

## COHESIVE DEVICES IN HELON HABILA'S *WAITING FOR AN ANGEL*

<sup>1</sup>OLOKO, M. Jamiu, Ph.D; <sup>2</sup>YISA, Abdulah Olawale, Ph.D and  
<sup>3</sup>BADEJO, Monsurat Abisola

<sup>1</sup>Dept. of English Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State.

ORCID NO: 0009-0002-1247-09306; jmiuoloko@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Dept. of English Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State.

<sup>3</sup>General Studies Unit, Crescent University, Abeokuta, Ogun State.  
<sup>2</sup>yisao@tasued.edu.ng, <sup>3</sup>monsuratseriki@gmail.com

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### Abstract:

*Linguists like Halliday and Hassan take the view that the primary determinant of whether a set of sentences do or do not constitute a text depends on cohesive relationships within and between the sentences which create "texture". This texture is provided by the cohesive relation. Cohesive relationships within a text are set up where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. These cohesive devices that make a text a unified whole are encapsulated in literary texts as demonstrated in the examination of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* in this study. When a text is properly held together as a unit, it is said to be cohesive. Cohesion, therefore, is one of the devices used by authors to hold a text together. Findings show that Habila successfully employs cohesive devices to give vivid insight into life under a modern dictatorship and presents a moving testimony of trials, tribulations, injustices that reveal the excesses of the military in Nigerian politics.*

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### Introduction

Linguistics is basically the scientific study of language. It is a field concerned with the nature of language and communication. One of the objectives of linguistics is the understanding of the nature and functions of language. Language is not only a communicative medium; it is also a facility that is very useful to articulate and foster intrinsic values of a social system or policy. It is apparent that people have been fascinated with language and communication for thousands of years, yet in many ways, they are only beginning to understand the complex nature of this aspect of human life. Helon Habila displays his artistic creativity and a sign of ingenuity with the way and manner he

communicates salient messages in his novel, *Waiting for an Angel* using cohesive devices.

Coherence is defined as the quality of being logical, consistent and able to be understood. Imagine coherence as a building (It's an analogy, go with it). Cohesion on the other hand refers to the act of forming a whole unit. It is effectively a subset of coherence (Harshdeep Kaur, 2018). Tamunobelema, (2018) Pictures cohesion as the bricks and cement which make up the building Cohesion is therefore related to ensuring that the words and sentences you use stick together.

The notion of cohesion in language studies relates to the formal, especially, the semantics links between

one clause and another in terms of its reference in rolling forward or backward. With cohesive ties, we know how an item such as a pronoun, a noun, or a conjunction relates in either dimension (forward or backward) to another clause within a text. (Shedon, 2025).

The use of cohesion and coherence vividly picture the central message of Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* as the excesses of the military in Nigeria and the evil of their dictatorial rule. The events in the novel revolve around the protagonist, Lumba, a journalist in Lagos who was a political prisoner under the ruthless reign of General Sani Abacha. While in prison, he gets access to a pencil and paper and begins to write. He decides to keep a diary. Habila in this literary work reveals the evil effects of military rule in Nigeria. The incessant incursion of the military into Nigerian politics is satirized by the writer in this text.

As a result of the above evaluation, Habila has a major preoccupation in this text, that is, the military intervention and the prolonged military regimes, especially Abacha's regime that threatened to a large extent, the existence and unity of the nation. It is on this premise that we attempt to explore the cohesive devices that the writer uses that make his message in this text so easily understood by the readers.

### **1. Synopsis of Waiting for an Angel**

Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* is a compilation of extracts from his collection of short stories and prison stories which were published in Nigeria in 2002. The full story was subsequently published as a novel in the United Kingdom with the title *Waiting for an Angel*, in 2002.

The novel tells the story of Lumba, a journalist and political

prisoner during the era of the military junta of late General Sani Abacha. He wrote the story secretly while in prison and mostly early in the morning. The novel is all about death, fate and wretchedness, wrenching both gut and heart. Lumba attempts to capture the mood of those years of Abacha's reign; the despair, the frenzy, the somberness, but above all the reclusive and airless atmosphere that characterizes him in prison.

Habila ironically uses the word 'Angel' to make his work captivating. The word 'Angel' is metaphorical as the 'Angel' is not the heavenly being expected to rescue and set free Lumba, but rather this 'Angel' beats up Lumba and throws him to the street. This Angel no doubt represents the death Lumba awaits to put an end to his persistent turmoil. Habila reveals in this text that the only hope that is possible could be death, or the coming of a democratically elected president under whom Lumba and other political prisoners can only hope to enjoy release and eventually freedom.

Habila exposes the impact of the military incursion in Nigerian politics. Each time the military boys overthrow a democratically elected government, they present themselves as messiahs that want to save the nation from perpetual doom. But unfortunately, the intervention and prolonged military regimes have caused several damages to the nation as a whole and threatened the existence and unity of the country. To justify this position that the military government is not better than the corrupt civilian government, through Lumba, the protagonist, Habila observes:

*The military has failed us,  
I say down with  
khakisocracy; Down with  
meritocracy; Down with  
kleptocracy (p. 68)*

Nigerian military often abandon her primary role of security and protection to involve and participate in the politics of the nation. Jernibewon (1998) asserts that the constitutionally guaranteed role of the Nigeria armed forces is to protect the territorial integrity of the nation by warding off external aggression and suppressing internal insurrection. But whenever they take over the governance of the nation, they become terrors and dictatorial. Habila also justifies this assertion through Mao, another notable character in the text:

*Look, we are living under siege Their very presence on our streets and in the government houses instead of the barracks where they belong is an act of aggression. They hold us cowed with guns so that they will steal our money. This capitalism at its most militant and aggressive... They will continue subjugating us; Killing all dissenters, one by one, sending them into exile, till there is no competitor left to oppose them (p.158).*

In *Waiting for an Angel*, there is the central theme of oppression and the excesses of the military exemplified by the Abacha dictatorial rule. The general atmosphere of the nation at that time was tense and repressive. The entire citizenry faced so much hardship as they tried to survive against all odds. Their solace was in the Angel they awaited, the Angel of death, who they believed will bring ill end to their oppression.

This study is therefore an attempt to bring to limelight those elements/features that make the text to be unified and simple for the readers to understand the message of the author.

### **Conceptual Framework Cohesion**

Cohesion according to Chalker and Weiner (1994) has to do with grammatical or lexical relationships that bind different parts of a text together. Similarly, Osново (2003) defines cohesion as the linguistic means by which a text functions as a single unit. Yule (1996) posits that texts must have a certain structure which depends on factors quite different from those required in the structure of a single sentence. Some of these factors are described in terms of cohesion, or the ties and connections which exist within texts.

Cohesion, in the view of Halliday and Hasan (1976), occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one 'presupposes' the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text.

The implication of these different definitions provided above is that everything that makes a text a whole or single unit is a cohesive device. When we therefore talk about cohesion in texts, we are talking about how actual texts, like the one under study, *waiting for an Angel* by Habila, is held together lexically and grammatically. There are certain linguistic devices used in relating segments and bits of a text to one another. These linguistic devices are referred to as cohesive devices. In the study of languages, there are so many of such devices, but our interest is in the English language. We shall therefore examine in this paper cohesive devices that are predominant in *Waiting for an Angel*. Halliday and Hasan (ibid) outline types of cohesive

relationships which can be formally established within a text. It is these outlines that we shall use to analyze *Waiting for an Angel*.

**Cohesive Devices**

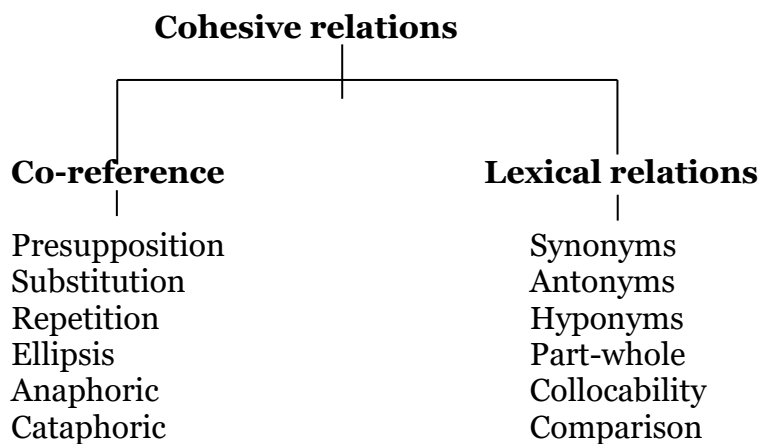
As earlier mentioned, certain linguistic devices used in relating segments and bits of a text to one another are referred to as cohesive devices. In this study, Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) two major types of cohesive relations are adopted for analysis. These are reference and lexical relation. Since their use of the term ‘reference’ is peculiar to them, we shall immediately substitute it with the term *co-reference*. Our primary interest, therefore, is to examine the co-

referential forms and lexical devices in *Waiting for an Angel*.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for analysis of the text under study is that of co-reference and lexical devices as aspects of cohesive devices.

**Co-referential forms** are forms which, instead of being interpreted semantically in their own right, make reference to something else for their interpretation (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). **Lexical devices**, on the other hand, involve making use of the characteristics and features of words as well as the group relationships among them (David, 2008).



**Fig 1.**

**Analysis and Discussion**

**A. Co-reference**

Co-referential forms direct the hearer/reader to look elsewhere for the interpretation of the message of the writer. As cohesive devices, they manifest in the following ways: presupposition, substitution, repetition, ellipsis, anaphoric, and cataphoric.

**Presupposition**

The notion of presupposition is defined in terms of assumptions the speaker makes about what the hearer is likely to accept without challenge (Givon 1979, quoted by Brown and Yule

1983). In the words of Steelmaker (1978), presupposition is what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation.

A typical example in *Waiting for an Angel* is when James addresses the audience on the setting ablaze of Lumba’s office by government agents, but does not mention who carried out the action, assuming that the audience knew who perpetrated the act:

*Hello, hello: Ladies and gentlemen, Brotherhood of the pen; I am happy to announce that we have here with us a man who a*

*moment ago we all thought had been arrested, a man whose office was this morning torched by... well. We all know by whom (p.212).*

In the view of Halliday and Hasan (1976), the two elements in a text, the presupposing and presupposed, create cohesion as one presupposes the other. Consider another example:

*There are so many faces in the bar, so many bodies pressed together... Men and women and children; One of them, I am sure, is an angel... There must be something in the eyes to suggest...*

The word 'them' presupposes for its interpretation something other than itself. This requirement is met by 'so many faces', 'so many bodies', 'men, women and children' in the preceding sentence. The presupposition, and the fact that it is resolved, provide cohesion in the expression and in so doing create text.

The above scene is an eye-opener into Habila's major pre-occupation in this text: the impact of military incursions in Nigerian politics.

### **Substitution**

Halliday and Hasan adopt a very straightforward model of co-reference. They assume a simple substitution view where an expression may simply be replaced by another in the text. They are not alone in this view, and there is a general approach to the analysis of text which is called 'substitution text linguistics' (see Harweg, 1978). Consider this example from the text being reviewed:

*A mob wielding cudgels and cutlasses is hot on the heels of a youth... The*

*youth, looking over his shoulder as he runs, crashes into a light pole and falls senselessly to the ground. Before he can regain a second wind, the mob is on him. I watched the cudgels rise and fall, I hear his wailing, his ululating scream finally turns into a whimper. They pour petrol on him and set him ablaze. I watched the fiery figure dancing and falling until it finally subsides onto a pavement as a black, glowing, twitching mass (p.40).*

In this extract, 'the youth' is substituted with the pronouns 'he', 'him', 'it', and the noun 'figure' in the preceding sentences. Presumably, the identity of the youth is preserved at least until it is dismembered, but its description has certainly changed, especially in the last clause. This cohesive device employed by Habila clearly shows that the violent nature of Nigerian society has seen no significant change under the military regime. After all, one of the excuses of the 'Khaki boys' for overthrowing the civilian government is the lack of security for lives and property.

### **Repetition**

Repetition is part of reiteration used as a lexical device. This is a situation where words are repeated multiple times, and it is a prominent device in the novel. The following words and phrases: *down, matter, laugh, 'I'll be back'* are repeated many times in the text. Few of such repetitions are:

*The military has failed us I say down with Khakistocracy: Down with meritocracy: Down with Kleptocracy: (p.68).*

The repetition of the word *down* in the above scene illustrates the kind of hatred that Bola, who is addressing a crowd, harbours for the military. It is not only Bola who hates the military; this is a general trend, nobody wants to be ruled by force; everybody detests dictatorial rule.

*'Laugh'* is another word that is repeated many times in the text, as shown below:  
*You de laugh at me because I bravely sacrifice my leg for this country, and now I am poor because I no fit work with one leg. You laugh at my friends here because dem de live old and broken houses, because dem no get brothers in the army to thief and send dem money... (p.33).*  
*But make I tell you something, you de laugh at the wrong people. Make you go laugh at all the big generals who de steal our country money everyday de send am to foreign bank while their country de die. Dem de drive long long motor cars with escort while I no even get two legs to walk on I, a hero, I fight... (p.134).*

The word *'laugh'* is very symbolic in this text. It signifies dehumanization and ridicule. The speaker, Brother, who lost one of his legs to a soldier's bullet in the post-June 12 riot, feels dejected and dehumanized when Nancy, a food server in a restaurant, laughs at him for protesting the inscription in a corner of the restaurant that reads 'Poor Man Paradise'. It is ironic that society hails

and praises the people who should be jailed while laughing at those who should be treated as heroes (like Brother, a true democrat who lost his leg while fighting for his country).

### Ellipsis

Ellipsis is part of what Halliday and Hasan referred to as co-referential forms. It refers to the omission from a sentence of words needed to complete the construction or meaning, as exemplified below:

*'...I say we are tired of being tired: Yes: tell them, Snake; "Great Nigerian Students; G-R-E-A-T Remember what Soyinka wrote: "The man dies in him who stands silent in the face of tyranny," and according to Amílcar Cabral, "Every onlooker is either a coward or a traitor." That is why we are here today. We can't continue to be onlookers when a handful of gun-wielding thugs are determined to push our beloved nation over the precipice...' (p.48).*  
*According to Martin Luther King Jr., it is the duty of every citizen to oppose unjust authority... (p.49).*

In the above extracts, ellipsis is observed in the first line ('...I say we are tired of being tired') and in the last line ('to oppose unjust authority...'). Ellipsis, the cohesive relationship employed by Habila in these examples, enables the reader to grasp the message of the people's determination to fight for their rights, good governance, freedom of expression, and liberation from oppression.

### Anaphoric Relations

Anaphora can be defined as subsequent reference to an already introduced entity. Mostly, we use anaphora in texts to maintain reference (Yule 1996:114).

Halliday and Hasan (1976:5) explain that cohesion is not a structural relation. Hence, it is unrestricted by sentence boundaries, and its most common form is simply the presupposition of something that has gone before, whether in the preceding sentence or not. This form of presupposition, pointing back to some previous item, is known as 'anaphora'. What is presupposed anaphorically may be in the sentence immediately preceding, but it may also be in some earlier sentence. In the following example from *Waiting for an Angel*, 'them' refers to 'Peter' and 'Paul', whose brother was arrested by the military, and the crowd protests violently:

*You can't take him away;  
Peter interjected. He is our  
brother! He is not well!' He  
is not well,' Paul echoed.  
Thieves! Ole! Give them  
their brother! Government  
boy-boy!' (pp.69-70).*

Another instance of anaphoric relation in the text is noticeable in Lumba's statement when he reports the police brutality against Nkem, his neighbor:

*When I returned to the  
tenement house They were  
taking Nkem away.  
The police, there were five  
of them, Were dragging  
him forcibly to  
Their van parked before  
the compound... His face  
was bloody, One eye was  
swollen  
And it kept blinking As it  
tried to focus on me.  
(p.109)*

'Them' in the second sentence refers back to 'the police', 'him' also refers back to 'Nkem' in the first sentence. This anaphoric function of 'them' and 'him' gives cohesion to the two sentences analyzed, so that we interpret them as a whole.

### Cataphoric Relations

While anaphoric relations are those which look back, cataphoric relations on the other hand are those which look forward in the text for their interpretation.

In the extract below, 'they' is a cataphoric item as it refers forward to 'the police':

*When I returned to the  
tenement house, they were  
taking Nkem away. The  
police, there were five of  
them... (p.109).*

Another example of cataphoric relations are exemplified as follows:

*But when I turn  
It is not a soldier standing  
there.  
It is an angel.  
It opens its enormous  
wings and closes them  
again in a clapping  
motion.  
The air from the wings lift  
me up and carries me out  
through the door.  
I land with a splash on the  
wet street  
I am bleeding from the  
chest.  
I feel life draining out of  
me... (p.43).*

In the above scene 'it' refers back to 'Angel', 'them' refers back to the 'wings' of the Angel. The Angel that was expected to rescue Lumba but instead beats him up and throws him to the street. The word 'Angel' is used

metaphorically by Habila as the Angel is not a God sent heavenly being but the death Lumba awaits to put an end to his persistent turmoil.

### A. Lexical Relations

Cohesion within a text can of course be provided by relationships other than those involving co-reference. Cohesion may be derived from lexical relationships like synonym, antonym, super-ordinate terms, hyponym, part-whole relationships, collocability and comparison.

#### Synonyms

Synonyms are two or more forms with closely related meanings, which are often, but not always, intersubstitutable in sentences (Yule 1996). It may not be the case that synonyms are exact substitutes in all circumstances. Thus, we may have words that are vital, complete, or absolute synonyms and others that are broad synonyms (Ogbulogo 2005). In *Waiting for an Angel*, synonyms are noticeable as exemplified below:

*Poverty street's real name was Morgan Street, one of the many decrepit, disease-ridden quarters that dotted the city of Lagos like ringworm on a beggar's body. My Aunt Rachael's restaurant; Goodwill food centre was at no 2 poverty street (p.120).*

From the above, 'restaurant' and 'food centre' are synonymous. They both refer to where people eat, drink and relax. Ironically, the place of eating and drinking in this novel is located at Poverty Street, indicating that the place is meant for the poor people in the society, the down-trodden masses who

don't have the opportunity to loot the treasury:

*Olokun Road terminated in the less squalid but more notorious university road...there were hotels for sex and alcohol, and there were doorways and alley-mouths for marijuana and cocaine (p.121).*

In the above extract, 'marijuana' is synonymous to 'cocaine'. They are both hard drugs injurious to human health.

*...in the post-June 12 riots...  
Brother had killed two soldiers  
With his bare hands before  
a third soldier  
Shot him in the leg (p.128).*

The verb 'killed' is synonymous to 'shot', another verb in the sentence. The two words describe the violence and crises that erupted after the annulment of the June 12 election by the military Junta.

#### Antonyms

Antonyms are sense relations expressing oppositeness in meaning. However, exact oppositions are at times not realized. Antonyms are mainly divided into two types, those which are gradable and those which are non-gradable (Yule 1996, Ogbulogo 2005). There are a few examples in the novel under study:

*I sure you don de miss the cold, eh?  
Here na so so heat full everywhere.  
Heat and soja. If the heat no kill you,  
Soja go harass you (p.131).  
...a man wanted to marry her...*

*Our landlord Alhaji Sikiru...he was killed In the Abiola riot, two years ago...*

*My Auntie, it seemed, wasn't very lucky with men.*

*It is only now...that I am able*

*To crack the riddle of 'Godwill'.*

*It was a wish, a prayer which vacillated between golden past and a dark, unhappy future (p.144).*

In the first extract, 'cold' is the opposite of 'heat', while the phrases 'golden past' and 'unhappy future' are antonyms in the second extract.

### **Super-ordinate terms/hyponyms**

This is another way that reiteration is used to achieve lexical cohesion in the novel. Super-ordinate has to do with words used as umbrella terms under which some other exists. Walker and Weiner (1994) define the term as words that operate at some other level than another which is subordinate to it.

Examples of super-ordinate/hyponymy in the text being analyzed are:

*Lomba picked a magazine up from the table and opened it. My write-up, it came out last week...*

*'The military in Nigerian politics' (p.87).*

In this extract, 'military' is super-ordinate to the 'armed forces' of the country.

*Nancy screamed, clapping her hands*

*In Brother's face... She snatched up the plate of half-eaten soup before him and brought it down,*

*upturned on his head...the gooey, mucilaginous okro soup trickled in slow motion down his face— eyes, ears, nose, moustache, beard...(p.134).*

'Face' in the above example is the super-ordinate of 'eyes', 'ears', 'nose', 'moustache', and 'beard'.

### **Co-hyponyms**

The word 'hyponym' according to Cruse (2004) is one of the most important structuring relations in the vocabulary of a language. Co-hyponyms means hyponyms that are in company. The text under review has many examples of co-hyponyms:

*...his footsteps muffled by the sound of the car engine (p.142).*

*Later, arraigned before the full council of my family: My irate, table-banging father, My weeping mother and my kid sister (p.142).*

'Car' is the hyponym of 'engine', while 'family' is the hyponym of 'father', 'mother', and 'sister' in these examples.

### **Part-whole**

These are words where there is a part and a whole of an item used in the same sentence. An example will suffice here:

*Lomba finds himself wrapped in the huge arms (p.211).*

### **Collocability**

Collocation refers to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. It establishes the sense associations which are predictable.

Consider this example from the text:

*...the waves growing stronger through the weekend, finally to break on Tuesday's rocky shores. The Dial is a weekly magazine of arts and society, and recently politics. Ordinarily, Lomba does not come to the office on Wednesday...(p.188).*

In the above expression, 'Tuesday' relates to 'Wednesday'.

### Comparison

This is another important form of lexical relation. It has to do with examining or judging to what extent persons or things are similar or not similar. A few examples of this type of lexical relation from the novel are:

*...when we saw the leg shattered and bloody we decided to call it a day but the bastards followed us to the hostels... when we heard the girls screaming 'rape';  
Our courage was rekindled. You should have seen Sankara directing us at the basketball court, like a fucking general. The street was like a fucking war zone, filled with smoke and darting figures and fire and gunshot. One student died (p.73).*

From the above, 'like a fucking general' and 'like a fucking war zone' are the comparisons identified in these extracts. Habila achieves his aim of exposing the excesses of the military with the use of this lexical relation.

### Implications and Conclusion

What we have tried to show in this paper are the cohesive devices

which we consider have made Habila's novels simple and straightforward for his reader. From the diction, we have looked at various examples that have bearing with co-referential types and lexical relations. The examples that we used have shown that the way sentences and expressions are structured in a text contribute a great deal to our understanding of the meaning of a fictional prose.

We must however quickly mention here that the examples chosen to illustrate each facet of our discourse are in no way exhaustive. They are even sometimes limited and somewhat arbitrary, yet we believe that the areas that we have touched or brought out as examples have tried to bring out the cohesiveness in Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*. The application of these cohesive devices enables Habila to skillfully evoke an atmosphere of tension and fear, and indeed, a powerful picture of a critical period in Nigerian history.

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