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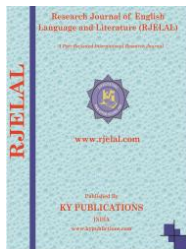
ON DEHUMANIZATION AND EXPLOITATION: A LEXICO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF RICHARD WRIGHT'S *BLACK BOY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the lexico-semantic analysis of dehumanization and exploitation in Richard Wright's *Black boy*. The author's background and his personal experiences which propelled him to write the book are examined. Indeed, it was difficult for a neglected young black boy to survive in a white dominated and hostile community coupled with high level of hostility and rejection from home as x-rayed in this paper. The theoretical framework of Hallidayan Functional Grammar approach will be employed for the analysis. Instances of dehumanization and exploitation which the blacks contented with in the hands of the whites are brought out through lexico-semantic analysis. Hence, the innocent, naïve, young boy grew up with negative and unpalatable world view of self-alienation from home and the society.

Keyword: Semantic, dehumanization, exploitation, experiences, hostility.

Introduction

The importance of language in human community cannot be over-emphasized. Thus, language plays significant roles in any speech community. Hence, without language, human beings would have found it practically impossible to communicate to the world around them. The main purpose of language is for man to communicate. So, the study of language is the study of man. In communication, language is vital to humans. According to Craith (2007:2) "language is a form of cultural capital and linguistic capital."

Language expresses culture, it is the only way by which the social experience and values of a group of people are perceived and understood. Sapir (1949) explores this relation between language and the interpretation of social reality in his discussion of the interrelation between language, culture and

personality. He avers that language is not ordinarily thought of as of essential interest to human beings, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems which is demonstrated in Wright's work.

Richard Wright presents his childhood experiences in two ways; as the tragic and harrowing story of a young Negro growing up in a difficult and treacherous world and a story about growing up in a hostile family. Wright also shows that the determination of some black people to survive despite the cloudy state of exploitation and dehumanization in America at that time are x-rayed in this paper. He reveals these instances directly and indirectly through the speeches, places, situations, events and circumstances. This paper therefore intends to focus on how he presents his subject through the effective use of language. It attempts to study how the author uses lexical categories and semantic implications to reflect the state of

maltreatment, dehumanization, and inhuman treatment to man.

Review of Related Scholarship

The work of Richard Wright has attracted some critical reviews and appraisals from both critics and scholars. They vary from its themes, narrative technique to language use. Prescott (2007) while commenting on black boy, calls Wright "a famous writer....An acknowledged reader of his race". According to Prescott, "his success story gives him credit but the wounds he received were deep" He states that:

the life he knew as a child is not over.
It has not changed. Such life is usually
completely outside the comprehension
of white Americans (35).

In view of the above, Prescott seems more critical in his observation. He notes that Wright's explosive autobiography does not suggest any constructive means for improving the lot of the Negroes. Through his behaviors, he tells his fellows never to bow to white rules. Therefore, revolt is portrayed by Wright as the only solution to the problems of his fellow Negroes. Adebayo (2001) considers Wright's work and asserts that:

The author recounts his childhood as

Being characterized by hunger, deprivation,
injustices, violence, insecurity, and innate
distrust of white people (95)

Indeed, what Adebayo describes as an autobiography which is able to paint a picture of the American society during Wright's time, yet he did not examine the lexico-semantic features in the text. In the words of Charle Lee (2007), "Wright's autobiography may possibly go down in history as one of the most memorable books of our time." He posits that "life breaths in its pages with a reality and intensity". Black boy, to Lee is a candid camera recording of the injustices that exist in America and also mirror their lives through effective use of language, thus the basis for examining lexical meanings in the novel. Another critic, Ellison (1958) studies that Wright's novel from the political point of view and not from the Lexico-semantic angle. He argues that:

the Black Boy is the song that follows
the reality of pure tragedy and creates
arts from the pain of suffering as a form,
the blue is an autobiography chronicle
of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically
(47)

In consonance with the above, and in a rather insightful perspective, Oluyemisi (2011) submits that:

a lexical study takes notes of the component
or features of vocabulary in a text.

In the novel, black boy, the vocabulary items noted are as well significant for meaning in various ways because there is always a meaning in a sentence (2)

In view of the above, it becomes evidently clear that these scholars did not examine a lexico-semantics of exploitation and dehumanization in the novel but this paper intends to exploit these aspects. More so, as evidences from above show, not much has been done on the concept of dehumanization and exploitation from the perspective of lexico-semantic analysis as we intend to do in this paper.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative method in the analysis of the novel. The focus of this paper shall be on the novel as the primary source of data. Secondary sources constitute scholarly essays, journals, books, internet materials. Emphasis shall be on Halliday's functional approach, as examples are drawn from the text. The analysis involves lexical and semantic functions. The text contains fourteen chapters. The groups were selected randomly which cover the first seven chapters and the last seven chapters that make up the novel.

Theoretical background

This paper is anchored on Hallidayan Functional Grammar, he asserts that:

word classes can be viewed semantically:
verbs typically refer to process, nouns to
entities and adjectives to qualities. They can
also be viewed from round about at their own
level, in terms of the relations into which they
enter. (50)

One major way Richard Wright shows his themes and communicates his message is through his style and choice of words in language use. Halliday and Mathiessen (2004) Functional Grammar model further proposes that lexical items relate; such as the relations existing between other items in a text. They term the relationship "Elaborating relations and extended relation". The model states further that:

text is a semantic phenomenon in the first instance; it is meaning unfolding in some particular context of situation,

The grammatical system of conjunction gives speaker and writer the resources to mark transitions in the development of a text (586)

Halliday emphasizes the fact that language is the product of a social group and a means of performing certain social functions. He proposes that "when we talk of a social function of language, we mean those contexts which are significant in that we are able to specify sense of meaning potential that is characteristically associated with them" (26). The model is interested in communicative competence of what the speaker can do (socially), what he can mean (with the usage of lexical-grammatical or semantic forms and what he can say at a particular place and at a specific time. Textual function according to Halliday, provides the text and situation in language for expression of content (ideational) and assignment of roles by writers.

It becomes obvious from this perception that the lexico-semantic intent of linguistics in *Black Boy* will be viewed from the ideation (content) and the textual function of the language of Richard Wright.

"Style", according to Leech and Short (1981), is "the way in which language is used in a given context by a given person, for a given purpose and so on." Thus, the most specific domain of style as stated by Leech and Short is the text. "A text is any passage, spoken, or written, monologue or dialogue and whatever length that forms a unified whole."

The above theoretical framework gives the novel the uniqueness it has and makes it different from other works that have addressed similar topic(s)

and also those that have presented African-American experiences in the novel. In view of this, Richard Wright's style in language use shall be examined through lexico-semantic analysis. Leech and Short opine that 'every analysis of style is an attempt to find the artistic principle underlying a writer's choice of language'. All writers and for that matter, all texts, have their individual qualities (75). They further give what they call 'a check list of linguistic and stylistic categories' they place the categories under four general headings; lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, cohesion and content. Okeke seems to agree with the view above and submits that; "the major parts of speech (Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives and Adverbs), that are open class words have lexical meanings while the minor parts Of speech (close set words) have grammatical meanings" (75).

Dehumanization and Exploitation; Lexico-semantic Features

According to Okeke, "semantics is the study of linguistic units to find out what they mean and what they are used to communicate". In his view, Crystal (cited in Okeke, 2008') opines that 'semantic is the study of meaning of linguistic forms'. On his own contribution, Palmer avers that 'semantics is the technical term used to refer to the study of meaning and since meaning is a part of language; semantics is a part of linguistics' (Okeke) further claims that "in linguistics, semantics is the subfield that is developed to the study of meaning as borne on the syntactic levels of words, phrases, sentences and even longer units of discourses" (2).

Yule says that "semantics is the study of meaning of words, phrases and sentences and relationship between linguistic forms" (4).

Lexico-semantics uses the apparatus of linguistic description to analyze the language style and use in a prose text. It is concerned with the identification and representation of semantics of lexical items. Lexico-semantic analysis of a literary work is an application of linguistic features to show distinctive instances that show deprivation of human qualities in the novel.

Nominal Groups in the Novel

Nouns are parts of words that belong to open class. This paper brings out various examples to show instances of exploitation and dehumanization, 'you little fool'. p4 'experience of feeling death' p6, 'Negroes' p7, 'pangs of hunger' p12, 'biological bitterness' p12, 'stinging slap' p14, 'disgusted shouts' p15, 'bleakness of black life' p12, 'foolish child' p33, 'that black little devil' p37, 'filthy fool' p36, 'hunger and thirsty drove me out' p37, 'pressure of hate' p63, 'the hostility of the white' p64, 'complex of emotions' p64, 'emotional rejection' p70, 'chores in the neighborhood' p72, 'sleepless, shivering night' p82, 'horrible infidel... hardhearted ingrate' p89, 'bottomless hunger' p119, 'silent hostility' p151, 'hunger in your face' p.202. These nominal groups were selected randomly and they cover the first seven chapters and the last seven chapters that make up the text.

Adjectival Groups in the Novel

Instances abound from the novel but instances were picked from the first ten chapters to show language use indicating elements of dehumanization and exploitation; 'mysterious journey' p5, 'cosmic cruelty' p6, 'bleak and hostile to me' p7, 'a stranger to me' p7, 'my father's rash words' p9, 'hostile stranger' p11, 'grow dizzy' p11. 'too weak from hunger' p24, 'full of fear' p26, 'Naked' p35, 'mortally afraid' p36, 'coloured man' p.41, 'black children, poor, half-starved, ignorant, victims of racial prejudice; p53, 'the craziest nigger boy' p.60, 'hating myself' p65, 'lumpish, loose, dissolved state' p70, 'dumb nigger' p174.

Verbal Groups in the Novel

The author uses a number of them in the novel to effectively communicate his ideas and this paper intends to employ this group of words to show instances of exploitation and dehumanization; 'scolding me' p1, 'punished' p1, 'beat' p2, 'yanked my leg' p4, 'I was lashed so hard' p.4, 'lost consciousness' p4, 'shaking with terror' p4, 'I never laughed in his presence' p7, 'before I smack you down' p9, 'mother whacked me across my mouth' p10, 'hunger standing at my bedside' p11, 'hunger baffled me, scared me' p11, 'hunger nudging my ribs' p.11, 'a

gang of boys grabbed me' p11, 'yanked me' p1, 'lashed thoroughly' p27, 'wordlessly... he lashed me with strap' p84

Adverbial Groups in the Novel

Richard Wright uses this group of words which adds meanings to the other words, these words show instances of exploitation and dehumanization, examples are; 'wobbly' p4, 'my legs wobbly' p10, 'staring at me gauntly' p11, 'standing hungrily and silently' p15, 'grow vaguely angry' p16, 'ran giggling' p17, 'continuously complaining of hunger' p24, 'walking sheepishly' p34, 'amusingly moralistic' p67, 'emotionally spent' p94.

Discussion and Implication of Identified Groups

We have identified words, expressions that show instances of dehumanization and exploitation in the novel. The lead character in the text, Richard Wright went through harrowing and nesting experiences right from home. This went throughout all the phases in his life, starting from the nominal groups. It is obvious that the little boy begins to experience such unexpected inhuman treatment from his immediate family (you little fool, experience of feeling death, pangs of hunger, foolish child, black evil, filthy fool, pressure of hate, emotional rejection, bottomless hunger, silent hostility) and what he called "biological bitterness" 23.

On the adjectival groups, those words we have identified in our classification clearly show a life of difficulties and challenges. The tragedies and dilemmas of the lives of the American Negroes as they emerge from slavery, dehumanization, and total struggle towards freedom and equality of right are portrayed through these groups. The harrowing and pathetic daily experiences of the lead character could be captured succinctly through the writer's choice of words (adjectival groups) that are being used by people around him.

The verbal and adverbial groups show high degree of use of words to further demonstrate humiliation, hostility and hatred towards the innocent young boy. These words were greatly used to bring down his character and reduce his personality. Anywhere he goes, his image worths nothing, even at home, where love and affection

should be shown to him by his immediate family members, especially his father.

It is evidently clear from these groups that dehumanization and exploitation which predominate the text cannot be achieved without this classification. The implications of the groups help in no small measure to elucidate more on the focus of our analysis.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to use textual function vis-à-vis the Hallidayan Functional Grammar to explore how Richard Wright has used language to portray the experiences of the blacks in America. Likewise, lexical items showing instances of dehumanization and exploitation are also exploited in the paper through words as used by the characters in the text. This paper has also shown that language can be used positively for human advantages and as well for negative impulse as we have observed in the text.

Furthermore, Richard Wright's use of language in the text has also demonstrated via our study, the uniqueness of the experiences the young boy goes through from his immediate family to people around him and the larger society. These unpalatable experiences are revealed by this study through the choice of words by the writer. It has further demonstrated that lexical items have semantic meanings to the users and that we have seen how he presents his subjects through effective and unique use of language.

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