

Speaking in structure and transitivity: politeness in “Abiku” by J.P. Clark

Obinna Iroegbu

Department of English and Literary Studies,
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria
obinna.iroegbu@fuoye.edu.ng

Abstract

This study examines some pragma-linguistic features in Clark-Bekederemo's "Abiku". The examination is relative to their function as elements foregrounding politeness in interlocution. The analysis focuses mainly on the structure and partly on transitivity; and offers an interface between two referents the speaker (S) and the hearer (H). The poem is analysed to account for the significance of thematic structure and transitivity. While structure offers an in road into the syntagmatic presentation, transitivity examines the paradigmatic relation among certain words applied in the poem. The incident of the marked thematic structure becomes congruently productive in the transmission of a certain pragma-linguistic inclination on the part of the speaker. Central to the pragma-linguistic inclination, as observed in the analysis, is the depersonalization or de-emphasis on the beingness of the abiku. This is evinced in the preponderance of disproportionately marked forms of sentence constructions in situations where the abiku should function as a Subject. This marked form of expression construction is duly sustained and significantly applies to both the entry and exit statements in the poem. The markedness in the deliberate thematization of processes and circumstances rather than a participant in transitivity is an extension of communicative features in the poem.

Key words: JP Clark, abiku, thematization, rhematization politeness principle

Introduction: The poet and the poem

The currency of the concept of *abiku* is well indicated in the observation of McCabe (2002, p. 1) that "the corpus of written Nigerian literature contains at least thirty works in which *àbíkú* or *ogbánje* plays some sort of pivotal role". In critical works and scholarly discussions, *abiku* as a title and topic, especially as captured in the poems of JP Clark and Wole Soyinka, has received quite substantial attention. In several decades following their composition, the two poems consistently received attention at both the secondary and tertiary levels of education. Thus, apart from top class scholarly attention exemplified in the works of Biodun Jeifo, Chidi Maduka, Oladele Taiwo and Ato Quayson, to mention but a few, both poems have commanded the attraction of the West African Examination Council spanning many years from the 60's down (McCabe, 2002). This is why Specht (2013) remarks that Soyinka's and Clark's "Abiku" constitute "two of the most famous examples" of "a vibrant local literature surrounding *abiku*" (36). In spite of the popularity of the poet, Yeibo (2011), however, remarks that "from the corpus of available literature, J.P Clark-Bekederemo's poetry has not been given intensive linguistic enquiry like other

African poets, such as Soyinka and Osundare" (p. 1).

Significance of the Study

The paper serves to continue the scholarly discussion on one of the most iconic first-generation writers in the Nigerian literary space. In spite of being contemporary and also winning reputable awards and fellowships, Clark has not received as much general attention as Soyinka and Achebe. This is despite the fact that the trio unofficially shares commanding statuses as the most prominent and productive in the three respective genres of literature (Jeifo, 2004). Thus, as Achebe is specifically known for his prose fiction and Soyinka is unarguably exceptionally successful in the dramatic genre, Clark is the commander in relation to poetry. He has written well over four hundred poems and published more than ten collections of poetry.

Besides giving further spotlight on one of the foremost writers, the paper exposes foregrounded features by which a better appreciation can be made of the poem. In this regard, the poem exposes indices by which an expression can be considered effective or otherwise as an imperative statement intended to achieve a

corresponding act. As a crossroads analysis between language and literature, this study explores yet another method by which a stylistic study can be carried out in relation to a text.

Theory, terms and concepts

This article is essentially eclectic with respect to a theoretical framework. It is eclectic in the sense that it employs a combination of pragmatics and speech act parameters. However, with respect to terms, concepts, and procedural analysis, the discourse adopts Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as its background framework. This choice is informed by the fact that the theory easily accommodates a meaning-yielding approach to the analysis of literature. In other words, the model offers a veritable vehicle by which a productive linguistic appreciation of the meaning/message of a literary work could be assessed.

Moreover, it places great emphasis on function and confesses an application which favours context-based explication and real-life instantiation of communication. SFL exemplifies a theory whose "application to language, and in particular to grammar, has been worked out in considerable detail" (Leech & Short, 2007, p.25). In essence, the subjective nature of literature as a

manifestation of aesthetics with socio-dynamic underpinnings requires a linguistic approach that emphasizes function rather than form. Recognition of language as a system where there exist paradigmatic choices and syntagmatic chains makes for alternative assumptions in what can constitute a final interpretation of a text based on the immediate and mediate linguistic contexts. Thus, when structures are applied as the enactment of meaning bearing units of constructions, a consideration of possible choices or alternatives offered by the linguistic system makes for a more robust interpretation and appreciation of the total significance of a given text. One of such features applicable to the reading of the poem "Abiku" is the system of *transitivity* which Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) recognize as "the central component in Halliday's functional grammar, which was conceived in relation to English" (p.72). Assessment of *transitivity*, therefore, becomes an approach by which functionality can be appreciated with respect to given texts or instantiation of speech events. Transitivity, especially as it applies to nominal forms and verbal features, makes for a more delicate examination of the import of speech in relation to the roles

of *participants* and the statuses of *processes*. It somewhat instigates paradigmatic assumptions as it highlights relational contrasts and similarities between what is applicable and other choices offered by the lexicon of the language in use. In "Abiku" for instance, transitivity brings to light the ascription of the *mental process* to the speaker in contrast and comparison to the *material processes* assigned to *abiku* and other *participants* or referents.

Structure is one of the four cardinal features in systemic grammar. Structure captures the syntagmatic dimension of any unit of analysis, be it a word, phrase/group, clause or sentence. As an integral element of meaning and significance, the structure of the text as it applies in the poem, "Abiku" triggers pragmatic assumptions and variables highlighting both interpersonal and ideational functions. Thus, based on the thematic and information import of the poem, the fronting of units which constitute distinct components of an expression is not arbitrary but can be said to bear inferable justification with regard to the speaker's attitude to such an item as fronted or relegated. The basic structure of an English declarative clause, following the SFL configuration, indicates

the sequence of Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement and Adjunct (SFPCA). This, more or less, corresponds to the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) of the traditional grammar or the NP+VP (\rightarrow S) of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar. In a typical declarative, an expression or statement is therefore classified as marked when the thematic structure is altered to front any element other than the Subject. It is unmarked when the Subject assumes its prominence as the element of the first mention in a declarative statement. In an indicative MOOD, the order demands a fronted Finite (F), which may be a modal primary auxiliary or even a lexical verb.

Theme

The *thematic structure* is a derivative of the *theme* as an element of the clause. In grammar, the term *theme* has a somewhat different meaning from what it denotes in literature. Whereas in its application as a literary term theme correlates with the subject matter or moral as derivable from a story/text, in grammar, especially as pertaining to SFL, theme refers to the transitivity unit of first mention in an utterance. Halliday observes that "the theme of a clause is the element which, in English, is put in the first position" (2002, p. 190). Being in

the position of the first mention confers on the *theme* a comparative significance higher than other transitivity units. This is because the *theme*, according to Halliday, constitutes the peg on which the message hangs. The *theme*, by its position, therefore, in a manner of speaking, anchors the personal attitude of the speaker with respect to how they structure the speech. In a typical declarative statement, and following the unmarked structure of the English clause, the *theme* is usually a nominal reference. Below, the items within the brackets are themes.

(*Abiku*) has been coming and going.
 (Other fingers) reach the sun.
 (We) know the knife scars.
 (Paraphrase of Clark's "Abiku", Fulltide, 2010)

The thematic structure is an important aspect by which the significance of theta roles and other pragmatic features of a text can be analysed. By theta role, it is meant the indication of the role of a noun in an utterance with respect to its being actor, beneficiary or receiver of the event/action expressed in the verb. Information Structure and Thematic Structure are concepts applied in SFL to account for structural roles played by basic linguistic features within a clause.

Issuing from these concepts are terms/ideas which include Theme and Rheme and Given and New. Bloor and Bloor (1994) observe that most linguistic analysts conflate these two structural concepts in the categorization of the features existing as basic features of the clause. This article is inclined towards an analysis related to Thematic Structure, which features Theme and Rheme, rather than Information Structure, which is concerned with Given and New.

Rheme

The rheme offers the vehicle by which the clause could be further interpreted. It is "the body of the message" (Halliday, 2002, p. 190). To Bloor and Bloor, the rheme is "the rest of the message" (1994, p. 72) after the theme. In a simple declarative statement, the theme corresponds to the Subject while the rheme equals the Predicate. The rheme relates to what is said beside or beyond the theme. In a marked speech, especially one in which an Adjunct begins the statement, the rheme could be a whole clause. Thus, in the expressions below, the contents in parenthesis are the rheme.

True, (it leaks through the thatch).
 Still, (it has been the healthy stock) ("Abiku", FT, 2010)

The terms, *thematization* and *rhematization*, are used in this article to underscore the speaker's preference for fronting or relegating significant structural items and transitivity elements in the poem. Thematization can be conceived as the deliberate or subconscious prominence granted a feature of the clause by way of having it presented before the rest of the clause. If an expression adapts to the SFL features of SFPCA, thematization requires that the Subject, as a nominal component, is structurally fronted to the position of first mention. To bring up any other element before the nominal feature is to thematize such an element.

Rhematization is actually the relegation of a component which ordinarily should occur as a fronted feature to a position other than that which it should occupy. Thematization or rhematization can serve as a pragmatic preference to underscore or foreground a certain message. Both present chances for assessment of politeness and help to highlight interpersonal relations between or among interlocutors in an instance of communication.

Politeness

Politeness in linguistics is a conversational feature which requires an

interlocutor to recognize the "face" or sensibility of the other interlocutor. It is a meta-linguistic feature which often underlies the message a statement carries in an ideal conversation. Thus, an interlocutor could deliberately, out of spite, or accidentally (as a consequence of socio-linguistic blunder or carelessness) violate this conversational feature. Leech (1983, p. 82) recognizes two broad perspectives from which the politeness principle could be explored. These are through the (i) Socio-pragmatic perspective and (ii) the Pragma-linguistic perspective. The pragma-linguistic indices for the assessment of politeness offer enough chance for an adequate account of the immediate linguistic context. Distinguishing between the two perspectives, Spencer and Zegarac observe that:

Pragma-linguistic perspective focuses on the linguistic strategies that are used to convey a given pragmatic meaning, while the socio-pragmatic perspective focuses on socially-based assessments, beliefs and interactional principles that underlie people's choice of strategies (2010, p. 76).

On the distinction between the pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic

perspectives, context plays a crucial role. Context, as applied here, relates to the immediate and mediate parameters which offer justification for choices of linguistic forms and content. "Abiku" as a poem presents illustrations for both *pragma-linguistic* and *socio-pragmatic* indices. This study is, however, concerned with the former rather than the latter. In "Abiku", structural foregrounding of features tends to signal a *pragma-linguistic* orientation wherein the speaker is out to de-emphasize the personality or *beingness* of the "Abiku" by rendering its reference only in subordinate, genitive, *rankshifted* or *rhematized* structures. Analytically, the de-emphasis on *beingness* occasioned by choices of structural and lexical features sharply highlights the preferences of the speaker with regard to what should occur as theme or rheme and what should not. In "Abiku", the unfortunate child, the preference of the speaker, indicates a shifting of its (*Abiku*) reference to a structural position that accounts for rheme rather than theme.

Leech (2014) emphasizes the *pragma-linguistic* perspective of politeness in his explication on "Requests and Other Directives". He dwells extensively on "directive strategies" which he recognizes

as "the communicative means we use when trying to get someone to do something they would probably not do of their own accord" (p. 143). Examination of "Abiku" as done in this study shows that the poem poses a pragmatic complex of both request and directive. Applying the distinctions between requests and order as made by Leech (2014) helps to identify the pragmatic lapses of the speaker in the matter of politeness in "Abiku" as a text.

Abiku is also the title and topic of another poem by Wole Soyinka. It is not within the scope of this study to engage in a full-scale comparative analysis of these two poems; however, it is germane to draw passing attention to the structural contrast in the two homologous texts. Clark's poem begins in a marked structure. The *markedness* of the entry statement is evinced in the speaker's evasion of the normal and common English clause configuration of Subject, Finite, Predicator, Complement and Adjunct (SFPCA) or Finite, Predicator, Complement, A (FPCA) in an indicative MOOD. Although the SFPCA is not a straitjacket affair as it allows for structural adjustments wherein any of the elements could be fronted rather than the other, there is a consistent feature of

its evasion in structures where the *abiku* in Clark's poem should have functioned as Subject (S). It is rather revealing that in the only structure where the speaker features as a Subject the S element is fronted. In the first four lines of the poem which constitutes the entry statement, it is read:

Coming and going these several seasons,
Do stay out on the baobab tree,
Follow where you please your kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for you

The speaker deliberately chooses an elliptical form where the "you" Subject that should have referenced *abiku*, and perhaps fronted or *thematized* it, is dropped. Moreover, the verbal feature, "Coming and going", indicates a non-finite form rather than the characteristic Finite (come/go) which should apply in a usual indicative MOOD. Although the poet as represented by the speaker is at liberty to choose whatever form of expression as suits his message, had the lines been alternatively worded to adapt to the SFPCA format of SFL, the expression might have started as: You have been coming and going these several seasons... In this case, the structure would have presented:

You ----- Subject (S)
have ----- Finite (F)
been coming and going --- Predicator (P)
these several seasons ----- Adjunct (A)

However, the speaker's preference for thematization of the process as indicated in the verbal feature and rhematization of the participant (*abiku* as a nominal reference) can be seen as pragmatically motivated. Its motivation can be traced to the underlying resolve of the speaker to emphasize what the *abiku* does (coming and going) rather than what it is (a person worthy of being accorded politeness). Thus, while the child is presented as the offending "super-dog" its humanity is at the same time denigrated through what can be regarded as a pragmatically motivated marked form of expression. This can be observed as a subtle violation of *abiku's* Face as a party to the conversation. In other words, it constitutes a Face Threatening Act (FTA). It needs to be stated that the FTA is a valid choice for the speaker.

Face

Politeness and face are symmetrically related to the extent that an observation of one leads to recognition of the other. The reason for politeness is to reduce or eliminate acts which may result in face

threatening. And where politeness is breached through face threatening, a face saving act is required. Grundy (2008, p. 188) connects face with the addressee's self-esteem which requires that such an addressee "needs to be well regarded and has the right not to be humiliated" by either the content or form of the speaker's utterance. Indicating the relevance of face in communication, Wardhaugh (2006, p. 277) explains that in any normal speech situation, the interlocutors "adopt a variety of strategies so as to avoid any threats to the face the others are presenting". Wardhaugh highlights the significance of face as integral to the "how" and "what". In other words, face threatening, or face-saving indicators are usually inferable from the content as well as the form of the interlocutors' speech. The poem, "Abiku", presents a one-sided linguistic investment in which the "abiku" reference is a passive participant. The *form* and *content* feature is what Verschueren (1999, p. 119) sees as "style and linguistic codes" which, in normal conversations, are employed by interlocutors "to interactionally generate the meaning of their social world and to negotiate mutual *investment* in the linguistic market place". A distillation of

the term "investment" brings out the implication of the principles of loss and gain. Thus, Verschueren's conception captures the true essence of face in the politeness principle. In other words, an interlocutor can lose or gain face depending on the linguistic forms that constitute speech.

Verschueren further explains that the structure of a text in an interlocutory context can be applied to "restore a threatened power relationship". Thus, in a dialogic situation, it is often a major reaction to restore a threatened face. This restoration might be direct, that is, arising from the exact words of the responding interlocutor or indirect, which is as inferable from the choice of the structure of his response. However, because it does not feature an interactive session between the voice and the spirit child, *abiku*, what obtains is face-threatening on the part of the former without any opportunity for the latter to undertake a face-saving act. This study shall, therefore, review instances of violation of politeness issuing from the lexico-grammar and lexico-semantics of the respective expressions applied to address the spirit child, *abiku*, in the poem.

Abiku: an enigma of conception

It can be said that the *abiku* phenomenon confesses a multifaceted socio-cultural perspective. The word, *abiku*, is of Yoruba origin and poses a morphological complex which roughly translates to "born and die". Specht (2013) understands *abiku* "as the Yoruba word for spirit-child or a child caught in an unending cycle of birth and death with the same human mother, unable to choose between the world of the spirits and that of his human family" (p. 34). To Mobolade, (1973) "an *Abiku* is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family" (p. 62).

Beyond the normal understanding of the word as reflective of what constituted an aspect of existence, *abiku* has been applied as a metaphor of sorts to describe cyclic and endemic failure bedeviling the Nigerian socio-polity. In its basic cultural description, *abiku* is regarded as the evil child that chooses to incarnate, die, and reincarnate within a short period. It is that child whose birth brings with it sorrow rather than joy. Scientifically, the incidence of *abiku* can be explained as related to the genetic mismatch on the part of ignorant parents. In this instance, a couple with the sickle cell gene gets stuck with the recurring incidence of a child whose genotype is SS configuration.

Symbolically, *abiku* can be a general term for several shades of infant mortality in Africa, the cause of which includes not just superstition (of baobab trees, bats, owls, kindred spirits) but poor dwelling places and natural disasters (of flood, fire). At the level of linguistic consideration, that is, in respect of what presents as the instance of communication, *abiku* is the shortchanged interlocutor in the linguistic investment against whom a face threatening act is committed but who at the same time is denied the chance to restore or redeem the "threatened power equation" (Verschueren, 1999) in an instance of speech.

Clark's "Abiku"

Clark's "Abiku" is one of the most popular poems by the poet. The poem, which shares a common title, topic/theme with that written by Wole Soyinka, has received a fair share of attention from scholars, students, and literary critics. According to Ajima (2011), Clark as a poet/creative writer uses the poem, "Abiku", to express his "belief in the traditional motif of the child that goes and comes, transiting at will between the physical human world and the spiritual realm of the ancestors" (p. 187). Ajima

points out that the *abiku* phenomenon is a reflection of the traditional African world-view. He further observes that Clark "shares in this cosmology with other African writers like Wole Soyinka in his "Abiku" poem, and Chinua Achebe with his Ogbanje phenomena exhibited by Ezinma in the novel *Things Fall Apart*" (p. 187).

A majority of the scholars of this poem are of the conclusion that the *Abiku* is the aggressor or offender while the voice or poet/persona is a kind of advocate for peace or reconciliation between the "evil" child and its mother/the physical world. Among these scholars is Okpanachi (2011) whose opinion is that:

In "Abiku", the narrative voice is that of a negotiator, diplomat and persuasive mediator between the tortured mother and the resolute spirit child bent on returning to the spirit world as soon as he/she is born. This triadic dialogue mitigates what could have been a confrontation and tension between the mother and a child as it is the case in Soyinka's version of *Abiku* (p. 181).

Okpanachi's view here is not exactly in tandem with the result of the linguistic assessment herein undertaken. This is

because transitivity and pragmatic-linguistic features of language such as thematic structure as presented in the speech of the voice indicate that they constitute an undeniable representative of the aggressive and abusive "We" in:

We know the knife scar
The voice represents and speaks for the "We" who are out to malign, verbally and physically, the *abiku* child whenever it was born. As a consequence, rather than being a mediator, the voice/poet-persona is a part of the aggressor. The politeness blunder committed by the voice goes against the grain in diplomatic speech. Mobolade (1973), explaining the concept from the Yoruba worldview and custom, holds that "an *Abiku* is any child who dies and is reborn several times into the same family" (p. 62). Mobolade observes naming strategies which amount to various speech acts corresponding to "appeasing, begging or coaxing" (p. 63). However, he also observes that these strategies often fail to the extent that the parents of the *abiku* would finally resort to brutal methods of mutilation. In this wise, a contradiction occurs in Clark's poem as mutilation (in "knife-scar serrating down your back and front") precedes what is ostensibly a "diplomatic appeal" (Okpanachi, 2011, p. 181)

Osani (2010), in a way, captures the dilemma and challenges facing the *abiku* child when he observes that the entire environment under which the events occur evokes an eerie atmosphere by means of the image of the baobab tree, bats, owls and floods. The baobab becomes a mythical tree, the macabre abode of spirit children; floods are associated with disaster, while bats and owls are nocturnal creatures often believed to be connected with evil (p. 171).

With all these socio-cultural connotations, it is a wonder that any sympathetic or dispassionate observer will blame the *abiku* if it chooses not to obey the call to stay for good. However, continuing in the popular view that the child was evil, Osani (2010) tries to associate it (the child) with the so called creatures often socio-culturally connoting or signifying an evil essence. This is why he concludes that, "[T]he prevailing atmosphere does become a fitting medium for the mysterious and sinister 'coming and going' of the spirit child" (p. 181).

Comparing Soyinka's version to that of Clark, Maduka (1987) observes that Soyinka portrays the *abiku* as "a braggart

using his power and glory to pour taunts on mankind" while Clark "sees him as an all-powerful spirit, seated in his glory and listening to the pleas of man who looks helpless and impotent to cope with his prances" (pp. 27-28).

Not only has the *abiku* been tagged an evil child by the voice that represents the sociological context but also by scholars, whose duty it is to evaluate and comment on the circumstance as captured in literature, generally accept the aggressor status ascribed to the *abiku*. Thus, it is a consensus understanding that the *abiku's* mother and the society into which the child is born are the helpless and hapless underdog. This study, by carefully examining the linguistic features structurally deployed in the poem, "Abiku", offers a repudiation of the popular presentation that the *abiku* as a child is the offender rather than the victim. This repudiation issues from a methodical account of the pragmatic significance of politeness or face threatening acts inherent in the poem.

It is highly insightful to review Aniemeka's (2017) reading of the poem. Linking the *abiku* concept and phenomenon to the polity, he states:

Here, the unabated locomotion is symbolic of restlessness in the institutionalized instability in political life of the Nigerian, and indeed most African societies. The post-independent Nigerian society between 1966 and 1999 was marked by coups and counter-coups that made the society a protest ground. The whole protest and disturbances came as a result of tepid corruption and mismanagement of funds. The stage was set then for poets to explore in poetry, events within their society. This is the antecedent to the poem "Abiku" (p. 4).

This evidently amounts to extrapolation and extraneous exegesis. Aniemeka's reading does not capture by proof the essence of the poem. Otherwise, how can a poem originally written in 1965 describe events of years spanning the period after its composition? This is where some critics got the extension of the semantic essence of the poem wrong. This is perhaps the motivation for

McCabe's admonition against a diachronic reading of the poem as a post-colonial index of African realities. However, the poem can only be adapted to describe a reflection of the post-colonial experience but not to translate or interpret it. Thus when Aniemeka concludes his article with the statement that the "semiotic infrastructure" of the poem "ultimately has some connotative constitutions hinged on the tortuous political instability that characterizes the post-independent period of Nigeria, with perhaps, particular reference to the incessant coup and counter coups of telling consequences to the nation" (p. 7), one is bound to disagree because the poem, "Abiku", was composed before the advent of coups. It amounts to extrapolation to connect it with the source of military incursion into the Nigerian political space except if Aniemeka is out to prove the prophetic significance of the poem.

Specht (2013), while comparing Clark's "Abiku" with that of Wole Soyinka, recognizes that "the two poems are very different in tone" and further observes that "Clark's approach is one of supplication, begging the *abiku* to break free of his or her ties to the spirit world and stay" (p. 36). Reference to "tone" and

the speech act of "begging" as observed by Specht here somewhat amounts to a linguistic comment, yet it does not capture the structural dimension in the disparity between the two poems. A significant structural contrast in Soyinka's poem is the preponderance of deictic or nominal word group (NWG) themes which essentially topicalizes *abiku* as a participant. Moreover, the application of the verbal form, *am*, emphasizes the *beingness* of *abiku* in Soyinka's work.

Yeibo (2011, p.1) notes that "from the corpus of available literature, J.P Clark-Bekederemo's poetry has not been given intensive linguistic enquiry like other African poets, such as Soyinka and Osundare". Yeibo's observation constitutes part of the motivation for this research. Thus, it is the purpose of this study highlight and explicate of linguistic forms which will in turn allow a better appreciation of the poem.

***Abiku*, thematization and violation of the politeness principle**

As a *pragma-linguistic* feature, politeness could be assessed at the levels of grammar and semantics. In "Abiku", either out of frustration and desperation or due to outright ignorance of the

necessity of this *pragma-linguistic* rule of politeness, the speaker engages in a gross violation of the politeness principle. The first violation is the deliberate *defocalization* on the personality of the *abiku*. This *defocalization* is achieved by means of the *rhematization* of *abiku* as participant and *thematization* of the acts of "coming and going". Thus, and as already noted earlier in the preliminary part of the study, rather than bring to the fore, the subject of discussion, which in all sense of fairness should be the *abiku*, the speaker chooses the *process* as a *transitivity* element worth fronting. In other words, *abiku* who is the title and topic, as a *participant*, should have been accorded more prominence than the *process* of coming and going. As a result of this, and in violation of the politeness principle, *abiku's participant* status, albeit passive – since it (*abiku*) is only expected to listen rather than respond in corresponding utterance– is downgraded to that of an object which has to come last, after a plethora of other transitivity elements of *process* and *circumstance*.

This study can be viewed as a mediation or intervention for pragmatic assessment of significance via the structural configuration of the text. Intervention, as conceived, is not in the sense of

judgemental evaluation with regard to right or wrong and appropriateness and otherwise of linguistic features deployed by the poet who is at liberty to apply linguistic forms that suit his motive. Rather, the intervention is a review that accounts for some basic significance accruable to linguistic forms and features deliberately or unconsciously deployed by the speaker/voice in reference to the spirit child, *abiku*. While it is understandable that every utterance is deliberate with respect to the speaker's original intention, language resources, at some point of analysis, may offer intuitive interpretations more or less at variance with the original intention of the speaker. This is why it is held that linguistic forms might be "deliberately or unconsciously deployed". To buttress this, the Yorubas say, "Ẹyin ni ọ̀rọ̀, tóbá jábó/fọ̀, kòşe ko". A rough transliteration of this aphorism is, "the word is an egg, which once it falls, cannot be packed or gathered". The implication of this is that the speaker neither reserves the privilege of withdrawing the uttered words nor possesses the freedom to reject interpretations generated by the pragmatics of perspective. The pattern of traces left by the shattered egg on the floor is subject to varied viewpoints of interpretations. In an explorative reading

of Okigbo's poetry, Chukwuet al (2021, p. 3) agree that "a formalist approach to the analysis of a poetic piece may generate other interpretive possibilities", perhaps beyond and besides that originally perceived by other analysts.

Defocalization through rhematization

Coming and going these
several seasons
Do stay out in the baobab tree
Follow where you please your
kindred spirits
If indoors is not enough for
you.

In this entry statement, reference to *abiku* as a *participant* is achieved through three pronominal items (personal pronouns). These pronominal items are, the first "you" in "where you please"; the second embedded "you" in "your kindred spirit"; and the final "you" in "enough for you". Of all the three pronominal references, it is only the last "you" that could be said to draw substantive attention to the *abiku* as a *participant*. The first "you" is encased within a *rankshifted* structure – evidently at the command of the adverb, "where". The second pronominal reference to *abiku* is a genitive form which does not indicate a direct reference to the *participant*.

Although this statement is an imperative which is intended to address the *abiku* directly, the speaker, as already emphasized, chooses to delay the one element that ideationally refers to the *abiku* till the termination of the statement. This is the first foregrounded violation of the politeness principle. Thus, it is the first deliberate speech act that is applied to denigrate the personality of *abiku*, and conversely, upgrade other transitivity elements including, and especially, that which pertains to activity.

The downgrading of *abiku* as a referent or *participant* in this entry statement is an embedded feature which arises when interpretations beyond the primary linguistic features (words) are made. The interpretation, therefore, arises from the paralinguistic feature of form rather than content. Recognizing the fact that linguistic interpretations often arise from the form rather than the content of an utterance, Lyons (1981, p. 167) asserts that when an addressee interprets the encoded features of an utterance, "a distinction is commonly drawn between the inherent meaning of an expression and what the speaker uses the expression to mean". The inherent meaning as can be deduced from this is the emphatic focus on the act of "coming and going"

and relegation of reference to *abikutoa* feature of later mention.

Sustenance of marked thematic structure

True, it leaks through the thatch
When floods brim the banks,
And the bats and the owls
Often tear in at night through the eaves...

In this second statement, *abiku* is neither focalized nor even referenced. The speaker here rather engages in what can be regarded as self-examination of their own shortcomings and failings. These are failings that in fairness can constitute adequate *demotivation* for the *abiku* to act in a manner expected of it by the speaker. The textual presentation of this excerpt also indicates a marked form where what can be regarded as Complement takes precedence over Subject or Finite. The significant foregrounding of form in this instance is likewise, as in the first statement, illustrative of that "distinction drawn between the inherent meaning of an expression and what the speaker uses the expression to mean" (Lyons, 1981, p. 167). Indeed, it can be said that this section of the speaker's utterance confesses an objective description of the environment under which the *abiku* is expected to thrive. However, the speaker

consciously counter-balances this untoward description by stating that others (fingers) not different from *abiku* surmount the challenges and thrive where the latter has chosen not to stay.

True ----- Complement (C)

it ----- (Dummy) Preparatory

Subject (S)

leaks ----- Finite/Predicator (F/P)

through the thatch ----- Adjunct (A)

(Structural order: CSF/PA, marked)

Just as is the case with the first statement, it is quite observable that there strongly appears to be an appreciable effort on the part of the speaker to avoid the unmarked SFPCA clause structure in the second statement. This is achieved through a preliminary Adjunct, "True". In other words, like every other statement, but one, this expression begins in an element other than a Subject (S). The item, "True", in terms of classification, presents a somewhat near ambiguous feature. On an analytical account, "True" could be deduced to be a Complement (C) (within an embedded clause) whose Subject element is elided. To realize the Subject (S), one has to recover the elliptical features thus:

(It is) True (it leaks through the thatch)

(It) ----- Subject (S)

(is) ----- Finite/Predicator (F/P)

True ----- Complement (C)

(Structural order: SF/PC, unmarked but not applied)

In its restored form, as shown above, the Adjective, "True", is, therefore, *predicative* in relation to the first "it", but, in some considerations, *attributive* to the latter (anticipatory) "it". It is not surprising that the speaker evades the structure as presented above. This is consistent with the observation that there is a conscious effort on the part of the speaker to employ a foregrounded or marked form which is imbued with the capacity to trigger an inherent meaning beyond the ordinary linguistic form applied in the text. Although the elliptical "It" is a dummy pronoun possessing just a cataphoric essence, applying it would have subtracted from the observation that the speaker is engaged in a face threatening act by rhematizing elements that are correlatives of the *abiku* as well as other human participants and by also failing to *thematize* any other nominal features but themselves. Although this is hardly indictable as a violation of the politeness principle, one is only attracted to the fact that in a subsequent statement where the speaker refers to themselves, they adopt the unmarked structure of SFPCA.

Face-saving and face-threatening acts

Still, it has been the healthy stock
 To several fingers, to many more
 will be
 Who reach to the sun.

Similar to the excerpt analysed previously, lines 12 to 14 feature the marked form of a *thematized Adjunct* plus an anticipatory or dummy pronoun (it). Thus, the Adjunct, "Still", becomes a crucial item to ensure a consistency of style. Cohesion is achieved because it connects anaphorically with the adversative significance of "True". Therefore, the successive statements, though separated by a period, could, as a matter of structure, be realized as two parts of a single compound-complex statement. In this regard, the expression could alternatively have read:

*It is true it leaks through the
 thatch...*
Still, it has been the healthy stock
 ("Abiku", paraphrase)

With respect to face, this expression has an ambivalent significance. It implies both negative and positive face (threatening/saving) acts. It is negative because the speaker points out the fact that what *Abiku* could not stand is:

*the healthy stock for others
 who reach to the sun*

Here, the speaker indirectly compares and contrasts *abiku* with "others". These "others" are indicated to be better because, unlike *abiku*, they ignore the fact that:

*bats tear in at night through eaves
 flood brim the banks and overflow
 the dried thatch often catches fire
 during harmattan* ("Abiku", paraphrase).

In the face of all these odds, these "others" still *reach the sun* whereas *abiku comes and leaves* (goes) almost immediately. This contrasting of *abiku's* preference against that of "others" of his ilk is a negative face. The positive inference from this face is that the speaker exonerates himself from the indictable condition by indicating that others survive whatever unpleasant condition as may be present in the family where the *abiku* is expected to be nurtured. In other words, since the "others" (who the speaker is in a representative capacity) have had to be made to pass through the process, endure, thrive, and "reach to the sun", their (speaker's) conscience is, therefore, free. If the whole poem is constitutive of an order directed as an authoritative imperative to the *abiku*, its authoritative undertone/force falls flat when the voice

congruently refers to this pitiable condition of the family/mother. In appealing to pity, the voice expects *abiku* to empathize. Maduka, remarking on the "importunate" tone of the dualistic order, observes that the act is "a neutralization of the effect of the first affirmation" (p. 23).

Sustaining defocalization of the *Abiku*

No longer then bestride the
threshold
But step in and stay
For good.

Lines fifteen (15) to seventeen (17) contain a statement which features an imperative MOOD whose entry element almost loses its verbal essence. Thus, the item "No longer" is synonymous with the verbal command, "Do not" or "Stop (+ progressive verb)". However, the speaker, in order to maintain a consistent style in structure and an interpersonal relation which *defocalizes* or *depersonalizes* the *abiku*, opens the statement with this quasi-Finite. The expression is said to be quasi-Finite because it poses a hazy distinction between a Finite, which is characteristically applied in an imperative statement and an Adjunct, which may be fronted in a marked expression. This command however contrasts significantly

with the first (as established in the first four lines) which altogether commanded the *abiku* to "stay out [away] on the baobab tree". In essence, the speaker who begins his speech in what could easily be termed a commanding offensive, after employing a face-saving device (in admitting the shortcomings of the household under which *abiku* is expected to thrive) begins an implicit imploration. Thus, the *abiku* is no longer being commanded to "stay away", rather it is being begged to "step in and stay for good". This act is, however, applied in bad faith because the subject of supplication is left out without a mention.

The expression, "No longer", confers a hazy polarity system. It is obvious that its import is negative in polarity. However, it indicates a fixed expression illustrating an exocentric rather than endocentric form. It is unlike other similar and synonymous expressions such as "Do not" and "Stop" (+ progressive verb). The structure is exocentric because it performs the function of a verbal form without containing a verb. This, as said, is unlike such analogous expressions applied for negative polarity. Thus, "Do not" contains the verb, "do" and "Stop" is a verbal form. Indeed, it is a normal English expression, but its application

here gives credence to the observation that there is a deliberate avoidance of certain types of structures on the part of the speaker. Normal imperative statements come as structures in which the verb is fronted or *thematized*. Moreover, the structure sustains avoidance of participant transitivity.

Imposition and self-focalization

No longer then bestride the
threshold
But step in and stay
For good. **We know the knife scars**
Serrating down your back and
front
Like the beak of the sword-fish,
And both your ears, notched
As a bondsman to this house,
Are all relics of your first comings.

The excerpt above (lines fifteen to twenty-two) consists of two distinct statements. These two distinct statements are extracted together to highlight how the poet applies graphology to a stylistic effect. The latter statement is declarative, which features a self-referencing expression, "We know". This self-referencing expression indicates consciousness and cognition on the part of the speaker. Of all the statements, this expression is the only one that can be classified as unmarked. The statement is

unmarked because its structure follows the normal SFPCA format of the English clause as conceived in SFL. However, on account of an interpersonal classification, the expression displays a deviation. The deviation is presented here because all other distinct statements except this (We know the knife scars) begin in some other elements (Adjunct/Predicator) rather than a Subject (S).

We know the knife scars // Serrating
down your back...
We ----- Subject (S) (referencing
speaker)
know ----- (F/P)
knife scars // Serrating down your back --
----- Complement (C)
(Structural order: SF/PC, relative to the
speaker)

There is both semantic and graphology foregrounding in the application of the first-person plural pronoun, "We". This all-inclusive first person Subject plural pronoun, "We", tends to indicate an instance akin to a gang-up where the "We" as represented by the speaker is tipped against the singular "you" of *abiku*. Logically, where a "We" plural and a "you" singular are engaged in a conflict, the underdog should be obvious. However, and this is with respect to graphology, the speaker tries to hide the

fact that in consideration of the power equation, they are guilty of imposition.

Graphically, the location of the "We" Subject (S) based on the arrangement of the words of the verse is foregrounded. This expression, in which "We" is fronted and applied as a Subject, although it is the only one unmarked, begins in the middle of a line. In other words, the statement occurs as a run-on-line. The implication of this graphic arrangement is that unlike all other features that begin every distinct statement in the poem which is fronted or focalized, the "We" Subject is almost hidden. And, but for this present analysis, it can be said that the poet-persona, through graphic arrangement, seems to have succeeded in hiding the obvious semantic power equation between the aggressive plural "We" who engage in giving the helpless and singular "you" a *serrating scar* on the back using a sharp *knife*. The fact that the "We" co-reference of the speaker is written in an upper case initial letter while all pronouns representing the *abiku*

are written with a lower case initial is not lost to observation. Moreover, whereas the poet applies a Subject pronominal feature as a co-reference to the voice in this verse, *abiku* is mostly indicated in genitive forms incorporating its body parts and its actions:

your ear
your back and front
your first comings

As can be deduced from the accounts of linguistic features in this poem, and based on the analysis so far presented, the speaker is rather out to show the *abiku* as a *tormentor* whose *action* rather than *personality* deserves attention. The *self-focalization* of the speaker as against the *de-emphasis* on the personality of the *abiku* is, as earlier said, foregrounded. It is also quite significant that the *process* involved with the *thematized* Subject (S), "We", is a mental *process* which contrasts with that (material processes) relative to *abiku* and other non-human but animate *participants* in the text. This much can be observed from the table below:

Table of transitivity of participants and process

S/N	Participant	Process	Process Type
1	<i>abiku</i>	Coming, going, stay out, follow, step in	Material
2	speaker, poet/persona (We)	know	Mental
3	other (fingers)	reach	Material
4	bats and owl	tear	Material
5	flood	brim	Material

Although the other two referents/participants (*abiku* and fingers/others) are, like the speaker, human references, the voice/poet-persona decides not to assign or match them with mental processes. Thus, they, *abiku* and fingers/others, are like any other nominal reference such as *bats*, *flood*, *kindredspirits* or *sword-fish* that is only capable of acts (material/behavioural processes) but not of cognitive or rational process. In this, it is evident that the elevation of self is integral to the speaker's utterance. This self-elevation is not only evident in the choice of the structures vis-à-vis focalization/ *thematization* as already observed, but also inherent in transitivity as presented

in the type of processes assigned to each participant or referent in the poem.

Conflicting Command

Then step in, step in and stay,
For her body is tired,
Tired, her milk going sour
Where many more mouths
gladden the heart.

Just as any other distinct or individual statement in the text which is directed at *abiku*, the last statement is also a command. Moreover, like every other statement, except that which has the speaker as Subject, this command begins in an item indicating an adverbial:

Then step in, step in and stay.

This command, however, slightly contradicts that with which the speaker begins his appeal. In the first command as shown in lines one to four (1-4), *abiku* is advised to choose the option which would have it "stay out" and follow "kindred spirits". Thus, the expression:

Do stay out on the baobab tree,
Follow where you please your
kindred spirits as instructions or
commands make a clear request
just as:

Then step, step in and stay

These two significant sets of statements which mark the entry and exit illocutionary acts of the speaker justify the observation that the speaker's resolve to address the *process* rather than the *participant* does not only generate a feature of "markedness" in the choice of the structures they employ but also draws attention to the contradiction in their speech as an illocutionary act. How serious is the speaker about their appeal that *abiku* should "step in and stay"

when, following the exposition, the surroundings under which the latter is expected to be brought up are prone to natural and man-made disasters of "flood" and "fire"? This is the question that agitates the mind. The speaker does not in any way promise to address the challenges of "brimming banks" and "fire-prone thatched dwelling places". Perhaps, this is why the *abiku*, in Soyinka's text derides the fruitless efforts of its detractors, including the "We" and all that they represent, who "in vain cast charmed circles around its feet" (Soyinka, "Abiku").

As already indicated, the statement which features the speaker as the Subject (S) is the only one in which the basic and most significant information is given before a predication.

We (unmarked theme)
know the knife-scar (rheme)

Applying the SPCA schema, this expression is thus broken down as:

Table of expression of unmarked information structure in "Abiku"

<i>We</i>	<i>know</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>knife-scar</i>
Subject	Finite/Predicator	(mod)	Complement
Theme	Rheme		

With respect to the dignity of identified human participants in the speech context enacted in "Abiku", it can be said that while the speaker assigns to themselves a pragmatically recognizable dignity both in the verbal *process* and thematic position, they conversely downgrade the *abiku* which is addressed in the poem. The speaker offers a speech which indicates a pretense of advice when assessed superficially. However, in a more delicate analysis, it can be observed that the speaker is issuing an impolite directive to a hearer who in no way is indicated as being in the position to benefit from the action being requested of them (hearer).

Conclusion

Language as a network of systems (Halliday, 2002) offers choices for stylistic references. However, the adoption of a particular dimension of choice is usually motivated by individual stylistic reasons (see Tallerman, 2011, p. 20). Thus, when the poet/persona, exercising their poetic license in the choice of grammar, decides to apply the marked structure of the English clause in all but one statement, it becomes evident that this choice, in its unmarked form, imbues the text with a relative pragmatic significance which cannot be stylistically overlooked

especially in comparison to the frequency of the marked forms. Therefore, the comparative preponderance of a particular form of *thematization* over and against another is not arbitrary but duly motivated. This is because adherence to stylistic motives ensures that a speaker or language user often tries to "exploit variations in order to foreground or background elements, to add focus and emphasize or to show the topic of a sentence" (Tallerman, 2011, p. 284). One does not have to stress the relationship between *topic* and *theme*, though there was a passing mention of these terms. However, *thematization* is, at another level of consideration, *topicalization*. Therefore, it is not out of place to conclude that the speaker's consistent choice of structure in which transitivity elements of *process* and *circumstance* rather than the nominal reference, *abiku*, are thematized is purely inspired as a stylistic form meant to deliver a pragmatic message. Hence the assertion that this *pragma-linguistic* exploration, though deconstructive – in which case analysis extends beyond the purview of the author – is stylistic. It is stylistic because adequate stylistic "analysis demands the necessity for a grammar which provides a sufficient description of

the *langue* and *parole* whereby the analyst states the *langue* against which he measures the *parole*" (Ufot, 2006, p. 19). The *langue* in this case is as exemplified in the basic word order of the English language, SPCA/SVO, which is considered against the poet's *parole*, featuring the high frequency of marked structure as applicable to the text.

It is important to clarify that what has been undertaken in this analysis is illustrative of a kind of speech contextual deconstruction (SCD). Thus, recognizing the necessary contexts that inhabit the formation of an utterance, the speech (immediate linguistic) context is singled out for examination. Consequently, in this process (of speech contextual deconstruction), the author is removed from the scene of enactment. This is because the author is neither the addressee (*abiku*) nor the aggrieved speaker as represented by the voice. Even if Clark as a private individual has had the experience of an *abiku* child, he does not in any way communicate (with the poem) that what is enacted is a product of a personal experience. Therefore, the analysis centres on the various pragma-stylistic devices deployed by the speaker and the possible illocutionary effect that

this might register in the mind of the addressee.

Essentially, a speech event is enacted. This speech event is between the speaker (voice/poet-persona) and the hearer (*abiku*). The major point of emphasis is the assessment of the structural presentation of the text as an illocutionary act. In any case, the method employed to encode this message can trigger off a possible reaction either in an envisaged direct reply (indicated in *abiku's* response in Wole Soyinka's poem of the same title) or with the act of repeated "coming and going" which is a face-saving act in disregard to the plea which requires that the *abiku* either "step in and stay" or, in the alternative, "stay out on the baobab tree".

To a superficial investigator, *abiku* is the adversary, the tormentor; however, a more careful linguistic assessment reveals that from the perspective of foregrounded features as well as the stand point of power equations, the speaker is the one being offensive. The speaker is offensive, not only by objectivizing the *abiku* but also by relegating the latter in the speech forms and linguistic features. Moreover, *abiku* is an underdog referenced with a singular

"you", who is in a struggle with a conspiring plural "We" who are poised to command it to do two conflicting things at the same time.

If regarded as a request rather than an order/command, the speaker's utterance fulfils Searle's felicity condition of "essentiality" since it counts on the possibility of getting *abiku* (H) to act in a manner desirable to the speaker (S). However, following Searle's further clarification, the speaker's utterance, taken as a single text, can neither be regarded as an order nor understood as a request. Thus, if viewed as an order, it is in bad faith because the speaker clearly lacks the status, following Leech's scalar index of "vertical distance scale", to command a transcendental being of "kindred spirit" to make a particular decision. This is said because for the order to fulfil the *adequacy condition*, there must be an indication that "S" (speaker) must be in a position of authority over "H" (hearer). Thus, there is no established superiority position on the "vertical distance scale" (Leech, 2014, p. 138) between the *abiku* and the speaker. Taken as a request, the *pragma-linguistic* assessment of textual and transitivity features does not favour the manner of

presentation of the speech. Leech recognizes that the "defining characteristic of requests, and more generally of directives, is that they propose actions to be performed by O* (hearer) at a cost to O – and normally for the benefit of S (speaker)" (2014, p. 136). The emphasis on "cost and benefit" by Leech connects with the concept of "investment" by Verschueren. The speaker in "Abiku", however, fails to make a clear-cut "cost-benefit" proposal as there is no indication of benefit for the *abiku* or a hint on the cost its action would have on the speaker.

More often, the source of impoliteness in an address is an indication that "the utterance is not only a bald-on-record directive (failing to observe the Tact Maxim), but implicitly also a complaint or criticism of O's behaviour (transgressing the Maxim of Approbation)" (Leech, 2014, p.145). In "Abiku" as a speech event, the speaker transgresses the "Maxim of Approbation" by explicitly criticizing *abiku's* behavior. It is the submission of this study that the politeness principle calls for something better than the way the speaker presents the address to the *abiku*.

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