independence in 1960, Nigeria has remained underdeveloped as a result of high level of corruption, political instability and bad governance. The political class constantly manipulates the people and the political processes for their own selfish interest. They loot the treasury and embezzle the money meant for the development of the country leaving the people to wallow in abject poverty and the society remains pauperised.

Osundare’s declaration of revolution against the political class in this poem and in most of his works

contribute significantly to sensitising the people and prompting them into action to reject the oppressive political class. These efforts and those of many others are yielding results as many NGOs and civil rights groups such as Socio-economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), Campaign for Democracy (CD), Coalition for Revolution (Revolution Now), Concerned Nigerians (CN) have emerged protesting against political and economic corruption and social injustice in the country. Various anticorruption wars and advocacies that will eradicate corruption have also been established by the Nigerian government. They include Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt and other Practices Commission (ICPC). Recently, the Central Bank of Nigeria changed the country's currency as one of the means of curbing corruption in the country.

At the international level, Nigeria is a party to the United Nations Convention on Corruption (UNCAC). This international body provides preventive measures on corruption such as asset recovery, enforcement on different classes of crimes as well as enhancing international cooperation on issues of corruption between member states. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) also plays significant roles in fighting against corruption and crimes. The body sees to the effective implementation of the convention by member states.

Nigeria is today pervaded with political and economic corruption, ethnic rivalry, violence and fragile democratic institutions. It is very sad that 62 years after independence and 22 years of uninterrupted democratic rule, Nigeria's socio-economic development has been marred by bad

leadership which has denied the masses from enjoying the gains of a sovereign state. For the nation to break the circle and enjoy good governance, accountability and transparency, the citizens and the political class must embrace a change in behaviour, develop a strong political will in order to build the nation's fragile democracy into a highly rewarding project.

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