Metaphors as Discourse Strategies in Osundare’s Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines the different categories and functions of metaphors in Niyi Osundare’s poetry, motivated by the scanty scholarly linguistic studies on metaphors in his poetry. Using insights from contextual models, metaphors in Osundare’s poetry are studied and analysed with a view to examining his reliance on metaphors as discursive strategies to question socio-political issues in his Nigerian society. The paper identifies five types of metaphors in his poetry: animal metaphors, from abstract phenomena to concrete metaphors, synaesthetic metaphors, organic metaphors, and telescoped metaphors. It also demonstrates that the metaphors play contextual roles such as being interactional tools, address terms, and weapons of criticisms. Metaphors are linguistic armories deployed by Osundare to question and address socio-political issues in Nigeria and beyond.

Keywords: discourse strategies, metaphors, contextual models, imageries.
1. Introduction and Review of Relevant Literature

Osundare, a frontline writer in Africa has been read from various perspectives: literary/critical (e.g. Doki, 2009, Nwagbara (2012) and linguistic (e.g. Osoba, 1990, 1991a and 1991b; Edonmi 2000). However, with a possible exception of Jolayemi (2003), who attempts a stylistic analysis of Niyi osundare’s poems in Village Voices with the aim of establishing his foregrounded use of metaphorical language, much less attention has been paid to metaphors in Niyi Osundare’s poetry. In fact, none of the studies on his poetry has examined metaphors as discourse strategies.

Despite much excellent work on both the linguistic and non linguistic aspects of Niyi Osundare’s poetry, scholars examining his poetry have not addressed the use of metaphors as discourse strategies as a way of better understanding the thematic preoccupation and the vision of Osundare in his poetry. Yet, without such an understanding, we are left with an inadequate analysis that creates the condition for ill informed interpretation of his poetry. This study will remedy this gap in the literature in order to explicate the heretofore unrecognised relationships between the metaphors in his poetry and his vision and thematic preoccupations as a poet.

A study of metaphors in his poetry, apart from breaking the silence on the discourse values of metaphors, will lend a better understanding of his poetry, as figurative language usually have close associations with the thematic preoccupation and vision of a writer. Therefore, this work sets out to examine how contextual considerations such as theme and ideology, influence the choice of metaphors and the use of these metaphors in Osundare’s poetry. Selected metaphors from his poetry are analysed, using insights from contextual models (Halliday 1978; Mey 2000; Odebunmi 2006).

The measly references cited here on metaphors prove that little research has yet been done on metaphors on the works of the world-acclaimed, Nigerian-born poet, Niyi Osundare. This poet has written about a dozen of poetry collections, few drama pieces, a handful of books of criticism, a book of essays, numerous articles on literature, language, culture and society. His poetry collections include The Songs of the Marketplace (1983), Village Voices (1984), The Eye of the Earth (1986), Moonsongs (1984), Waiting Laughers (1990), Midlife (1993), Songs of the Season (1999), Horses of Memory (1999) and The Word is an Egg (2000), Random Blues (2009) among others. He is undisputedly one of the world’s most significant contemporary poets. Osundare is a strong believer in poetry as performance. He has performed his poetry in different parts Europe, Asia, Canada, Africa and the United States; and his poems have been translated into different languages which include; Italian, French, German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean and Dutch. He is a social critic and activist who has never shield away from speaking out on the social, economic and political crises in Nigeria and the rest of the continent. Section 2 below discusses poetry as discourse, while section 3 discusses the theoretical perspectives for the study. In section 4, we examine metaphors in Osundare’s poetry and in section 5, we conclude the paper.
2. Poetry as Discourse

Poetry can be defined as a special use of language to express intense feelings. Poetry deploys language in a special way. It employs language to evoke and exalt special qualities of life, and suffices readers with feelings. The language of poetry can be said to be an admixture of sound devices, imagery and symbolism. According to Sage (1987) poetry is one of the most effective and powerful transmitters of culture. Poems contain so many cultural elements—allusions, vocabulary, idioms, tones that are not easy to translate into another language.

Furthermore, poetry can be seen as the art of rhythmical composition, written or spoken, for exciting pleasure by beautiful, imaginative, or elevated thoughts and as literary work in metrical form; verse. In the above definition, note the two key aspects of poetry - rhythm and meter. Rhythm is part of the world around us. We see it in the ocean tides, in the seasons, and even in the beat of our heart. In verse, rhythm is the flow of sound produced by the language; we sense something repeating as we read. Meter is the pattern of rhythm, and it may vary from poem to poem. Another popular poetic device is rhyme. The rhyming elements are usually the last words on a line. Of course, rhyming patterns may vary. Sometimes the rhyme follows immediately on the next line, or it may be delayed.

Furthermore, Cuddon (1999) defines poem as “something made, created thus, a work of art.” He further states that:

What makes a poem different from any other kind of composition is a species of magic, the secret to which lies in the way the words lean upon each other, are linked and interlocked in sense and rhythm, and thus elicit from each other’s syllables a kind of tune whose beat and melody varies subtly and which is different from prose. (721)

Poetry differs significantly from prose because it is usually metaphorical and more often than not exhibits such formal elements as metre, rhyme, and stanzaic structure. Also, experience can be intensified and enhanced through the feelings that dictate it and that which it communicates and the economy and resonance of language. These qualities are found only intermittently in prose. A poem too cannot be paraphrased without injury to its full meaning.

In addition, poetry deploys certain forms and conventions to elaborate the literal meaning of words, or to evoke emotional or sensual responses. Assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhythm are some of the devices used to achieve musical or incantatory effects. Further, the use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony and other stylistic elements of poetic diction more often than not give room to multiple interpretations. Likewise, metaphor and simile bring about a kind of sonority between otherwise different images—a layering of meanings, thereby forming connections previously not perceived.

Poetry often captures the poet’s feelings, desires and attitudes. It is most often enriched with figurative language and therefore employs images and particularly symbols of some kind. In
fact, it is the oldest form of literature. From early times, poetry was a universal phenomenon. It is the oldest form of literature known to man. The earliest poetry was a fusion of song and dance. It had a close semblance to religious rituals and feast. It was a means of expressing man’s most fundamental feelings and desires.

Meaning in poetry can be emotional and contextual in that, a poem calls for a personal response from individual readers which is in accordance with their words and views in life. Meaning in poetry is also arrived at through cultural spectacles. This accounts for why people from different cultural backgrounds will approach the same poem from different point of views and work towards a common message; although, the nuances will still differ from person to person, even if they arrive at the common general meaning. The present study examines Osundare’s use of metaphors in his poetry with a view to establishing their discourse values.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

This study is anchored on contextual models. This is because metaphors and their uses in literary works have close affiliations with context. This brings up the connection between context and style, which often stipulates the linguistic choices in interactions. It is a model about language use, which corresponds to the sociosemiotic model of language developed by Halliday (1978, 1994). Genre being a realization of the context of culture is the overall purpose of a social interaction. It is, according to Martin (1984: 25) “a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture”.

Odebunmi (2008) opines that the term “context” has a wide scope of application, ranging from the environment in which words occur to the situation in which language is used. Context could mean two things: first, the co-text i.e. the verbal elements that surround the expression at issue; second, “context comprises not only the larger, verbal environment in which the utterance or word occurs, but also its wider surroundings, in particular the conditions under which the utterance or word was generated in the first place” (Mey 2000: 7). Agreeing with the above, Odebunmi (2006: 1) describes “context as the spine of meaning.”

The appropriacy of communicative choices to the situation of language use is connected to context and style. An example is the dissimilarity that results from the way language is used by a teacher to teach, and the way the same individual deploys language to relate with his carpenter. How language is used, thus, depends on a number of factors- the subject of communication, and the impositions of the surroundings, including specificity of reference, the persons in interaction, and the medium of interaction. What this means is that the choice of language and language variety is situation - specific.

The context of situation is the immediate interactive situation. Halliday (1978) opines that context of situation can be interpreted by means of a conceptual framework using the terms field, tenor and mode of discourse, as the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning. To Halliday, these three aspects of context reveal how language is used. Here is
when the particular language choice and the specific context of situation in which it occurs are targeted.

Field of discourse concerns the activity in which we are engaged as recognized in the culture. According to Halliday (1989), it is what is happening, the nature of the social action taking place, what the participants are doing, in which the language figures as some essential component. In addition, to Gregory and Carroll (1978: 7) the field of discourse is the consequence of the user's purposive role, what his language is about, what experience he is verbalizing, what is going on through language.

The tenor of discourse “refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their statuses and roles” (Halliday and Hasan, 1980). In other words, the tenor of discourse concerns the players, the actors and the interacting roles that are involved in the creation of the text. It tries to provide an answer to the question- what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another?

The mode of discourse refers to the role language is playing in the interaction. What do the participants expect the language to do for them in a particular situation? The symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, its function in the context, including the channel (spoken, written or the combination of both) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, etc. The major preoccupation of the present study is on the functional aspect of language. Hence, we shall rely on the contextual models, in the sense that it focuses not only on the structure of language, but also on the properties of discourse and its functions in specific social and cultural situations.

4. Analysis and Findings
4.1 Animal Metaphors

Animal metaphors are metaphors which suggest human characteristics for animals or inanimate things. Speaking about anthropomorphic metaphors, Ullman (1977:214) avers that “…the greater parts of expressions referring to animate objects are taken by transfer from the human body and its passions.” In the texts under consideration, Osundare makes distinctive use of a wide range of images from the animal kingdom. He explores the animal kingdom for a wide range of metaphors. These metaphors have human beings and intangible objects as tenors respectively and the vehicles are taken from the animal kingdom. Examples in the texts under consideration include: In “Random blues 2” (Random Blues),

(a) Silence is a serpent. (1)
(b) The politician is a rag of leeches and lice. (13-14)

In the first example, silence is likened to a serpent. A serpent is a long, scaly, limbless reptile. Serpents travel on their belly or rib cage, and because of the nearness of their head to the ground, their flickering tongue appears to be licking the dust. “Silence” as used here is a metaphor for those who feel contented with the ways things are going in the society as long as they are not
affected directly at the moment. They are as good as being bitten by a serpent. In fact, failure to make their voices heard is worse than the effect of the venom secreted by a serpent. In the second example, that is (b) above, the Nigerian politicians are not in any way different from bloodsucking insects. Head lice are tiny, wingless insects that are generally about the size of a sesame seed. The politicians “suck” the people dry by enriching themselves and their family members at the expense of the whole citizenry. Shock, shame, and guilt are typical reactions of parents whose children contract head lice. The politicians in the country too should be ashamed of themselves. The poet also compares them to “leeches”. These are bloodsucking aquatic or terrestrial worms with a flat, segmented body that tapers at both ends but is broadest toward the posterior part. These creatures have a disk, or sucker, at each end of the body, the one at the head end being equipped with biting jaws. Leeches are found in great numbers in many streams and rivers in Africa. The young of one variety, when swallowed with the drinking water, attach themselves to the nasal cavities, larynx, or epiglottis of their host. They grow rapidly and are not easily removed. Their presence can hinder breathing and this, as well as loss of blood, sometimes proves fatal to the victim. A leech may consume three times its own weight in blood, a strong anticoagulant in its saliva ensuring a continuous flow from the victim. The politicians in the country are not in any way different from these bloodsucking worms. They are enriching themselves at the expense of the people they are representing. They do not care whether these people are well fed or not all they care about is enriching themselves and their cronies. Normally, like we will do to an unwanted friend, we try as much as possible to avoid “leeches” and “lice” in our homes and even our compounds. In like manner, the politicians too are not our friends. They claim to share our hunger, but in their mouths are crumbs of bread. Their fatness makes everybody and the country thin.

Further, in “Random blues 16” (Random Blues) we have these examples:

(c) Opulent orangutans. (18)
(d) Beasts of burden. (37)

Here, the corrupt leaders in (c) are aptly captured with animal metaphor. In example (c) the reference to the leaders as “opulent orangutans” is metaphoric. An orangutan is the largest tree-dwelling animal on the planet. Orangutans belong to the order of great apes, as do gorillas and chimpanzees. These gentle, hermitlike creatures live in the dense jungles of Borneo and Sumatra, two of the largest islands in Southeast Asia. Their name is made up of two Indonesian words, orang and hutan, meaning “man of the forest”. In spite of their riches, the leaders are like this animal- orangutans. This is not unconnected to the fact that the leaders isolate themselves from the common people that brought them to the corridor of power just like the orangutans are also hermitlike creatures. Further, the leaders are likened to animals because of their animalistic and inhuman behaviours. Then, the people are also seen as “beast of burden” in (d). Denotatively, “beast of burden” suggests an animal such as a donkey or an ox and an elephant used for transporting loads or doing other heavy work. The people toil and work; sweat both night and day but it is the corrupt leaders who enjoy the wealth of the land. The people are yoked and ridden for countless seasons and obediently and powerless like a donkey never kick.
Also, in “Words catch fire” (The Word is an Egg), we have the following examples;
(e) The crocodile jaws of power brokers. (113)
(f) The hive of my mouth. (157)

In (e) above, power brokers are said to have crocodile jaws. A crocodile is a large voracious aquatic reptile having a long snout with massive jaws and sharp teeth and a body covered with bony plates. The real power of the crocodile resides in its triangular snout. What a sight greets the eye when the hinged lower jaw drops open, revealing perhaps a full set of sixty-six sharp teeth! When the jaws clamp shut, the pressure exerted is tremendous. The metaphor is an attempt to expose powerful people in high places, be it in religion and politics who got to where they are because of the people but who have betrayed the people. Instead of guiding and guarding the people, these leaders oppress and even crush those who try to resist the oppression. Also in (f), the “hive of my mouth” is a metaphor of the angry people of the land represented here by the poet. The “hive” is a structure that provides a natural habitation for bees; as in a hollow tree. In this case, the mouth is seen as that structure providing natural habitation for bees. This suggests that if and when people are pushed to the wall they can fight back if not physically then verbally.

4.2 From Abstract Phenomena to Concrete Metaphors

Every writer aims at communicating effectively. Little wonder, poets endeavour to use metaphors appropriately and extensively. Some metaphors can help translate abstract ideas into concrete and palpable terms. Osundare deploys these metaphors extensively in his poetry. Examples in some of the texts under consideration include: in “Unspoken tears” (The Word is an Egg),
(a) …the abyss of lampless nights. (2-3)
(b) …clan of earless conquerors. (8)

Further in “Words catch fire” (The Word is an Egg), we have the following:
(c) Let them mind the wrath of wailing wombs. (106)
(d) The Politician drowns it in a torrent of words. (168)

These metaphors help in the concretization of abstract ideas and experiences. For instance, “lampless nights” in (a) above suggests utter darkness and it is a metaphor for hopelessness. Darkness in itself is abstract. To concretize this abstract experience, “abyss” is used in a figurative way to show the depth of the darkness. We are now made to see how real and how extensive is the darkness in the land. Further, “earless conquerors” in (b) is a metaphor for leaders who are unresponsive to the pains, sufferings and the cries of their people. At the initial reading, one may not able to situate clearly what is meant by “earless conquerors”. The word “clan” is used to concretize the metaphor. We can now see clearly that they are a group of people, a cabal who are in the helm of affairs in the land. This group of people does not care about the hopeless situation of the people. In (c) above, “wailing wombs” is an abstract idea and a metaphor that suggests pain and agony. The poet concretizes it by the addition of “wrath”, thus; we have the “wrath of wailing wombs”. This paints the picture of anger and retribution for those
who are ruining the earth “by mining the earth with bombs and poisoned arrows”. In (d), “torrent” denotes force at which the ocean wave moves; it is used here to convey “words”. This has helped to foreground “words” because now we can think of words as doing what the force of the ocean can do.

4.3 Synaesthetic Metaphors

These are metaphors that are based on transposition from one sense to the other of the five commonly known senses. In a synaesthetic metaphor, a certain perceptual mode is initially specified (or may be assumed), but the imagery is linguistically related in terms belonging to one or more differing perceptual modes. Commonplace examples in English include phrases such as "loud colors", "dark sounds", and "sweet smells". Examples abound in the texts under consideration. In “Words catch fire” (*The Word is an Egg*) we have the following:

(a)… imperial furnace. (5)

(b) …luscious rainbow. (76)

In “Omoleti” (*The Word is an Egg*) we have the following:

(c) …murmuring mist. (27)

(d) Of the song which invades the throat. (112)

(e)In the hammock of sound and silence. (144)

All the metaphors identified show that there are movements from one sense to another. In (a) above, there is a transposition of the sense of vision (‘imperial’) and that of touch (‘furnace’). This suggests that what happens in the empire is nothing to write home about. Furnace suggests excessive hotness. The metaphor “imperial furnace” is an indication of the plight of the people of the land. The heat coming from the imperial furnace shows that the emperor must be responsible for the suffering experienced in the land. In (b), there is a transposition of the sense of taste and that of vision. Also in (c) we have a transposition of the sense of hearing (‘murmuring’) and that of vision (‘mist’). It is a transposition of the sense of hearing (‘song’) and that of taste (‘throat’) that we have in (d) above. In (e) also, we have a transposition of the sense of vision (‘hammock’) and that of hearing (‘sound and silence’). All these synaesthetic metaphors help in projecting the thematic preoccupation of the texts and to establish their intelligibility.

4.4 Organic Metaphors

This is also known as functional-structural metaphor. Cuddon (1999) says the “vehicle of an organic metaphor is symbolic and carries an implicit tenor.” Thus, we have an organic metaphor when the imagery or the object of comparison is symbolic and has an implied undertone. Examples abound in the texts under study, and these include: in “Apocryphal thunder” (*The Word is an Egg*),

(a) Pound the streets
   With spiked boots. (3-4)

(b) The chameleon has lost count
Of the colours of tumbling edicts. (7-8)
Further, in “Unspoken tears” (The word is an Egg), we have:
  (c) The unspoken tears
      of tongueless tribes. (1-2)
  (d) Plodding through the abyss
      of lampless nights. (3-4)

In (a), the organic metaphors “pound” and “spiked boots” are images that are symbolic. They portray military regimes in the country that are of questionable authenticity but who are bent on crushing any form of opposition. Also in (b), the disorganized state of affairs in the country is brought to light by these images; “chameleon” and “colours of tumbling edicts”. The chameleon is a slow-moving, tree-dwelling lizard noted for its color-changing ability. Color response is primarily determined by temperature, light intensity, and emotional state. Chameleons have the ability to change color in response to emotions such as anger or alarm, or to various stimuli, including heat and light. They may change color from gray to green and brown, and sometimes even yellow. This is an aid to them in camouflaging themselves. In some quarters in Africa, the chameleon is regarded as the king of colours. But the poet opines that the crocodile has lost its colour changing ability. The implication of this is that the country is in disarray; nobody seems to know the way out. Nothing seems to be working again in the land as all we have are “tumbling edicts.” Further, the organic metaphor “unspoken tears of tongueless tribes” is symbolic. The tongueless tribes are the oppressed in the society. These ones have lost their tongue as it were because their voices are no longer heard in the society. Even though they cry both day and night, the leaders do not care about them. “Lampless night” in (d) is also symbolic. It means that there is no hope in sight for the nation and the people as well. The future is very bleak for the country. The “abyss” as used there is a testament to the hopelessness of the country and the people. Denotatively, the “abyss” is a bottomless gulf or pit; any unfathomable (or apparently unfathomable) cavity or chasm or void extending below. This is the kind of situation the people find themselves in.

4.5 Telescop ed Metaphors

This is called a complex metaphor. This happens when the vehicle of one metaphor becomes the tenor of another closely connected to it. In other words, the vehicle of one metaphor transforms into the tenor of another. We have an example from “Words catch fire” (The Word is an Egg);

  Words catch fire on the tongue of the bell
  The rallying lyric of a flared summon
  Cutting through the fog of silence. (190-192)

In the example above, “words” is the tenor and tongue of the bell is the vehicle, initially. “The rallying lyric of a flared summon” is the vehicle next and it has “tongue of the bell” as the tenor. Then, “the rallying lyric of a flared summon transforms to the tenor of another metaphor “the fog of silence””. Here, we noticed that the metaphor continues to unfold and extend like a collapsible telescope. The symbolic message here is that with words we can achieve a lot. Keeping silent
when we are being oppressed will not take us anywhere. It is a testament to the fact that people can win when they speak and fight for their rights but when they keep quiet they have lost.

5. Conclusion

This study has thrown some light on Niyi Osundare’s use of metaphors in his poetry. We have, in the foregoing, demonstrated that there are five types of metaphors in Osundare’s poetry, namely, animal metaphors, from abstract phenomena to concrete metaphors, synaesthetic metaphors, organic metaphors, and telescoped metaphors. The richness of metaphoric images lies in their ambivalence, allowing the possibility of multiple interpretations. Metaphors exist on the border of two worlds: that of the literary imagination and our everyday reality, and they act as intermediary tools of communication between these worlds. Metaphors play contextual roles by serving as interactional tools, address terms, and weapons of criticisms. Metaphors are linguistic armouries deployed by Osundare to question and address socio-political issues in Nigeria and beyond. Metaphors in his poetry are not arbitrary selections; rather they are carefully chosen to serve particular thematic, discourse and stylistic purposes in his poetry.
References


