

Stylistic Functions of ‘Discollocation’ in Soyinka’s Novels: A Systemic-functional Analysis

Edmund Bamiro

Dept. of English, Redeemer’s University, Mowe, Ogun State, Nigeria

Abstract—The present study employs the theoretical framework of systemic-functional grammar to probe the stylistic functions of ‘discollocation’ in the novels of Wole Soyinka, the Nobel Laureate for Literature in 1986. Discollocation is analyzed in relation to ideational metaphors, metaphors of mood, and the textual metafunction. In light of several critics’ contention that, compared to the style of another of Soyinka’s contemporaries, Chinua Achebe, Soyinka’s diction is often obscure and impenetrable, this study validates such critics’ claim. The study submits that although discollocation aids Soyinka in foregrounding and comparing ideas, this stylistic device may slow down the pace of reading comprehension. However, more studies are needed on the psycholinguistic implications of discollocation in Soyinka’s writing.

Index Terms—stylistics, discollocation, systemic-functional grammar, ideational metaphor, metaphor as mood, textual metafunction

I. INTRODUCTION

Collocation, in systemic-functional grammar, is an indispensable notion in lexical cohesion. According to Halliday (1994), “... there are ... instances of lexical cohesion which do not depend on any general semantic relationship ... but rather on a particular association between the items in question – a tendency to co-occur. This ‘co-occurrence tendency’ is known as collocation” (p. 312).

Collocational theory itself is traceable to Firth (1934-1951) who argued that “You shall know a word by the company it keeps” (p. 179). His familiar example was that of *ass* which occurred in ‘You silly ___’, ‘Don’t be such an ___’, and with a limited set of adjectives such as *silly*, *obstinate*, *stupid*, and *awful*. For Firth, this keeping company, which he called “collocation” was part of the meaning of a word.

Following Firth and Halliday, several systemic-functional linguists have written at length on the subject. For example, Spencer and Gregory (1970) insist that “collocation is an important concept to have in mind when studying the language of literature” (p. 79). They further specify that

Collocation is set up to account for the tendency of certain items in a language to occur close to each other, a tendency not completely explained by the grammar. For example, the item *economy* is likely to occur in the same linguistic environment as items such as *affairs*, *policy*, *plan*, *program*, *disaster*, etc. These items are termed the collocates of *economy* which, because it is the item under examination, is itself termed the nodal item. (Spencer and Gregory, 1970, p. 78)

Also, according to Robinett (1985):

In its simplest terms, it (i.e. collocation) is the arrangement or juxtaposition of words. Words quite often co-occur in close proximity with a high degree of frequency. Learning these collocations will be useful to students. This process of considering groupings of words involves the consideration of the whole context in which a word occurs. Thus, learning the word *car* might involve learning some of the words that collocate with it: *driver*, *accelerate*, *stop*, *seat belt*; *gas* (*oline*), *oil*, *lubrication*, *service*; *windshield*, *brakes*, *insurance*, *collision*. (p. 121)

The term collocation is similar to Wardhaugh’s (1969, p. 133) “probabilities of occurrence”. Although the systemic-functional conception of collocation is generally limited to lexis, in a larger sense the “probabilities of occurrence” may include syntactic signals of subject-verb word order, nouns following prepositions, nouns following a definite or indefinite article, an adjective or adverb regularly following the adverb *very*, etc. The concept of collocation is also akin to the idea of “mutual expectancy” described by Allen (1973, p. 15-19) as our ability to guess what should come next in connected discourse. Syntactic items such as sequence signals (conjunctive adverbs, pronouns, etc.) play an important part in providing such expectancy clues. If eventually linked with the literary critic’s ideal conception of style, collocation is analogous to “style considered as the best words in the best order” (Bateson, 1979, p. 100).

I have gone into this considerable detail about collocation so as to provide a background for my discussion of discollocation in the novels of Wole Soyinka. ‘Discollocation’, as used in this study, is similar to Spencer and Gregory’s (1970) “unusual collocations” (p. 90), Leech’s (1970) “collocative clash” (p. 120), and Carter’s (1982) “unexpected collocations” (p. 30). Spencer and Gregory (1970) remark that collocation is an important concept to have in mind when studying the language of literature because “The creative writer often achieves some of his [sic] effects through the interaction between usual and unusual collocations, and through the creation of new, and therefore

stylistically significant, collocations” (p. 79). They furnish some examples of discollocation in Dylan Thomas’s verse: “a grief ago”; “once below a time”; “happy as the heart was long”; “all the sun long”; “it was Adam and maiden”.

Leech (1966) indicates that discollocation – which he once saw in terms of lexical deviation – studied with reference to the frequency collocations, or groups of lexical items in proximity, is a matter of gradience. Consequently, “One would have no hesitation in dubbing the collocation damp smile as deviant, but it would have to be placed on a scale of lesser-to-greater deviation on the lines of:

- (1) broad smile (most normal)
- (2) free smile
- (3) damp smile
- (4) high smile (most deviant)” (Leech, 1966, p. 143).

In their discussion of collocation, Spencer and Gregory (1970) emphasize that “when compared to the referential criterion of meaning, the formal criterion of collocation has this in its favour: it is more observational and objective” (p. 79). Consequently, Carter (1982, pp. 19-51) devised tests to check for informants’ sense of the degree to which certain words belong together in W.H. Auden’s poem, “Oxford”. Among others, the following lexical items were not predicted and might be deemed to be unexpected collocations in the company of surrounding words in the poem: ‘agile babies’; ‘high-strung students’; ‘fidget and poke’; ‘Eros Paidogogos’; ‘Talkative city’, etc. However, Carter (1982) acknowledges the problems of these kinds of tests designed to elicit literary judgements (pp. 19-51). He accepts that “the results of the tests are conditioned by the nature of the tests themselves, the selection of items for testing (other responses to the poem might require different tests) and by the arbitrary, albeit necessary, imposition of a norm” (Carter, 1982, p. 35).

II. METHODOLOGY

My analysis focuses on Soyinka’s two novels, *The Interpreters* (1966) (hereafter, *Int.*) and *Season of Anomy* (1973) (hereafter, *SOA*). The Nobel laureate for Literature in 1986, literary critics generally agree that the problem with Soyinka’s style inheres in his difficult lexis and syntax. It would then appear that part of the problem with Soyinka’s difficult style lies in various discollocations noted in his two novels.

The theoretical framework adopted for the analysis is Systemic-Functional Grammar (SFG). SFG is the brainchild of the British linguist, Michael Halliday. The precursor of SFG is Scale-and-Category linguistics. Especially during the 1960s, the kind of grammar proposed by Halliday formally incorporated a semantic and functional dimension and it became known as systemic-functional grammar or systemic grammar for short. In proposing SFG, Halliday’s central thesis is that meaning or semantics cannot be divorced from syntax. In other words, syntactic statements are essentially semantic statements. SFG thus interprets language as being an enormous systems network of meaning potential. The task of the grammar is to specify the total grid of options available to a speaker of the language. SFG does not draw any distinction of principle between the meaning potential and the use of that potential in a given context. More importantly, in contrast to scale-and-category grammar, SFG claims that any sentence or clause in English performs three kinds of functions simultaneously: the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Discollocations in Soyinka’s novels are noted largely at the nominal group structure with a few examples occurring at the rank of the clause. In the nominal group structure, discollocation is a result of a semantic ‘tension’ or incongruity between the ‘Epithet’ (more commonly known as ‘Modifier’ in traditional/structural/transformational grammars) and the ‘Thing’ (‘Head’ or ‘Headword’ in traditional/structural/transformational grammars), the latter being the semantic core of the nominal group. In other words, discollocation of this kind is a matter of incongruous relationships. Numerous examples of this type of incongruous relationship are attested in Soyinka’s novels and it is almost impossible to make a frequency count of all the instances. However, before going into specific functional analysis of this kind of discollocation, some examples are furnished below. The first two examples are from *The Interpreters*, while the remaining are from *Season of Anomy*:

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|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. hard shadows (p. 10) | 19. infectious calm (p. 240) |
| 2. hard mists (p. 15) | 20. turbulent quest (p. 240) |
| 3. silenced cries (p. 90) | 21. extravagant haloes (p. 268) |
| 4. staring sockets (p. 90) | 22. stubborn hope (p. 269) |
| 5. empty visions (p. 90) | 23. lidless eyes (p. 295) |
| 6. puzzled death (p. 91) | 24. sedate lunacy (p. 312) |
| 7. living death (p. 306) | 25. buried past (p. 316) |
| 8. luscious mudbath (p. 174) | 26. symbolic dust (p. 126) |
| 9. metal bestiary (p. 174) | 27. hungry prowl (p. 128) |
| 10. iron mastodons (p. 174) | 28. armed serpents (p. 133) |
| 11. succulent odours (p. 242) | 29. febrile dark (p. 151) |
| 12. restful shadows (p. 148) | 30. feral tingle (p. 167) |

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|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 13. dark intuitions (p. 150) | 31. caustic flights (p. 293) |
| 14. spurious grandeur (p. 158) | 32. varnished skull (p. 164) |
| 15. homicidal hate (p. 164) | 33. astonished wings (p. 194) |
| 16. barkless height (p. 175) | 34. leaden arms (p. 308) |
| 17. distanced wishfulness (p. 198) | 35. seated ring (p. 312) |
| 18. weighted inertia (p. 220) | 36. eloquence of eyes (p. 268) |

I pointed out earlier that discollocation at the nominal group structure is a result of a semantic incongruity or anomaly between the 'Epithet' and the 'Thing'. It then follows that discollocation may be explained in terms of grammatical metaphor as conceptualized in SFG: that is, the discollocations represent the writer's effort to present congruent or 'normal' experience in a rather 'incongruent' or 'anomalous' mode. Consequently, discollocations invite the reader to reword or replace the incongruent modes of meaning in a more congruent way.

It is thus suggested that a fruitful way of analyzing discollocations, which result from an incongruous relationship between the 'Epithet' and the 'Thing', is to posit a condition of grammatical metaphor. The examples listed above are, therefore, analyzable as ideational metaphors, metaphors of mood and they also generally fulfill a textual metafunction.

A. *Discollocation as Ideational Metaphors*

The examples of discollocations above are all instances of ideational metaphors because given our knowledge of the world, they simply describe unlikely states of affairs. These unlikely states of affairs are brought about by a collocative clash between the 'Epithet' and the 'Thing'. Given our knowledge of the world, we all know that 'shadows' are not 'hard', 'mists' are not 'hard', 'sockets' do not 'stare', the 'dead' can never be 'puzzled', a 'hope' is not 'stubborn', etc. However, by deliberately rendering these states of affairs in 'incongruent' or 'metaphorical' terms, Soyinka is asking us to scrutinize these states of affairs. In this kind of situation, we might follow Halliday's injunction that the discollocations have to be "unscrambled".

Similar to other types of ideational metaphors discussed by Halliday (1994, pp. 321-332), the "unscrambling" of some of our examples listed above could result in congruent forms negotiated through the complex exercise of rewording. Although working within a different grammatical orientation which emphasizes "an inventory of regular relational principles describing metaphoric extensions" as well as "a feature extension rule eliminating selectional clashes", this is how Norrick (1981, pp. 220-224) posits that discollocations or what he terms "transferred adjectives" should be derived. For example, in Keats's

(1) "And silent was the flock in woolly fold" (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, p. 4)

Norrick (1981) reasons that "not the fold is literally woolly, but rather the flock or its members". Norrick (1981) thus proposes to derive a construction like (1) above from normally interpretable underlying structures by means of an over-extension of an otherwise regular syntactic process which preposes an adjective from within a relative clause or prepositional phrase modifying a noun to attributive position before it (p. 221). Consequently, (1) above is derived from the phrase

(2) creature which has a woolly hide,

whereby the "syntactic process places woolly before creature and deletes the remainder of the clause" (Norrick 221); woolly fold can then be derived in parallel fashion from (3):

(3) fold which contains woolly creatures.

However, the problem with Norrick's proposal is that it is based on a notion (derived from generative semantics) that disregards the totality of the context in which a linguistic element occurs. Moreover, given the complex nature of discollocations, as opposed to other kinds of grammatical metaphors discussed by Halliday (1994), 'rewording' of the type suggested by Norrick becomes a reductionist tendency in that the discollocations lose their erstwhile communicative force. In this connection, Black (1981) argues that no literal paraphrase would have "the same power to inform and enlighten as the original" nor "give the insight that the metaphor did" (pp. 78-79, original emphasis); a literal comparison supposedly equivalent to a good metaphor would lack "the ambience and suggestiveness and the imposed 'view' of the primary subject upon which a metaphor's power to illuminate depends" (Black, 1982, p. 32).

I would, therefore, suggest that the 'unscrambling' of the examples has to be negotiated in the context in which they occur. It is in this sense that my extension of the concept of ideational metaphor to include discollocation should be construed as a complex transfer of experiential meaning from one lexical item to another, which has to be negotiated within the context of communication. Consequently, the 'Epithets' involved in discollocation are involved in a complex metaphoric transfer of meaning involving the 'Thing', however, with the totality of the context playing a major decisive role.

An exegesis of some of the discollocations listed earlier will suffice to buttress my claim that the unscrambling or decoding has to be negotiated in context and that no amount of rewording or paraphrasing will capture the meaning packed into these modes of expression. For example, part of the meaning of 'hard mists' involves grasping the complex role 'rain' is playing in that context. In fact, later in *The Interpreters* (p. 155), one of the protagonists, Sekoni, was to die in a road accident due to the slippery road after rainfall. Symbolically, then, rain becomes 'hard mists', an element insensitive to human tragedy in specific contexts. 'Restful shadows' describe the atmosphere of serenity that pervades a particular locale, while 'luscious mudbath', 'metal bestiary', and 'iron mastodons' capture the conflict between forces of modernity represented by the 'Epithets' of technology (luscious, metal, iron) and the unvarnished, pristine innocence

of the villagers represented by the 'Thing' (mudbath, bestiary, mastodons). Note, however, that at a higher level of abstraction, 'metal bestiary' and 'iron mastodons' refer to such things as cranes and caterpillars. By yoking together a web of complex images, Soyinka is able

to convey such a complex experience of life that no reductionist strategy of rewording and paraphrase could ever hope to capture. Or how do we interpret the discollocation in 'eloquence of eyes' where lexical items from two different sensory areas are brought into communion? -- in this case 'eloquence' [+sound] and 'eyes' [+visual]. In the same way, 'hungry prowls' and 'armed serpents' signify a whole complex atmosphere of social decay and use of naked power; 'astonished wings' describes the action of a flock of egrets which one of the protagonists had disturbed, while 'seated ring' is a recapitulation of "Seated in a ring were the inmates of the lunatic yard" (SOA, p. 311; my emphasis).

B. *Discollocations as Metaphors of Mood*

In addition to functioning as vehicles of the writer's complex experiences, discollocations are interpersonal metaphors associated with mood in that they aid in expressing the writer's feelings, attitudes, and opinions towards the states of affairs described by the discollocations.

In certain contexts, the writer's attitudes are carried by one of the lexical items involved in the discollocation: 'spurious grandeur'; 'dark intuitions'; 'homicidal hate'; etc. However, in most cases, the context suggests the mood. For instance, with reference to the list of examples furnished earlier, Soyinka's attitudes towards and the assessment of what is being communicated range from awe ('hard shadows'), to horror ('silenced cries', 'staring sockets'), indignation ('empty visions', 'puzzled dead'), hopelessness ('living death', 'luscious mudbath', 'metal bestiary'), contentment ('restful shadows'), powerlessness ('symbolic dust'), and apprehension ('hard mists', 'hungry prowls', 'armed serpents', 'febrile dark', 'feral tingle', 'astonished wings').

C. *Discollocation and the Textual Metafunction*

The textual function of discollocations at the nominal group structure involves (a) thematization and (b) information condensation. As I have indicated several times already, discollocation at the nominal group structure is a result of a semantic tension or incongruity between the 'Epithet' and 'Thing'. Consequently, this incongruity directs our attention to these forms and it as if the writer is asking us to scrutinize these modes of expression. Discollocations thus bring salient messages to the 'fore'. However, I am using "thematization" in the sense of "foregrounding" as posited by Mukarovsky. The basic tenets of foregrounding are well-known and, according to Leech (1970):

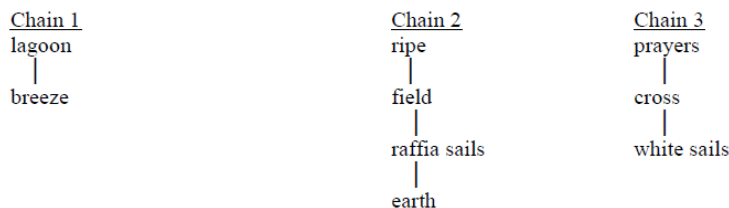
Foregrounding, or motivated deviation from linguistic or other socially accepted norms, has been claimed to be a basic principle of aesthetic communication. ... [W]hether or not the concept is applicable to any great extent to other art forms, it is certainly valuable, if not essential, for the study of poetic language. The norms of the language are in this dimension of analysis regarded as a "background" against which features which are prominent because of their abnormality are placed in focus. In making choices which are not permissible in terms of the accepted code, the poet extends, or transcends the normal communicative resources of his [sic] tongue. (pp. 121-122, my emphasis)

Discollocations also fulfill an "elliptical" role in the larger context of the discourse. In this direction, they help the author compress his ideas and condense the ideational content of what is being communicated. In some cases, this information condensation is explicit as in the example 'seated ring' which is indeed a reduction of "Seated in a ring were the inmates of the lunatic yard" (SOA, p. 311). However, in most cases, what is lost as a result of the compression offered by discollocations have to be deduced, inferred, or presupposed from the context of communication. In these instances, the reader is invited to look back to what has been mentioned earlier in the discourse and in some cases what is yet to come. For example, the discollocations 'luscious mudbath', 'metal bestiary', and 'iron mastodons' presuppose a knowledge of the conflict between forces of modernity and those who want to see the pristine innocence of the villages untarnished. It is this textual metafunction of discollocations that locates them in the category of "compounding process".

Other discollocations are attested at the rank of the clause in Soyinka's novels. The following are three examples:

(1) In spite of the small group which stood alienated by the side of the lagoon, oblivious of their presence, a ripe field of corn swept past again and again, pausing for prayers at the door. Then the breeze would swell once more, white sails and light raffia sails on mushed earth, and a hundred hands lifted Noah and the cross till they felt themselves routed and grounded superfluous (Int., p. 181).

The discollocation in this passage is as a result of disjunction in the semantic field. The notions of "co-extension" and "similarity chains", as formulated by Hasan (1984, pp. 181-219), are useful here. At least, at the rank of the clause, we expect the lexical items to show strong collocational associations in which case the lexical items, especially the content words, form similarity chains and thus contribute to the cohesive harmony of the message. We can thus construct the similarity chains of the passage above, as follows:



Even if there is a correspondence between chains 1 and 3, given the fact that Soyinka is describing an event of prayer by the lagoon, chain 2 does not easily fit into this experience domain, thereby resulting in a discollocation. The reader is also asked to work out the meaning of ‘white sails’ which is a metonymy for the kind of costume worn by the supplicants.

(2) Metal on concrete jars my drink lobes (Int., p. 7, my emphasis).

Similar to the experience domain in ‘eloquence of eyes’, there is a discollocation among jars, drink, and lobes. While the mental process represented by jars collocates significantly with lobes (synecdoche for ear), drink does not seem to fit into the whole picture. However, a close scrutiny reveals that by bringing together drink [+alimentary] and lobe [+auditory], the author is able to communicate, forcefully, the peculiar sensibility of one of the characters, Sagoe.

(3) The silence erupted in his ears. ... (SOA, p. 174, my emphasis).

This is contrary to our expectation because, normally, ‘silence’ does not ‘erupt’. However, the context in which the discollocation occurs suggests that the construction serves to express Ofeyi’s (the principal protagonist in the novel’s) disgust and apprehension of the destruction of the serenity of his village by forces of modernity.

The three examples above are some of the several discollocations which occur at the clausal rank in Soyinka’s novels.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has employed SFG to probe the stylistic functions of discollocation in Soyinka’s novels, paying close attention to discollocations as ideational metaphors, metaphors of mood, and the textual metafunction implied in the use of discollocations. My analysis has demonstrated how it is possible to apply SFG to the analysis of lexis, particularly discollocation. To the best of my knowledge, my analysis is one of the very few attempts to study discollocation within the SFG framework and thus provides a seminal analysis on how the systemic-functional notions of ‘metafunction’ and ‘grammatical metaphor’ can be extended to lexical analysis.

As indicated in the study, several critics of African English literature are of the view that, compared to the style of a writer like Chinua Achebe, Soyinka’s diction is often obscure and impenetrable. My analysis of discollocation in Soyinka’s novels seems to justify these critics’ claims although this is not to say that Achebe has consistently remained fairly simple and lucid in his lexical choices.

However, Soyinka’s lexis is more complex and obscure than Achebe. His novels contain more difficult words (lexical markedness) and he employs more compounds, conversions, and discollocations. We have to realize that, although from the writer’s perspective, in keeping with the principle of economy of expression, devices such as discollocation not only help the writer in thematization but also aid in compressing ideas, from the reader’s perspective, they ultimately slow down the pace of reading comprehension since, in the final analysis, readers are left on their own to work out the implicit meanings or supply the missing links. In other words, there is a trade-off implied in the use of a device like discollocation: what the writer gains by way of economy of expression the reader loses in terms of easy comprehension. Consequently, studies are needed on the psycholinguistic implications of discollocations in Soyinka’s novels, especially an objective measurement of reading difficulty associated with the processing of such linguistic devices in his novels.

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Edmund Bamiro obtained the degrees of B.A. in English (First Class Honours, 1982) from the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; M.A. in English Language (1986) from the University of Lagos, Nigeria; Ph.D. in Linguistics (1990) from the International Christian University, Tokyo, Japan; and Ph.D. in English (1997) from the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Canada.

He has taught in various universities such as the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria; University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria; Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria; The College of the Bahamas; University of Saskatchewan, Canada; and University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada. His research interests are English Linguistics, Stylists, and World Englishes, with particular reference African and Caribbean Englishes.

Prof. Bamiro is a member of professional societies, such as the International Association for World Englishes, the Canadian Association of University and College Teachers of English and the American society of Geolinguistics.