

DEVIANT COLLOCATION AS A WRITING TECHNIQUE IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A STYLISTIC STUDY OF HELON HABILA'S *MEASURING TIME*.

Dr. Onyekachi Jacinta Awa

Department of English Language and Literature,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki

ABSTRACT: *This paper appraises the use of deviant collocations in Habila's Measuring Time. Ordinarily, collocations are words or expressions that naturally co-occur. But some literary artists have as a matter of fact made some incongruous blending for stylistic stand point and to unravel the ills in their environments. This inquiry adopts the systemic functional Grammar because it highlights the functions of language, the descriptive methods of data analysis, the primary and secondary data collection methods. It was discovered that language use depicts the afflictions of the people like the twins La Mamo and Mamo in the novel. Thus, elements of language as used in the Measuring Time stand for Habila's ideological orientation. He therefore, uses deviant collocations such as personification, paradox, oxymoron, grotesque scheme, hybridity and so on to unearth the sense of fragmentation, despair and perplexity, which define his fictional Keti community, which is a paradigm for Nigeria and indeed Africa.*

KEYWORDS: African Literature, Language, Style, Deviation and Collocation.

INTRODUCTION

Sinclair (1991) defines collocations as items that occur physically together or have stronger chances of being mentioned together. For Hill (2000), collocation deals with word combinations that are predictable. For instance, when *foot* is used as a verb, it is highly likely to collocate with the noun *bill*. Thus, we have *foot the bill*. In a most simple manner, Udofot (2011) describes collocation as the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. From the above, it is derivable that collocations are those lexical items that naturally and commonly keep company. Every word has collocations but some are more predictable than others as in the following:

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|--|---------------------|
| (1) Blond collocates with hair. | (Blond hair) |
| (2) Flock collocates with sheep. | (Flock of sheep) |
| (3) Neigh collocates with horse | (Neighing of horse) |
| (4) Handsome collocates with man or boy. | (Handsome man) |
| (5) Beautiful collocates with woman or girl. | (Beautiful woman) |
| (6) Milk collocates with sour. | (Sour milk) |
| (7) Herd collocates with cows. | (Herd of cow) |
| (8) Pride collocates with lions. | (Pride of lions) |
| (9) Barking collocates with dogs. | (Barking of dogs) |
| (10) Mewing collocates with cats. | (Mewing of cats) |

- (11) Bleating collocates with sheep. (Bleating of sheep)
 (12) Crowing collocates with cock. (Crowing of cock)

Whereas the artist can confine himself within the structural boundaries of the language to select different forms germane to his communication needs, he is also at liberty to indulge in the use of deviant forms for aesthetic beauty or to achieve “Uniqueness” or “Creativity”. This, Osundare (1982:7) delineates as “a mark of creativity and inventiveness in the literary artist.” This leads to style as deviation from the norms. Style as a deviation from the norm rhymes with Fowler (1981) definition of literature as the creative use of language. This indicates the use of unorthodox or ‘out of the ordinary’ forms of language. The writer deliberately deviates from grammatical rules so as to attract the attention of his or her readers. Style as deviation is associated with style as choice since they have the same aim of conveying in a clear manner the author’s message. So, in the opinion of Agrawal (2010) style may be referred to as a departure from the norms. This approach is hinged on the notion that language is both rule governed and accumulation of norms. In other words, there are norms at all the levels of linguistic analysis as posited by Lawal (1997). The norm is the common core from which every member of the speech community draws, and deviations occur when a speaker makes departures from the norms or common core and the common core can be manipulated by a writer to suit his individual creative world or purpose. (Kamalu, 2008). Subsequently, Habila uses deviant blends to deride his society.

Statement of the Problem

Habila has deliberately made use of incongruous collocations in his *Measuring Time*. This study seeks to find out why and how he has made such bizarre combinations in his text.

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, this investigation seeks to find out those linguistic features which Habila manipulated for literariness and to portray his ideological orientation.

Theoretical Foundation

This study adopts the Hallidayan Systemic Functional Grammar, which highlights the functionality of language and thus implies that each individual utterance in a given context has a particular function. Asiyabola (2012), then, Projects Systemic Functional Grammar as a functional approach to language. Thus, language is used to express meaning and to perform various functions in different contexts and situations of our daily life. Specifically, Habila uses some out of the ordinary collocations to reveal the oddities in his society.

METHODOLOGY

Since this investigation is non experimental or statistical but purely text based, the ex-post facto research design, the primary and secondary data collection methods, the content or descriptive or textual system of data analysis, and the simple random sampling technique were employed in this examination.

Deviant Collocations in the *Measuring Time*

An aspect of foregrounding observed in Habila's *Measuring Time* is the use of deviant collocations. The deviant collocations in the novel are usually portrayed through the author's use of metaphorical modes such as paradox, oxymoron, antithesis, personification and so on to distort reality. These figures of rhetorics produce contradictory and incongruous ideas and these represent Habila's society. Therefore, structures of language as used in the *Measuring Time* stand for Habila's ideological orientation. As a result, he uses deviant collocations in *Measuring Time* to picture the perplexity in Keti in particular, Nigeria and Africa in general. Personification as a metaphorical construction is investigated below:

Personification

Personification confers human and animate features on non-human or inanimate objects, and this is a breach of Selectional Restriction Rule (Yankson, 1992). Kamalu (2008:162) explains that:

Personification involves the violation of collocation rules. Personification demonstrates instances of semantic incompatibilities – the juxtaposition of values that are semantically incompatible.

Personification is sometimes used to portray how some society, culture or individuals feel about reality. As a consequence, it depicts a writer's ideology, standpoint and his opinion of his society. A few examples of personification will be examined below.

- (1) **Tabitha was only seventeen, and the bloom of her youth sat on her cheeks like a rainbow. (P.19)**

Here, the verbal group (VP) or phrasal verb (VP) 'sat', usually picks a nominal group with the feature [+animate+ human], but here, the nominal group (NG) 'cheek' is meant to collocate with 'sat'. Thus, there is the substitution of an animate nominal group with an inanimate one. Therefore, "the bloom of youth" which is inanimate has been made to sit on 'cheeks' as if 'cheeks' were seats.

- (2) **By afternoon the sun would have boiled out the water from the earth and leaves and pools and moisture would hang in the air (p.15)**

Here also, the verbal group 'boiled' is usually associated with animate nouns, with human or animate characteristics, but in this instance the nominal group "the sun" with the feature [-animate-human] has taken the position usually occupied by a relatively homogenous set of animate nouns like man, woman and so on. Hence, an inanimate name - the sun has been made to boil water, which is the natural endowment of man.

- (3) **Mamo went down the veranda step slowly, one at a time. He stood on the last step, looking up at the dying sun for a long time, enjoying the slowly rising heat below his shirt.**

Here, "sun", which is inanimate, has been made to die. Death is attributed to animate beings or animals. Naturally, it is a human being or an animal that dies but in this particular instance, the sun is made to die instead of to "set".

(4) The women would have to leave what they were doing and come to answer death's imperative call. (P.137)

In this particular example, the nominal group 'death', which is an inanimate noun, is bestowed with animate and human quality of "calling women". This is a feature that is exclusively reserved for human beings.

(5) I woke up. It was late, around midnight, and the whole palace was asleep (P. 214)

The verbal group "sleep" normally collocates with the noun, which possesses the feature [+animate +human] but in this example, the nominal phrase "the whole place" which has the semantic feature [-animate -human] replaces some animate nouns like, Ada, Ngozi or father or mother (human beings). Therefore, "the whole place, which is inanimate has been bestowed with animate qualities and is "asleep."

(6) Her musky perfume brushed his nostrils as she passed (P.271)

This is a breach of selection restriction rule because the inanimate group (NG) 'perfume' with the characteristic [-animate -human] is vested with the features /+animate +human/. Thus, the noun phrase (NP) "perfume" collocates with the verb phrase (VP) "brushed". "Perfume", which is inanimate is given animate feature to enable it perform the duty of animate being "brushed".

(7) His appetite came rushing back (P.287).

There is an aberrant juxtaposition here; making for a breach of selection restriction rule because the inanimate nominal phrases (NG) "appetite" with the characteristics [-animate-human] is conferred with the semantic quality [+animate +human]. So, the noun phrase (NP) "appetite" associates with the verbal phrase (VP) "came rushing". So, "appetite" an inanimate, abstraction, has been allowed to behave like an animate being who naturally will "come rushing." In addition to the above function of personification, it adds to paint Habila's *Measuring Time*. Habila uses this literary troupe in his language to underline the theme of generational conflict between parents and their children, husband and wife, which has led to breakdown of the family, disappearance of family values parental love, care, support and affection and powerful mother love and bonding. Lamang's family is used as the paradigm or template to mirror the unpleasant relationships of the family.

(8) A single lantern, fighting valiantly both against the wind that leaned with hands on the wooden door... (P.15)

In this particular statement the (NP) 'lantern' with the features [-animate -human] collocates with the /VP/ "fighting" with the attribute [+animate +human]. So, an animate object "lantern" has been bestowed with the human quality of "fighting".

(9) ... and the darkness that advanced and withdrew playfully in umbra and penumbra revealed the other occupants of the room. (P.15)

In this example, there is wrong collocation to create effect on the reader and aesthetics to the story. "Darkness" a (NP) with the qualities [-animate -human] collocates with a (VP)

“advance” which is an attribute of a living thing. So, animate attribute are bestowed on an inanimate abstraction “darkness” thereby making it to act like human being who will “advance” or “withdraw”.

- (10) **The stories she told us and the neighbourhood children in front of the mud kitchen, far into the moonlit night, she told not only to entertain us, but also to push back the time when she'd have to go to her lonely bed and stare at the bare wall that mocked her mighty with images of her failed life... (P.18)**

Here, ‘story’ which is inanimate with the features [-animate –human] is made to “push back” which is a human’s responsibility with the attribute [+animate +human]. So, an inanimate quality has been bestowed on a non-living thing ‘story’.

- (11) **They threw themselves at her, sobbing with relief, when she opened the door, and at least their eyes opened and they saw the clear morning sun rays behind her, bathing her as she stood on the threshold.**

The morning sun rays bathes a human being. This attribute is naturally meant for a human being with the features [+animate +human] but it has been bestowed to non-living things ‘sun rays’

- (12) **The wind, blowing from the Sahara always had a way of sucking the vitality out of him, making him fall ill more frequently than in other seasons. (P.29)**

Here, the wind ‘blows’ and ‘sucks.’ These are the natural endowments of a /NP/ with the features [+animate +human] but, these qualities are given to an inanimate thing ‘wind’ with the features [-animate –human].

Other examples are

- (13) It was March, the dry season was coming to an end, the air already carried the fresh, stirring odours of rain from far away; dust devils swirled up into cork-screw funnels, lifting up twigs and pieces of paper and chasing them around and around in circles.
- (14) The Keti River ran from north to south on the eastern side of the village, and this morning it roared with liquid rage. (P.51)
- (15) He sat on the steps till the sun had gone down behind the hills and the air had turned chilly and the birds and insects had started singing their goodnight songs and then he stood up and started for home.
- (16) She gave a long ululating wail, which went on and on, like a song rising lazily over the roof, curving like a scythe over the mahogany trees outside, going from house to house, where the women – just about to light the fire for the morning meal – would hear it and answer with their own wails.

Paradox and Oxymoron

Other metaphorical frames Habila has used to interrogate reality are paradox and oxymoron. These groups involve the juxtaposition of ideas and words, which are self – contradictory. Kamalu (2008:164) asserts that in “oxymoron, the words placed side by side contradict each other, while in paradox, the juxtaposed ideas are self-contradictory”. The term Paradox is from

a Greek word “paradoxon” which means contrary to expectations, or perceived opinion. Despite the contrary nature of oxymoron it has some latent truth as in the following:

Your enemy’s friend is your enemy.
He is a wise fool
Truth is honey which is bitter
I must be cruel to be kind (Shakespear’s Hamlet)
The earth the nature’s mother is her womb
(Shakespear’s Romeo and Juliet)

On the other hand, an oxymoron is a combination of two seemingly contradictory words; as in the following:

- (1) Living deaths
- (2) Fair storms (Sir Philip Sidney)
- (3) Freezing fire.

Helon Habila has used these literary devices to emphasize the social contradictions in his “Keti” society. Therefore, He uses such modes to emphasize the illogicality, flaw, conflicts, ambiguities and denials in his society. A few examples will be discussed below.

- **The “glow” on their mother’s cheek hid the incipient dark tinge of “sadness” and “apprehension” (P.19)**

While the noun phrase “glow” is semantically affirmative there is a semantic contrast between it and the noun phrase “sadness” and “apprehension”, which are semantically negative and synonymously related.

- **She taught me “how to live with it,” “how to deride it” even. (P.18)**

The pair “how to live it” and “how to deride it even” are contrasting, while the first is affirmative, the second is negative. So, they are anonymously related.

Grotesque Scheme

This is another aspect of deviant blending. Here, there is purposeful deformation of semantic elements for theatrical effects. This strategy is usually used to depict the absurdities in a situation, action or character. It is a stylistic plan, which uses exaggeration, distortion or humour to expose and ridicule human vices or social situations (Kamalu, 2008). Specifically, Habila uses elements of distortion as an artistic form to mock and devalue reality. Consequently, the real identities of the characters are intentionally twisted in order to stir laughter. A few examples from *Measuring Time* are listed below:

1. Their eyes tightly shut, their limbs stiff as if with rigor mortis, their ears focused like radars towards the tapping on the window. (P.27)
2. The man was rocking on his feet back and forth, back and forth as if manipulated by an invisible hand, as if about to fall (P.38)
3. The only person they would have said goodbye to was Auntie Marina, but they knew that if they did, her tears like chains would tie them to the earth and they wouldn’t be able to fly. (P.48)

4. LaMamo's absence, though never talked about hunted the house like a ghost that went from room to room, denying them rest (P.64)
5. ... She gave a long ululating wail, which went on and on, like a song, rising lazily over the roof curving like a scythe over the Mahogany trees outside going from house to house... (P.184)

The general rhetorical element captured in these extracts is the direct comparison of two or more varied entities. This is technically referred to as simile in literary criticism and it entails the use of "like" or "as" to state or suggest the uniqueness of the compared items.

In the first example above, the glued eyes of the twins and their stiff limbs are equated with body stiffness after death (rigor mortis), while their ears are compared with radars (detectors or locating system). This structure tests the reader's imagination and intuition as he or she is expected to make an intellectual interpretation of that interface between their shut eyes and stiff limbs and rigor mortis, and "ears" and radars before he or she can understand what is meant.

A similar weird comparison is made in the fifth example where a "wail" is compared with a "scythe", a tool for mowing or reaping.

Habila, especially in the *Measuring Time* uses the stylistic elements of distortion, to project his satirical attack on his society.

Hibridity

This is another element of grotesque, which blends the features of two or more different entities to form an inexplicable one. This makes way for physical features of animals and sometimes of plants to be bestowed on humans or vice versa. A few examples are cited from the *Measuring Time*.

1. She then gently revealed the mewling contents of the blanket... (P.16)
2. I can't forget it he was crying and mewling like a cat (P.44)
3. We were days and days in the water and mud like fish. (P.44)
4. They stood as he had dreamt facing the village below: the trees, the people like ants, the houses with smoke rising off the hatch roofs of the kitchens. (P.102)

In all the cited examples, there is semantic incongruity as human beings take the features of animals, and sometimes, plants. This bestows on them, an unusual semantic feature [+animal+ human+ plant]. Helon Habila uses these metaphorical distortions to depict the beastly behaviour of some humans, especially the ruler towards their fellow humans (the ruled). This is evidence in the approach adopted by the Mai, the Waziri, the governor and his subordinates, who squander the resources, meant for the development of society for frivolities like the birthdays of their girl friends as illustrated in the following extract:

There were more parties mostly at the same venue, mostly with the same people, and mostly for the same reasons: birthdays for girlfriends. (P.250)

All the deviant structures employed in Habila's *Measuring Time* symbolize the chequered state of affairs in Keti, a town characterized by aridity, emptiness, devastation, and Lamang's family, where there is dearth of love care and warmth; all culminate in LaMamo's disappointment, as he comes home after twelve years of fighting as an itinerant soldier in various wars in countries in Africa, led a revolutionary riot and died in the process. The lack of bonding between Lamang and his children, Mamo and LaMamo is observed when the twins planned to live Keti town without their Father's consent:

Saying goodbye to their Father was not part of their plan. By now the distance between the twins and their Father was at its farthest, and because of that, they realized, there was really nothing they could do to hurt him. He only spent about a week at home every month, and whenever he came back, he'd look at them with astonishment, as if remembering suddenly that he had two sons. He always struggled to remember their names, and when he did remember, he invariably mixed them up even though they were not identical. The only person they would have said goodbye to was Auntie Marina, but they knew that if they did, her tears, like chains, would tie them to the earth, and they wouldn't be able to fly. They left her a note. (P.48)

CONCLUSION

Habila's *Measuring Time* examines the age-old theme of generational conflicts between parents and their children, disappearance of family values of parental love, support, care and warmth, partisan politics and the ill effects of war, Nigerian checkered history of military dictatorships, economic stagnation, social misery and political misrule. Helon Habila as a historian carefully traces the historical tramlines of the fictional Keti community (and to some degree Nigeria's history) from the mist of antiquity through pre-colonial and colonial times to the postcolonial era. Specifically, he embellishes his *Measuring Time* with deviant collocations, such as personification, oxymoron, grotesque scheme, hybridity to unearth, the aridity, drought, emotional atrophy, sense of fragmentation, sense of loss, exile, feeling of loneliness and despair, which define the fictional Keti community, which is a paradigm or a template for Nigeria and indeed Africa.

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