

## STYLISTIC CHOICE OF EUPHEMISM AS A STRATEGY AGAINST VULGARITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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**ABSTRACT:** *There is no gainsaying the fact that social media such as facebook encapsulate language of obscenity, vulgarity and indecency. Using the stylistic approach that considers style as choice, the paper contends that stylistic strategy of euphemism can be deployed to mitigate obscenity and vulgarity in the language of social media. An article on facebook "Letter to my Boss" serves as data for the analysis of obscenity in the language of social media. Linguistic contents of the article, purposively selected and placed in the first columns of both tables I & II, represent the stylistic choices of the writer, while the linguistic content on the second columns of the tables represents the available linguistic options open to the writer. The analysis reveals that the writer carefully selects his/her linguistic choices while ignoring other choices of the available options even though they contain the same meanings. This is perhaps done in order to mitigate the obscenity that the article would have portrayed. The paper therefore suggests that this euphemistic strategy can be deployed as stylistic choice in any literary piece where vulgarity and obscenity are inevitable.*

**KEYWORDS:** Style, Language, Obscenity, Taboo, Mitigation

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### INTRODUCTION

Within the context of linguistic study, the term 'style' is regarded as the choice which a speaker makes within the expressiveness of a language, as demonstrated in the surface structure of a text. By 'text', we mean any act of communication that includes spoken, written and printed words. It also includes audio and visual signs (see: Chimombo and Roseberry, 1998: ix).

However, in the views of Spencer and Gregory (1964:ix), 'style' is considered as an individual creative utilization of the resources of language which the period, chosen dialect, genre and purpose (within such utilization) offer the writer. In other words, 'style' from this perspective, may be seen as the dialect of the writer, distinguished from other dialects in terms of time, geographical setting, culture, mode of acquisition, discourse type or genre as well as other social-linguistic factors.

The linguistic attempt to study the styles of writers may have thus provided the basis for the emergence of the field of study, popularly referred to as 'stylistics', even though the field has over the years been classified into specific groups such as linguistic stylistics, literary stylistics and literary-linguistic stylistics, depending on the type of activities embarked upon by the analyst. Perhaps, that is why Dare (1993) describes 'stylistics' as a discipline concerned with the study of style. According to him, stylistics may be defined as 'The

systematic, methodical or scientific study of style'. This definition is, no doubt in connection with linguistics, which is the scientific study of language.

In the current paper, stylistics is perceived in terms of the attempt by linguists to study the varieties of language (use) in a text, and the effort to identify the correlatings of such varieties (which we have also called 'linguistic features') to the understanding or interpretation of the text. This perspective is in consonance with the views of Banjo (1983) which describe a stylistician as someone who studies precisely what a writer is doing with various linguistic options at his/her disposal, including what choices the writer makes and how he/she bends or breaks the linguistic norms to suit his/her purpose, even without degenerating into gibberish. In short, a linguistic stylistician arrives at the meaning of a text through the recognition and description of phonological, graphological, lexical, syntactic and semantic cues that characterize the text.

Our focus in this paper is to provide an offer for the exploration of facebook as a space for linguistic study of style and creativity in social media. Towards achieving this, we intend to identify and describe significant graphical, lexical, syntactic and semantic patterns of some selected postings on face book, whose analysis may help us create a better understanding of the role of social media, especially face book, in the acceleration of the social process.

There are many models of signification in face book, ranging from (the use of) language, pictures, cartoons, audio, video, emoticons, photos and so on. However, because of the limitation imposed by the nature of a paper like this in terms of space and volume, only language is considered in this work. Other modes of signification are not captured, even though we acknowledge their existence and relevance to this work. They may nevertheless serve a fertile ground for further research activities in linguistic stylistics.

As indicated above, only one posting is purposively selected to represent language, as a mode of signification in face book. This posting is an article entitled 'Letter to my Boss' and it was downloaded on the 7th of February, 2015 from 'Fun, Facts, Humour and Learning Post' and content analysed. The analysis focuses on the stylistic significance and values of face book postings, through linguistic evidences and established claims which prove that a comprehension of the identified stylistic values of linguistic choice of words on face book postings can help shape a better perspective of the social media. This is necessary in view of the negative portrayal of the social media, especially face book, which some traditional media (radio, television and newspaper) have wrongly perceived as a platform for indecency, obscenity and vulgarity, perhaps because of the little or no censorship or regulation attached.

Our emphasis is on 'form' and 'content' of the posting. It is opined that these two stylistic devices are usually regarded as the two major vehicles that are used to convey beauty and creativity of the authors, regardless of the power of the internet technology to embellish postings with semiotics ornaments that are usually meant to add spices and 'colour' to them (probably) to attract attention or signal the interest of internet surfers.

The contention in this paper is that face book can serve as a social platform to share ideas, represent interest, narrate experience and describe events and situation if properly managed. In addition, face book can also be a forum to provide advice and offer suggestions that could correct mistakes, prevent social vices and report misdeeds, all in a view to help accelerate the progress of the society, especially a developing economy such as Nigeria. However, this is not to totally absolve face book from presenting a space for channelling individual interest,

ideology or agenda. Some face book users even seize the platform to promote agitations and interests of disgruntled or beleaguered individuals of the society.

Our analysis is thus informed by the opinion of Gregory (1978) concerning the purpose of any stylistic analysis of text. According to Gregory, an interpretation of a text emerges from an examination of it, first as a linguistic event and secondly, as a social event. This latter part is of necessity in this paper. For instance, we take cognizance of the fact that no literary piece exists in a vacuum, and that every literary work is placed within the socio-political and socio-cultural relevance, if only the analyst intends proper grasp of the message of the text. The tendency to analyse text in relation to the socio-cultural milieu of a given society may thus make the text a social product that may also confer social acceptability on such text.

The selected face book posting could therefore offer the data required to demonstrate how language may be deployed to reflect, depict, ridicule, condemn or comment on a society drifting towards anarchy or state of topsy-turvy with a view to perhaps providing windows of opportunities for redress and improvement, which is usually done in a subtle form that people often mistake for obscenity or vulgarity. However, before embarking on the analysis, it is just apposite at this juncture to briefly examine some stylistic approaches to textual analysis. This will help us select the best option that is most suitable for stylistic analysis of face book posting that is our focus in this paper. These stylistic approaches are briefly discussed below:

### **Some Approaches to the Study of Style**

Three major stylistic approaches are identified and briefly discussed in this paper. They are 'Norm and Deviation', 'Prominence and Foregrounding' and 'Style as choice'. This is however not to say that these three stylistic approaches are exhaustive of the various approaches that are abound in linguistic stylistics. We also have some approaches such as 'Atomisation', 'Statistical Approach' and so on which space may not permit us to discuss here. We may also wish to state that even the three major approaches slated for discussion are not mutually exclusive, as some are interrelated, while some are overlapping. Let us begin with the stylistic approach of 'Deviation from Norm'.

### **Style as Deviation from Norm**

According to Dare (1993), this stylistic approach, 'Deviation from Norm', is based on the assumption that language is an accumulation of norms or 'accepted' patterns, popularly referred to as the standard form or value. It is an approach that seeks to pursue this standard value to the letter. It also frowns at any linguistic form that deviates from (that is, fails to adopt) this expected standard (norm). The approach that employs 'deviation from norm' adopts a principle that ensures deviant (or marked) features in the surface structure of text are identified and separated from the norm (al) or unmarked order of the text, that is, the form we have earlier referred to as 'standard'. This approach relies on the general assumption that in every language, the forms and structures referred to as the 'norm' are pure, grammatical, well-formed or acceptable sentences of the language, which linguists have called the 'standard variety'. Hence, the linguistic stylists employing 'Norm and Deviation' approach watch out for any signal of deviation from this expected standard variety while studying the style of literary piece and 'report' this deviation appropriately.

However, the weakness of this approach is that there is tendency for the analyst to report (or to respond to) some deviants or errors arising may be from omission, gaps, typing or printing

as deliberate and probably include them in his/her analysis. Also the approach may not cater for literary peculiarities granted some genres of literature such as poetry and drama. For instance in poetry, the poet or the persona in the poem often relies heavily on poetic licence for figurative expressions and expressions that condense ideas or thoughts in few words in order to convey artistic beauty on the poem. Such poetic language may be erroneously regarded as deviant if measured against the standard form of the language. Following these limitations on norm and deviation approach, it is obvious that such stylistic approach may not be suitable in a paper whose data are more or less articles that are created in form of poetry. There is, therefore, the need to examine the second approach, which is 'prominence and foregrounding'.

### **Prominence and Foregrounding**

The approach that applies the principle of 'prominence and foregrounding' to stylistic analysis simply look out for elements of language (otherwise called 'linguistic features') that stand out (prominent) in some way on the surface structure of the text. These linguistic features cut across levels of language study such as phonology, graphology, lexis, syntax and semantics. The analyst tries as much as possible to find out if the elements that so stand out (in a given text) are deliberately made to be so by the author of the text, in which case, such 'deliberate prominence' will be taken as 'motivated'. In other words, a motivated prominence is a foregrounded element. 'Foregrounding as a stylistic strategy is usually deployed by authors to prove that certain linguistic items or features are quite significant to the interpretation of the text. Hence, analyst sees foregrounded elements of language as meaningful or stylistically relevant, only if such motivated prominence (that is, foregrounded features) contribute to the understanding or interpretation of the message of the text.

If foregrounded items are linguistically relevant or stylistically significant, then such items arrest the attention of the analyst, as he/she may need to watch out for those foregrounded items that are made so through repetition, or some that are deliberately made to remain constant in a particular position or some that are placed in strategic or significant places in the text, including those that are made prominent through boldness, capitalization, italicisation, special font and so on. Even, at times, linguistic or lexical items that are pre-posed or post-posed may arrest the attention of the analyst if they are stylistically significant.

However, 'prominence and foregrounding approach' is not without some flaws. For instance, the approach allows for the intuitive knowledge of the analyst to play some roles. In fact, there is tendency for the analyst to misjudge or misread the intention of the writer in foregrounding a particular linguistic feature. If the analyst had relied on shared basic assumption, then he/she might have been influenced by his/her own intuition, more so that the reason(s) for foregrounding are not usually explicit. For instance, there is tendency for the analyst to fall in the same mistake for which analyst using norm and deviation approach has been found wanting. For instance, graphic elements such as unsolicited comma, dots, periods, hyphen or other punctuation marks (which are mere oversight) that people often referred to as typographical errors or mistakes, may make certain linguistic items stand out and the analyst may just include them in his/her analysis.

Many stylistic analyses have been flawed in this manner and this has formed the major weakness of this approach. For this reason, it therefore becomes imperative to consider another stylistic approach in this paper, which is, the approach that considers 'style as the choice' made by writers.

## **Style as Choice**

This is a stylistic approach that believes writers consciously or unconsciously make choices within the expressiveness of a language. Dare (1993), for instance, is of the opinion that certain factors determine the linguistic choices a writer makes in the process of writing. Such factors include the resources of language, the tenor (which defines participants' role relationship, whether formal or informal) the mode of communication (that is, symbolic organisation that defines whether the piece is written or spoken), the field of activity (type of social action), the genre and so on.

Talking about the resources of language for instance, Halliday (2004) observes that all options are embedded in the language system, and that what a speaker or writer does is to simply choose from the available options within the system. For instance, every language has a wide range of vocabulary from which the speaker or writer freely selects to suit his/her purpose. Perhaps, that is why Spencer (1964) considers the perfect utilization of these resources (that is, the linguistic options) as a hallmark of an effective writer or speaker. Osundare (1982) may not have agreed less with this, as he posits that a remarkable writer is one who has been able to bend or break the pre-set rules (norms) of language to accomplish artistic goal. It may also be the reason why, very often, writers ignore the linguistic constraints imposed by language rules. For some writers do this by exploring the elastic edge in the language system for other available linguistic options to actualize their goals of writing.

In the process of this exploration, some literary artists carve out personal idiosyncrasies that altogether define their respective idiolects, and by extension their (own) style of writing. However, apart from idiolect that makes particular writer unique, other factors can also impose situational constraints on writers. Such factors include the field, mode and tenor that we have identified above. For instance, the field of activity determines the subject matter of the discourse, which may place certain restrictions on the writer's choice of words. Social factors like culture and moral values, ideologies and belief systems, taboos and superstitious beliefs, including religion, can also serve as hindrance to the writer's choice of words.

However, how a writer is able to flout, in the word of Osundare, these linguistic hallowed thou-shalt-nots is what makes a writer remarkable. It is perhaps this determination to establish oneself as a remarkable writer that has prompted many activities such as blogging, twitting, face book, online articles and so on in the social media. The interest of this paper is on face book postings, and we shall examine how an author (a writer) is able to write on what may be regarded as a socio-cultural taboo through face book communication, even without contravening the linguistic etiquette (i.e., the norm) that is in place in such society. Hence, our analysis shall rely heavily on the approach that describes style as the linguistic choice of language users. In other words, this paper attempts to describe how face book writers seize the loophole (that language has within its system) to stretch the elastic edge offered by the communication system in choosing words that euphemistically project his/her goal in describing what ordinarily is obscene in the society. The face book article is presented below:

### **Letter to my Boss**

I, the Penis, hereby request a raise in my salary on the following reasons:

- I do physical labour.
- I work at great depths.
- I work in high temperatures.
- I work in a damp environment.
- I plunge headfirst into everything I do.
- I do not get weekend or public holidays off.
- My work exposes me to the risk of contagious diseases.
- I work in a dark workplace that has poor ventilation.

Yours sincerely, Penis

### **The Response**

Dear Penis,

After assessing your request, and considering the arguments you have raised, the administration cannot uphold your arguments for the following reasons:

- You are unable to work double shifts.
- You do not work 8 hours straight.
- You will retire well before you are 65.
- You fall asleep after brief work periods.
- You do not always follow the orders of the management team.
- You do not stay in your designated area and you are often seen visiting other locations.
- You do not take initiative - you need to be pressured and stimulated in order to start working.
- You leave the workplace rather messy at the end of your shift and do not make effort to clean it.
- You do not always observe necessary safety regulations, such as wearing the required garment.
- You sometimes leave your designated work area before you have completed the assigned task.
- And, as if that was not all, you have been seen constantly entering and exiting the workplace carrying two suspicious-looking bags.

Sincerely,

Management

### **Stylistic Analysis of “Letter to my Boss”**

“Letter to my Boss” is a posting from ‘Fun, Facts, Humour and Learning Post’ on Face book (see: <https://www.facebook.com/Fun, Facts, Humour and learning post>). It was downloaded on the 7th of February, 2015. This posting is perhaps meant for the Nigerian netizens in their socio-cultural setting, where cultural beliefs, taboos, superstition, mores and values are predominant. For instance, within Nigeria’s socio-cultural setting, it is a taboo to publicly talk about sexual organs and their functions. Nigeria is also a socio-cultural environment where the existing ideology or cultural beliefs also determine the signification system adopted by all members in the culture. As observed by Jimoh (2012), to negotiate and participate meaningfully within a given culture, one must be part of the language system. This is the

convention which the culture has created for itself and the writer of the article “Letter to my Boss” is perhaps aware of this tacit agreement.

In our stylistic analysis of the article, we attempt to find out how the writer is able to confront these cultural challenges in his article without losing grip of the message of literary piece and without resorting into gibberish before attaining his/her goal of entertaining, educating and amusing the readers. The article is written as a form of letter to an imaginary boss in a fictional office. The persona, who calls himself ‘the penis’, is seeking a raise in his salary through an official request in a letter directed to the management of the fictional institution, using a lot of explanations to justify his claim for increase in salary, most of which are based on the hazardous nature of his job. The latter part of the article reveals the response from the imaginary management, thwarting nearly all the evidences used by the applicant to buttress his claim. The tables (I and II) below illustrate the linguistic options available to the writer of the article. We attempt a discussion of the writer’s linguistic choices in the article based on these available options.

**Table I: Linguistic Options in “Letter to my Boss”**

S/N	Author’s Choice	Available Linguistic Options
1	the penis	the dick, the straw, the rod, the manhood, the power house,
2	physical labour	sex, fun, sexual intercourse, banging, digging,
3	great depths	Ass, hole, vagina
4	high temperature	sensation, arousal, orgasm
5	damp environment	wet, muddy, soft, mess, vagina
6	1 (penis personified)	Penis, dick, rod, straw
7	no weekends, no public holiday	restless, untamed, uncontrolled, unregulated, sex maniac, addicted.
8	contagious diseases	STD, gonorrhoea, syphilis, AIDS
9	dark work place	unseen hole, unknown environment covered ass, muddy region, inner part, bushy part, private part
10	poor ventilation	unairy, choked, unventilated, warm, hot

**Table II: Linguistic Options in “The Response”**

S/N	Author’s Choices	Available Linguistic Options
1	work double shifts	ejaculate twice, release two times/simultaneously
2	work 8 hours straight	making love for eight hours, sex 8 hours continuously
3	retire before 65	unable to make love before the age of sixty five
4	fall asleep	tired, stop functioning, retired
5	not following management orders	disobedient, rude, recalcitrant, disloyal, disrespectful (to employer)
6	visiting other locations	reckless, disorderly, unstable, restless, easily aroused
7	no initiative	irresponsive, weak erection, inactive

## DISCUSSION

Tables I and II contain linguistic options that are available to the writer of the article in question, “Letter to my Boss.” The first column on each table comprises author’s preferred

linguistic choices, as demonstrated by the surface structure of the text. On the other hand, the second column represents other linguistic options available to the writer but which he/she has not utilized. The assumption therefore is that certain factor(s) must have influenced his decision to opt for certain linguistic selection while leaving out these other options. The basic assumption is predicated on the socio-cultural environment upon which the article is based. In other words, the assumption is that the posting is made by a Nigerian in the Nigeria's socio-cultural environment which forbids talks, discussions or writings on sexual matters describing them as taboo.

A taboo society is a socio-cultural milieu where cultural or religious custom does not allow people to do, use, write or talk about a particular thing that is considered offensive, immoral or embarrassing. In Nigerian society for instance, it is a taboo to publicly talk about sexual matters, description of sexual organs and their functions, sex education or sexual intercourse. However, since the article in question focuses on the description and functions of the 'penis', which is the sexual organ of the male human in the Nigerian society, the writer has to explore the elastic edge in the language system to select from the available linguistic options, in order to get his/her message across without contravening the linguistic hallowed-thou-shalt-not of a culturally inclined society, such as Nigeria.

One way that ensures the writer is conscious of the existing taboo is the strategy of employing a linguistic device that acts as bailout, and this is the linguistic device known as euphemism. This device allows language users to refer to something embarrassing or unpleasant in a way that makes it seem more acceptable than it really is. In fact, apart from mentioning the name of the forbidden item, 'penis', perhaps because the theme of the article revolves around it, all other choices are entirely euphemistic. For instance, the author's choices in items 2-10 in Table I are manifestations of euphemism which clearly manage and mitigate vulgarity in the article, as the descriptions in other available options (2-10) would have rendered the writer's language offensive and obscene.

Table II also attests to the writer's deliberate choice of euphemism as an effective means of avoiding obscenity in a society where such is a taboo. In fact, it would have been unimaginable how other available options would have painted the article as they all violate these hallowed-thou-shalt-nots. The permeation of euphemism through the entire body of the article also confers creative ability on the writer as he/she must have deployed euphemism out of this creative ingenuity. In other words, a remarkable writer is the one who is able to describe the indescribable (such as obscenity) because such writer is expected to possess creative ingenuity and resourceful power of imagination to turn absurdity into creativity. This ability is what has made the author of this article unique and worthwhile.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have shown how a writer has utilized the linguistic resources of language at his/her disposal to transform what ordinarily is an offensive and obscene article into linguistic and artistic creativity. We have also demonstrated how the stylistic approach which considers style as choice (of writers) can be effectively applied to explore the elastic edge of the language system in order to overcome linguistic constraints imposed by moral and cultural barriers. This singular act is capable of producing the envisaged remarkable writer of



Osundare (1982), who believes such a remarkable writer should be the one with ability to bend or break the so-called linguistic thou-shalt-nots.

We have also proved in this paper that social media, especially face book, may not necessarily encapsulate vulgarity, obscenity and indecency but that social media can be an effective platform to showcase creativity and linguistic artistry. This is aside from its other roles as a forum for sharing ideas, comments, news, stories, videos, experience, satire and entertainment. The knowledge of these functions of facebook can better shape our perspective of the social media and open up new vistas for opportunities, friendliness and mutuality towards building a peaceful and united society.

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