

## **Communicative Potentials of Diction in Olu Obafemi's *Wheels***

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### **Abstract**

The study began with the definitions of literary communication, style, and diction. The introductory part stated that diction as an element of communication could be realized through style and literary communication. The triad of diction, style, and literary communication interweave to convey the message of the writer. In this study, the researcher adopted eclectic procedure, using a model of literary stylistics and a principle of Marxism for textual analysis. The passages that were sampled for analysis were those with elements of Marxism and revolutionary aesthetics. The analysis reveals the themes of injustice and inequality, social stratification, exploitation, deprivation, oppression, poverty, etc in the novel.

Key words: diction, style, literary communication, revolutionary aesthetics, Marxist elements.

### **Introduction**

Communication is initiated when there is a stimulus that triggers off selection of linguistic devices where language is the medium involved. Words that are generated are systematically arranged into strings of sentences and groups of paragraphs to produce a literary work which is a channel between the author (writer) and his audience (readers). The literary text conveys the message from the writer-sender to the reader-receiver. Generating and processing words to wholesome meaningful units to produce a literary work as an embodiment of the writer's message for public access is what literary communication is all about.

Osundare (1987: 137) describes literary communication as "remote, indirect, situationally abstract and unface-to-face". This definition equates literary communication with written communication, for example, a novel. According to the above definition, literary communication is a form of communication where there is a distance between the literary communicator and the communicatee, therefore, the author or the communicator chooses his words carefully and arranges them in a coherent manner to avoid ambiguity. In this type of communication, there is no immediate feedback from the audience (readers) and no opportunity for further clarification of the message. Facial expression by the audience and body gesture which can give clues for

further clarification of the message are absent. In fact, it takes time before a literary communicator can get the response to his works from distant critics, therefore, there is the need to carefully choose words that can pass across his message effectively.

The audience of a literary or written communication is unimaginable: it spreads across centuries and continents. The works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Achebe, etc have currency all over the world at all times because of their careful choice of words and communicative potentials of words.

In another development, Osundare (1987: 140) defines literary communication as a kind of specific instance of language use. And literature whether written or oral is a good example of this type of language use. Whether literary communication is a written communication or an example of language use, it derives its relevance from choice of words and arrangements of these words into sentences in order to communicate. Osundare (1987: 140) further observes that literary communication employs different types of style to put across world views and ideologies. This means that from a writer's repertoire of words in a language, he chooses words which are a manifestation of style to transmit his world view and ideology. According to him, there must be something to communicate and this (what to communicate) dictates the style and the nature of literary communication. In literature, themes as well as the social and ideological vision of the writer determine the choice of words and the style of the writer.

Style, according to Otagburuagu, Obah and Ogenyi (2010: 39) is appropriateness in the choice of words, sentence structure, punctuation, organization and indeed, a recognition of the level of language usage. The first part of the above definition of style illuminates the meaning of diction. Therefore, the authors see diction as an aspect of style. A study of diction falls within the domain of stylistic criticism. "Appropriateness" in the choice of words implies that authors choose words that can convey their feelings effectively for proper interpretation of the literary work by the audience.

Furthermore, Ogunsiji (2011: 19) defines style as the choice of words or expression in a given text by a given person for a given purpose. In this definition, the author recognizes the communicative function of style and the communicative potentials of diction. It is like a reinforcement of Otagburuagu, et al's definition of style.

Moreover, Yakubu (2014: 55) contends that style involves systematic selection of words, sentences, and rhetorical structure to expound and advance the writer's theme. This states the function of style in developing the theme of a literary work. It is a recognition of form and content nexus which is important in literary criticism. This contention also highlights an area that has been left out in the earlier definitions of style which is the rhetorical resources of language for effective transmission of the writer's message. Style encompasses choice of words, extra-linguistic devices, emotional impact and evocative effect of language on the readers. The analysis of these stylistic devices is important for proper interpretation of a literary work. It should be noted that "style involves the use of language but extends beyond language" (*Nigeria Certificate in Education Course Book on English Language, Cycle 4, 2000: 63*). Style covers emotional effects; the aesthetics of the work, and narrative techniques.

According to Abrams (2005: 237), diction is the different forms of words, phrases, sentences, figurative expression and the general vocabulary of the author that make up the literary work. He categorizes the study of diction under style which deals with varieties of language and register. Diction is a wide range of choice of words in literature which constitutes simple or difficult vocabulary, archaic or biblical, vulgar or refined, technical or common, colloquial or formal language. *Nigeria Certificate in Education Course Book on English Language, Cycle 4* (2000: 63), defines diction as the writer's selection of words and expressions to describe character, setting and events. According to the course book, diction is an important element of meaning in literature, thus it is concerned with careful selection of words for effective transmission of the writer's thoughts, feelings and experiences. The success of a literary work lies in its ability to evoke the right response in the reader.

Writers are usually conscious of their audience and this determines their diction which can be simple or complex. Writers' repertoire of language and style ranges from familiar to unfamiliar words; straightforward sentences and ideas to complexity of form and ideas; simplicity to complexity of symbols and figures of speech. A good writer should know his audience because appropriate interpretation of texts is important. Diction is an important consideration in literature because its accessibility or otherwise determines a satisfactory or unsatisfactory interpretation of a literary work. The correct responses of readers, that is, their feedback is important in literary communication.

Diction has communicative potentials which manifest as the themes of the literary work. A literary text is a product of language and as observed earlier, it is a medium of communication between the literary communicator and his audience. The audience, though remote, will at one time or the other, respond to the message of the literary communicator. Obafemi has a message in the novel, *Wheels*, and he chooses the appropriate words that can transmit the message. Words, therefore, are an important consideration in the analysis of the novel. Obafemi chooses from his repertoire of words in the English language and sometimes the Yoruba language and Nigerian Pidgin to convey his message.

Language and literature are Siamese twins and diction, style, and literary communication are a trio in these Siamese twins. In stylistic criticism, there is no clear-cut division between style, literary communication and diction. The writer's diction initially lies dormant in his subconscious waiting to be activated onto a manuscript by a stimulus and when activated, it is then processed into a text to be accessed by the public as a form of literary communication. The manifestation of the stimulus is the theme or the message of the literary work. According to Osundare (1987: 134), art is to communicate the imagination that lies in the private fancy of the writer's mind. When the imagination is transformed into words through the writer's choice of expressions then it becomes available for the public and critics to interpret.

A writer chooses words and varies the length of his sentences which result in his ability to communicate. The figurative expressions, register, and the varieties of language he uses as the subject and situation demand for effective transmission of his message and attitude are his style. Furthermore, the choice of words with variation of sentences and language for effective communication is the literary communication. The procedure that leads to the realization of

literary communication begins from diction. The nexus between language and literature is a product of diction, style, and literary communication which are a triad.

The aim of this study is to investigate how the meanings of individual words that constitute sentence(s) produce the writer's message and reveal his ideology. The researcher is interested in analyzing the writer's diction to reveal the message of the novel; that is what the novel communicates. As a Marxist writer, the researcher is also interested in finding out the revolutionary aesthetics that portray Obafemi's mode of Marxism in the novel. To do this, the researcher seeks to adopt eclectic procedure by using a model of literary stylistics and a principle of Marxist theory. First is the model of literary stylistics which stresses the import of diction (Ogunsiji, 2011: 27). On this premise, every aspect of style treated in a literary work is not independent of the message of the text. Style is seen here as a vehicle for effective transmission of the message of the author. Literary stylistics is principally interested in the message and the contribution of language towards effective communication of the message.

Secondly, the principle of Marxist theory espoused by Derek Wright which states that "the co-existence of opposites, thesis and antithesis, may result in a conflict between the two opposing forces and in turn forge a better social condition which is, according to Marxist terms, regarded as the synthesis" (Cited in Bamidele, 2010: 142) will be synthesized with the above model of literary stylistics to form the framework for textual analysis. This study draws inspiration from the above principle of Marxism. It guides in the analysis of diction to find out the message of the author and the ideology that underlies the text. It also helps in the analysis of characters in the novel that interpret the ideology of the writer. The analysis of diction that is going to be done will reveal revolutionary aesthetics and elements of Marxism as well as Obafemi's message in the novel.

### **Diction in OluObafemi's *Wheels***

The analysis of diction in this study will focus on words that reveal the writer's message and ideology. Attention will be paid to Marxist elements and revolutionary aesthetics in the novel. According to Sessan and Oluremi ([www.juiu.ug](http://www.juiu.ug)) in their study of Obafemi's *Suicide Syndrome*, radical aesthetics is characterized by social and economic stratification between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In *Wheels*, apart from social and economic stratification as a revolutionary aesthetics, there are tones, religion, exploitation and class, injustice in a classified society and conscientization as aesthetics. Analysis of diction is intended to reveal all this in the present study. Similarly, Atanda ([rupkatha.com](http://rupkatha.com)) in his contributions to critical works on OluObafemi's and Ahmed Yerima's drama observes that "for OluObafemi, the aesthetics of his drama relies principally on Marxist ideology". Aesthetics as used by Atanda, Tolupe and Oluremi means artistic evaluative criteria. This meaning is applicable to the usage of aesthetics in this study. Below is the analysis of diction with samples of passages from the novel that reveal revolutionary aesthetics and Marxist elements as well as the themes of the novel:

### **Angry Tone as a Revolutionary Aesthetics:**

I know many of these rich people, these Alhajis and contractors who live in the cities tried behind my back...to snatch her away from me to add to their ten or so wives. And me, a loyal soja, fighting for them, with my one wife, newly married and no child yet.

Oh, I would have filled their fat stomachs with bullets...But let them try, I would have cut their thick necks off with my sharp cutlass (13).

The lexis of the passage denotes aggression and confrontation which imply violence and it reveals the narrator's anger. And violence is one of the elements of Marxism. There is bitterness in the tone of voice of Soja to reveal the themes of injustice and social stratification. 'Me, a loyal soja, fighting for them' portrays an existence of two opposing classes in the novel. This is also, an element of Marxism. Furthermore, in the expressions: 'filled their fat stomachs with bullets', 'cut their thick necks off with my sharp cutlass' are angry and aggressive tones with confrontational language. These are prevalent and pervasive in the novel. They develop the theme of violence in the novel.

### **Socio-economic Stratification as a Revolutionary Aesthetics:**

(1) I know there are many many houses - on the other side of the bridge. Fine, tall, big houses with very many rooms, fine and shiny toilets, beautiful kitchens with bright lights....In all those fine houses, there are all sorts of cars of various sizes and shapes packed (sic)....In those houses across the bridge, most of the important people in the town live there. They live there with their well-fed, well-dressed, well-pampered children....On the other side of the bridge where we live, there are all sorts of crowds swarming like flies inside tiny one room tenant houses. On this side of the town, only very lucky people...can rent facemeifacemyou houses. In our own type of houses, there are what you call Shalangas (holed toilets) where people line up to shit....(31).

The above passage is composed of words that describe social dialectics: the rich on one side and the poor on the other. Each community has its own characteristics of wealth or poverty. The passage is a juxtaposition of opulence and poverty. The following phrases used by the author introduce these twin settlements of contradictions (the haves and the have nots); one facing the other: 'on the other side of the bridge', 'in those', 'in all those', 'in those houses across the bridge', 'on the other side of the bridge', 'on this side', 'in our own type of house'. This passage shows us the side that Kofo, the narrator, belongs to: the side of the less privileged. The passage further develops the themes of alienation and socio-economic stratification. These are two elements of Marxism. The two themes are made conspicuous by the author's careful choice of words and in a tone that shows disapproval. Below is another example from the novel:

(2) As I got to Seun's father's large and glittering mansion on the rich side of our village, I find two different groups of gathering. The majority of the people stand on the trimmed and beautiful bahama grass. They are people from my poor and squalid section of the village. This is where the workers, the subsistent farmers, the artisans, the market women and men...all the employed people stand....On the red-carpet, raised platform, just outside the foyer and facing the general crowd, are the Very Important People of our town; the retired army officers like Seun's and Gbenga's fathers, executors of the last war who are big time executives and financiers of big companies; present military top-notchers in government and big time politicians...great gathering of opposites... (96-97).

In the above passage, differences in social class is stated in: ‘poor and squalid section’ and ‘rich side of our village’. These phrases portray class distinction. The rich are comfortably seated under the canopy while the poor are standing in the scorching sun on the grass. Words and phrases such as ‘workers’, ‘the subsistent farmers’, ‘artisans’, ‘market women and men’ and ‘the unemployed’ reveal those that constitute the masses while the phrases: ‘retired army officers’, ‘big time executives’, ‘financiers of big companies’, ‘present military top-notchers in government’, and ‘big time politicians’ reveal the ruling class. Characters in this gathering are grouped according to their social status, hence the expression ‘great gathering of opposites’. The passage reveals the theme of socio-economic stratification. Let us also look at the following:

- (3) ...Mansions and rented slums, Vee-boots with tainted glasses against rickety motor bikes; opportunities and privileges versus deprivation and want.

The above passage projects the theme of social stratification and it is separated into three units with the uses of comma, semi-colon and the final full stop. Each unit presents two contrasting ideas which are lack versus opulence to project class distinction. The personalities of Kemi from a rich family and Kofo from a poor family are represented in the passage. Though they are in love with each other, their different socio-economic backgrounds may pose a threat to their relationship. In the passage, ‘mansions contrasts rented slums’, ‘vee-boots with tainted glasses’ contrasts ‘rickety motor bikes’, and ‘opportunities and privileges’ contrasts ‘deprivation and want’.

### **Religion as an Aesthetics in the Novel:**

- (1) The important message which the Holy Spirit voices through Kofo’s mother to the villagers in their assembly is about the coming of Armageddon, about the imminence of the end of the world, when all the corrupt powerful people who keep God’s own children in poverty, in sickness, in homelessness and in squalor will be swept into oblivion. It also gives a revelation of a Brave New World, with bright stars shining on a sparkling city of happy men and women when want shall be no more (38).

Register of religion leads to the realization of the above passage as a revolutionary aesthetics. This register is employed to pass across the Marxist message of change, revolution, and the new world. Allusions to ‘Holy Spirit’, ‘Armageddon’, ‘the end of the world’, and ‘New World’ are expositions of Marxist ideology using religion as an aesthetics. Marxism is against any form of corruption, poverty, and suffering of the people. Therefore, the Christian revelation of the demise of ‘the corrupt powerful people’ and the coming into being of a ‘Brave New World’ as projected in the novel is an accentuation of Marxist ideology. Below is another example:

- (2) The Imam is so courageous, and I’m so afraid. He talks of plenty of poverty in our streets and that people are beginning to complain very loudly. He also says there is plenty money and goods in the land for just a handful of people. These few people build mansions and buy cars and marry many wives and hide the rest of the money in other people’s countries. Our Imam says that these few rich ones hide their well-fed, well-dressed and well- protected children in their very beautiful mansions and estates. He says God did not create inequality. It is men, wicked and evil men who have taken control of power ... that have caused poverty and suffering in the land. (33-34).

Like the first passage in this section, this is also, a deployment of religion, to advance Marxist ideological basis. The word 'Imam' with the expression 'God did not create inequality' suggest that religion as portrayed in the novel is an instrument of change. Imam's condemnation of inequality and poverty in the land as a result of poor governance portrays him as an advocate of Marxist ideology. The author has demonstrated in this novel that Marxism and religion: Islam and Christianity share some principles. On this ground, Obafemi is different from other Marxist writers, for example, NgugiwaThiong'o who projects Christianity in his works as being manipulated by the ruling class for exploitation of the masses.

### **Exploitation and Class as Aesthetics:**

I was asked to go because having no education, or having very little education - I went up to primary three of those days - the army say make I dey go. The time I face hot fire for Abagana and all the book book army officer dem run under cover, dey no remember say I no readbook .... I retired. For all the years of fighting for my country, leaving my newly married wife Abeke behind with no child, no house no money no food no family, they gave me retire benefit of thirty pounds. (12).

In the passage, 'having very little education' shows the social status of the narrator, who is a member of the masses. As a member of the working class, the proletariat, he is under the 'book book army officer' who are his employers. The officers who constitute authorities in the army retire him because he has no certificates. His lamentation: 'dey no remember say I no read book' reveals exploitation of the masses, the less privileged. Marxists see the relationship between employers and employees as being exploitative. Soja, like other members of the working class is exploited: the rich exploit the poor.

Furthermore, the wording of the passage is an appeal to emotion and the tone is critical. The passage has evocative power to capture the compassion of the audience for the character. In rhetoric, this is pathos. Abrams (2005: 212) asserts that pathos in modern criticism is designed to evoke feelings of tenderness, pity, etc. On reading the above passage, one is sincerely moved to see injustice perpetrated by the ruling class against the less privileged in society. Marxist writers use pathos to win the sympathy of their audience for the oppressed class in order to change the oppressed system. Moreover, the climax of the passage marked by parallelism which is introduced by repeated 'no' reveals the theme of deprivation and poverty.

### **Injustice in a Stratified Society and Conscientization as Revolutionary Aesthetics:**

- (1) His mind roamed back to the war and the injustice of it all became more unbearable than ever before. He remembered the Colonels and the Generals who gave all the big big orders. They stayed away in their homes while we went to face the enemy's fire .... As we protected them with our skins, they stayed in their furnished hotels, sometimes fighting the war on the maps in the midst of wines and in the company of fat-arsed girls .... As we died in our hundreds and thousands, they increased their own salaries with the money saved from our deaths. As we perished under the bridges and in trenches, they got all elevations ... They swelled their own class while our own got depleted. (24-25).

In the above passages, ‘while’ and ‘as’ introduce the subordinate clauses that describe the gory experience of the other ranks who are at the lower rung of the social hierarchy while the pronoun, ‘they’ begins the main clauses that state the comfort enjoyed by the army officers, the members of the ruling class. Words that compose the passage are carefully chosen to develop the theme of injustice and the tone is critical to show the author’s condemnation of injustice and social stratification. Below is another example:

- (2) We make them what they are ... the poor ones. The farmers who can’t pay their children’s school fees. The ex-soldier who gets mud-splashed by our fanciful cars, as they ride their second-hand bicycles...the market women who travel for miles to fetch the meat and fish which dress our dinner-dishes ... We turn them to angry lots .... Is there a new war to be commanded and ordered? Is there a new rage which will enable soldiers to kill many more recruits, create many more widows and make us richer with their blood stained money? (118-119).

With the opening expression, ‘we make them what they are’, injustice is portrayed and it is one of the themes of the novel. It is perpetrated by one social class against the other. Moreover, the author’s diction in the passage produces critical tone to show his disapproval of injustice and inequality. Furthermore, the passage portrays the Marxist principle espoused by Derek Wright through the clash between Kemi and his father. After Kemi’s conscientization, she begins to confront his father, the same thing applies to Seun. These children of the rich people are made to be aware of the atrocities committed by the rich class and therefore, they are now attacking their parents and denouncing their rich family backgrounds. The hope of a better ‘social condition’ as propounded by Marxist theorists lies in the relationship between Kemi and Kofo and other members of the young generation in the novel.

Diction is an important critical exercise. It reveals the message and the ideology of the author. Analysis of diction in this study has revealed Marxist elements and revolutionary aesthetics that project OluObafemi’s Marxist message and ideology in *Wheels*.

### **Summary of Findings**

1. Diction is the style index that reveals Obafemi’s Marxist ideology in the novel.
2. Diction reveals the Marxist aesthetics as well as Marxist elements employed in the novel.
3. Obafemi’s style in the novel projects class struggle.
4. Obafemi’s careful selection of words in the novel leads to the success of the work.
5. Pathos in the novel is a vehicle of mass mobilization.

### **Conclusion**

Diction in OluObafemi’s *Wheels* is simple and straightforward. The language is accessible thereby making his message to be well understood. His choice of familiar words to describe the plight of the poor in society makes him popular among the common man. Marxist elements and revolutionary aesthetics in the novel are expressed in clear-cut and straightforward language.

Obafemi’s diction and style show that he has the interest of those with average proficiency in English in mind. Most of these people fall in the category of the less privileged class. His language in *Wheels* is not above their comprehension. His diction in the novel is effective for the



transmission of his message to the audience and this contributes enormously to the success of the novel.

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