A Lexico-Grammatical Analysis of a Funeral Oration: Michael Imoudu – The Struggle was Your Life

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Abstract: Funeral rites are among the oldest known rituals to man. One of such rites is the presentation of funeral oration. More than any other activity associated with burials, funeral orations highlight the personal characteristics of the deceased and serve as a means of reinforcing social bonds and status. The funeral oration selected for this study was presented by the president of the Nigerian Labour Congress, Comrade Adams Aliyu Oshiomole at the burial of the Union's first president, Michael Aithokhamen Omiunu Imoudu. The speaker's main objective is to recount the prominent roles the deceased played as the founding leader of the labour movement by means of which he championed the cause of the oppressed and positively impacted on the national life. This work attempts a lexico-grammatical analysis of the selected funeral oration. It explores how the grammar constructs reflect the general atmosphere pervading the context. It also analyses the clauses in the oration, using the semantic theory of Leech and the systemic functional theory of Halliday and Matthiessen. From the analysis, the trend of the speech reflects a predominant use of declarative and few imperative clauses. The role language plays in the oration is "constitutive" and the type of interaction is "monologic". The medium of interaction is "spoken" with "phonic" channel and the speech is "persuasive".

Keywords: Funeral Oration; Grammar; Lexicon; Oshiomole; Semantics

Introduction

Death is a common occurrence in the human society. Its incidence is usually marked by the observance of different ceremonies depending

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on the funeral customs, beliefs and practices of the society in which the death occurs. One of such practices is the presentation of funeral oration. Funeral oration has its origin in the ancient times, precisely among the Egyptians. Funeral oration refers to the formal speeches made during funeral ceremonies. Such speeches are usually made by dignified individuals who are in one way or another related to the deceased. Funeral orations are used to rehearse the good deeds and legacies of the deceased and as such serve as a means of reinforcing social bonds and status (Bart 61, Maduka 197–213, Bamigbola 13). For a funeral oration to effectively convey the message intended by the speaker, appropriate words must be used. According to Halliday (*An Introduction* 132), every interpretation of texts, of the system, and of elements of linguistic structure is based on how the language is used. Butt, Lukin and Matthiessen (267–290) add that the speaker controls the semantic field through the grammatical choices enacted. This paper therefore presents a lexico-grammatical analysis of a funeral oration presented by the president of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Adams Aliyu Oshiomole, in honour of the past president of the congress, late Michael Aithokhamen Omiunu Imoudu.

The oration was chosen because of its linguistic qualities and political significance. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) was formally constituted as the only National Federation of Trade Unions in Nigeria in 1978 with Michael Imoudu as the first president. In the oration, the exemplary life of the deceased as the first president of the Labour Movement is recapitulated. The legacies and challenges he has left behind are mentioned. Selected clauses in the oration are cited for lexico-semantic analysis while all the clause complexes are considered for grammatical analysis. What makes Systemic Functional Linguistics so useful for exploring texts of this nature is its perception of the dynamic relationship between language and context. The knowledge of the context allows us to make predictions about the lexico-grammar of a text. Conversely, grammatical analysis allows us to understand the context of a text's production because the sum of the meanings encoded in the lexico-grammar becomes signs of the context.

According to Leech's *Semantics*, language is said to perform five functions, namely: informational, expressive, directive, aesthetic and phatic. The discourse of language is intricately related to those functions which language is used to perform. This is to say that utterances must always relate to context. The thrust of this paper therefore is the

contribution of lexico-grammatical pattern to the understanding of the prevailing context and the speaker's intention in the oration.

Theoretical Background

The framework used for analysis in this study subdivides into two. The semantic analysis is based on the semantic theory which deals extensively with lexical choices as well as the determination of the meanings attached to them. For the lexico-grammatical analysis, the underlying framework is the Systemic Functional Grammar.

Semantic Theory

Semantics refers to the study of the linguistic meaning of sentences. The notion of meaning as postulated by Carnap (60–81) and discussed by Kempson (197) and Adegbija (3) establishes that the meaning of each word is said to be dictated by the semantic field in which it can occur or with which it can be associated. According to Fodor (151–155), in the early days of the development of semantic theories, another theory of meaning proposed is the componential (or decompositional) approach to the meanings of lexical items. The theory makes use of the arguments of Katz and Fordor (170–210) as recorded by Fordor that:

> Semantic markers are the elements in terms of which semantic relations are expressed in a theory… the semantic markers assigned to a lexical item in a dictionary entry are intended to reflect whatever systematic relations hold between that item and the rest of the vocabulary of the language. On the other hand, the distinguishers assigned to a lexical item are intended to reflect what is idiosyncratic about the meaning of that item (145).

In this wise, the componential analysis theory is based on the supremacy of semantic components in explaining meaning (Fodor 145, Adegbija 6). Some inadequacies are identified in this view. The discovery procedures for semantic features are not clearly objectifiable and only part of the vocabulary can be described through more or less structured sets of features. These inadequacies are supplemented with the relational components. Thus, the meaning of a word like *father* will have the properties.

+ Animate
+ Human

+   Male
+   Adult
and additional relational component of male parent of Y.

Kempson (197) in *Semantic Theory* argues for a theory that is capable of incorporating all the weaknesses of former theories like the componential analysis, image theory and meaning postulate, among others, to give an all-embracing theory. She argues for a truth-based theory of semantics, which specifies logical forms from which all inferences, relevant to analytic truth can be deduced. Adegbija (6) proposes an eclectic theory. He proposes a semantic theory that deals with the shortcomings of the others. According to him, this theory is capable of decoding meaning at a deeper level, which he refers to as master speech act level.

Systemic Grammar

Halliday is the proponent of this theory. He proposes a "functional grammar" that can reveal how "the form of language" is "determined by the functions", and the "grammatical patterns" by "configurations of functions". "Each element in a language is explained by reference to its function in the total linguistic system"; and most "linguistic items are multi-functional". "Systemic theory" "interprets" "meaning as choice" and "a language" or "semiotic system" "as networks of interlocking options". In his explicit description of the function of human language, he identifies three main functions – ideational, interpersonal and textual functions (Halliday, *An Introduction* 132).

In systemic functional grammar, language is analysed in three ways: semantics, phonology, and lexicogrammar. Systemic functional grammar presents a view of language in terms of both structure (grammar) and words (lexis). The term "lexicogrammar" describes this combined approach. Halliday views grammar and lexis as two ends of the same continuum. Analysis of the grammar of a language is taken from a trinocular perspective - three different levels. So to look at lexico-grammar, we can analyse it from two more levels, "above" (semantic) and "below" (phonology). This grammar gives emphasis to the view from "above".

In Halliday's concept, language analysis has two aims or levels. The "lower level" - "always attainable" if we "relate the text to general features of the language" - is "to show why the text means what it does".

"The higher level" is "to show why it is valued as it is" -- as "effective or not" "in relation to its purpose" (Halliday, *An Introduction* 132). The second goal is assumed to be more difficult than, and presupposes the first. Evaluation at this level rests on interpretation of the context of situation and context of culture. Another question to be asked at this level is how the linguistic features of a text relate systematically to the features of its environment, including the intentions of those involved in its production. Like any systematic inquiry, the study of language in a social context according to Halliday (*An Introduction*) involves some idealization because the object of linguistic study is never an unprocessed language event but a text (language in a context), an operational unit - and the text, whether invented, elicited, or recorded, is an idealized construction (Halliday, *Exploration* 68, 107)

This study attempts a lexico-grammatical analysis of a selected funeral oration. Specifically, we explore how the grammar constructs of the text reflect the general atmosphere pervading the context. The clauses in the oration are analysed using the semantic theory of Leech (115) and the systemic functional theory of Halliday and Matthiessen (44–54).

Contextual Analysis

The oration was presented by the president of the Nigeria Labour Congress Adams Oshiomole in honour of the past president of the Congress, late Michael Aithokhamen Omiunu Imoudu who is acclaimed labour leader Number One in Nigeria, due largely to his unprecedented labour activism and radical unionism. Among the listeners were fellow union members, civil servants, fellow citizens and international community gathered at the funeral of the late president of the Nigeria Labour Union. The field of discourse therefore is the burial of an Ex-President of a Union.

The immediate goal of the oration is to recount the good deeds and legacies of the deceased and extol him for all his commitments that made great impact on the union and the nation as a whole. The long term goal, however, is to reinforce or impart on the living the good qualities which the departed demonstrated. The tenor shows "hierarchy" and "solidarity" and the agentive or societal role presented is that of leader/subject with "minimal" social distance. The role language plays in the oration is "constitutive" and the type of interaction is "monologic". The medium is "spoken" with "phonic" channel and the speech is "persuasive".

Semantic Patterns in the Oration

In this oration, the speaker dwelt so much on the personal qualities, achievements and the legacies of the deceased. This agrees with the acceptable content of a funeral oration, i.e. highlighting the personal characteristics of the deceased as a means of imparting the good qualities on the living (Bart 61; Maduka 197–213). We shall identify some of the lexical items to examine the semantic patterns in the oration.

(our)   leader
"   hero
"   teacher
"   mentor
"   comrade
(Nigeria's Labour)   leader   (number 1)
                            iron man
                            man with fire in his heart
                            man with the courage of the lion
                            … the integrity of an angel
                            a first class trade union organizer
                            authentic founder
                            father of modern Nigeria
(you)   led   (us well)
(you have) enriched   (us)
(you)   taught   (us)
(you)   endured   (dismissal)
(you were an embodiment of)   willpower
                                     courage
                                     integrity
                                     purpose
                                     vision
                                     selflessness
                                     humanism
(your path of)   struggle
good lessons   (you have taught us)

A componential analysis of some of these lexical items would reveal the attributes portrayed about the deceased.

1	2	3	4	5
leader	hero	teacher	mentor	comrade
+ head	+ brave	+ educator	+ adviser	+ friend
+ director	+champion	+ instructor	+counsellor	+ companion
+ guide	+conqueror	+ trainer	+ tutor	+ pal
-	-	-	-	- enemy
-	-	-	-	- opponent
-	-	-	-	- rival

The above words were deliberately used by the speaker because they all reflect the attributes that fit the description of the personalities of the deceased. The use of long list of epithets to describe the deceased is an indication of how well the deceased is cherished and appreciated. The speaker uses metaphors in "the courage of the lion" and "the integrity of an angel" to depict the personality of the deceased. He also employs embellishment to enrich the speech e.g. "leader number 1", "iron man", "fire in his heart", "courage of the lion". Words like "built", "gave", "taught" are used to spell out the contributions and achievements of the deceased. There is collocation of bond between words in the oration. Anaphora is also employed in the oration.

> Here lies Nigeria's labour leader number 1; here lies the Iron man; here lies the man with fire in his heart;

The above expressions portray the zeal and dedication with which the deceased led the union. *Lexical repetition* is another device used in the oration. Words like "you", "today", "leader", "union", "movement", "Nigeria" have high frequencies of occurrence. These words which form key words in the oration are repeatedly used for emphasis. *Synonyms* are used to express the quality of the deceased. The speaker refers to the deceased as leader, hero, teacher, mentor and Comrade, Michael Aithokhamen Omiunu Imoudu. These words are used to enable the hearers appreciate the life of the deceased.

> It is to your credit that you led the longest ever general strike in Nigeria history. You led 44 days of strike; you led marches upon marches, meetings upon meetings and strikes upon strikes. We are free today as a people because you and your comrades burnt the candles from both ends. You went to prison so that we could be free; you endured dismissal from your job so that we could work in freedom.

> Papa, you were great. You had no chains of degrees, but you had knowledge, you had no position, but you had respect; you had no army but you scored victories - victories against oppressors and victories against racism and colonialism. You had no money, but you prospered – you prospered in image, you prospered in health, you prospered in contentment, and you prospered because we live in your path as your children.

The use of *contrast* and *antonyms* is employed in the above statements to describe the fulfilled life which the departed lived and the strong roles he played to attain freedom for his subjects. The use of repetition is prominent. The word "victories" is repeated three times and "prospered" is repeated four times for the purpose of emphasis. *Reference* is also used in the oration to create links between words. References are made to "the oppressors" and "the nationalists" in the following clauses:

> Let them tell their history. Let them tell their own story of how Nigeria became free. In the oppressors' version of history, you were just an ordinary worker. The nationalists were those who took over the reins of power and used their influence to write themselves into what they thought was history.

> But Nigerians remember that you were one of the authentic founders and fathers of modern Nigeria. Nigerians remember that under you our movement was the arrowhead of the struggle against colonialism. Under your leadership, our movement struck and stuck hard and the wall of colonialism weakened and collapsed.

In the above clauses, the speaker makes reference to the colonialists who exploited the employees (labour union members). The nationalists were the political class to whom the rein of power was handed by the colonialists. The speaker uses exophoric referencing "them" referring to the oppressors. He also employs anaphora "let them tell" for the purpose of emphasis. The statements support the authenticity of the speaker's account of the deeds of the deceased and ridicule any negative story. The speaker points out that there are people with different account about Nigeria's independence. "Oppressors" and "ordinary" are used as adjectives to qualify "version" and "worker" respectively. The speaker uses some lexemes of unionism, e.g. "oppressors" and "nationalists." The speaker underrated the "so-called" nationalists while praising the deceased.

Lexico-Grammatical Analysis

According to Butt et al. (267–290), "Grammar is a multi-faceted resource, which simultaneously construes a picture of reality, enacts our social relations and structures the flow of information so that a text displays both cohesion and coherence within its social context". Lexico-grammar is said to be concerned with the syntactic organization of words into utterances. Here, the clauses in the selected oration are examined in terms of the actors, processes, circumstances, mood and the textual elements. The entire oration is made up of 43 clause complexes (1823 words). In our analysis, the clauses are numbered according to their order in the oration.

Experiential Patterns in the Oration

The process type that dominates the oration is material process. Other process types also exist in the oration such as relational, mental, verbal and behavioural. Table 1 presents an analysis of the process types in the oration.

Table 1: Summary of the Process Types in the Oration
[α = independent clause; β = subordinate clause]

Clause Complex	Structure	Process Types
1	α x β	material, material
2	x β α	relational, relational
3	α	Relational
4	α x β	relational, material
5	α	relational
6	α x α x α x α	relational, relational, relational, relational
7	α x α x α x α	material, material, material, material
8	β x α	mental, material
9	α x α	mental, material
10	α x α	relational, relational
11	α	material
12	α	relational

13	α x α	material, material
14	α	material
15	α	verbal
16	α	verbal
17	α	relational
18	α	relational
19	α x α	mental, relational
20	α x β	mental, relational
21	α x α	material, material
22	α x β	relational, material
23	α x α x α x α	material, material, material, material
24	α x β	relational, material
25	α x β x α x β	material, relational, behavioural, material
26	α	material
27	α	Relational
28	α x α	material, relational
29	α x β	Mental
30	α	Relational
31	α x β	relational, material
32	α	relational
33	α x α x α x α x α x α	material, material, material, material, material, material
34	α x α x α x α x α x α x β	material, material, material, material, material, material, relational
35	β x α x α x β	relational, relational, relational, relational
36	α x α x β	material, relational, material
37	α x α	material, relational
38	α x β x β	relational, relational, relational
39	α x β	material, relational

40	α x α x α x α x α x α	material, material, material, material, material
41	α	Verbal
42	α x α x α x α	material, material, material, material
43	α x α	relational, relational

In the above table, 51 out of the 97 processes identified in the oration are material while other types include relational (37), mental (5), verbal (3) and behavioural (1).

The major actors in the oration include the deceased referred to as "you" or "papa" in most cases and the union members referred to as "we", "our", "union members" and "Nigerians". This points out that there is sometimes a binary opposition between the dead and the living. The predominant circumstance type in the oration is "manner" expressing how well the deceased has led and impacted his subjects.

The following clauses show the predominant actors and circumstances in the oration.

Actor	*Process*	*Circumstance*
We	are gathered	here today…
You	led	us well
Nigerians	remember	that under you, our movement was the arrowhead of the struggle against colonialism
We	have tapped	from your wealth of knowledge
You	led	44 days of strike;
you	led	marches upon marches, meetings upon meetings and strikes upon strikes.
Papa, you	were	an embodiment of willpower, courage, integrity, purpose, vision, selflessness and humanism throughout your active union years.
Papa, you	were	great.
we	shall grow	in courage
we	shall grow	in commitment
we	shall grow	in unity
we	shall grow	in resolve, ….

The personal pronoun "you" in the above clauses refer to the deceased who is portrayed as a leader who has had a lot of influence on

the union leaders and Nigerians at large. The manner in which he led his subjects is depicted through the circumstances in the clauses. The word clusters convey strong appreciation for the life of the deceased and his heroic deeds. Some lexemes like "marches", "willpower", "courage", "arrowhead", "struggle" portray that the deceased was a man of outstanding personalities.

Interpersonal Patterns in the Oration

Here, we attempt to analyse the interpersonal selection of the speaker within the system of mood. According to Muir (141), "mood is a system realized at clause rank, with its features assigned to a form of the verb". A clause containing such a verbal form is said to express a statement, question, command according to which the form of the verb occurs. Two main forms are identified, indicative and imperative. The identification of these is common to all systemic grammarians. [Halliday and Matthiessen (44–54), Berry (120–145), Osisanwo 31)].

The oration is made up of 43 clauses of different structures (simple and complex).The choice of words of the speaker has direct bearing on the objective of the speech. The message of the whole oration can be read in the following clauses:

> It is to your credit that you led the longest ever general strike in Nigeria history. You led 44 days of strike; you led marches upon marches, meetings upon meetings and strikes upon strikes. We are free today as a people because you and your comrades burnt the candles from both ends. You went to prison so that we could be free; you endured dismissal from your job so that we could work in freedom.

> Our movement reaffirms before you that we shall grow in vision; we shall grow in courage; we shall grow in commitment, we shall grow in resolve, in the service of Nigeria and in the quest for social justice, people power, and a united and democratic Nigeria.

The speaker recounts the good qualities of the deceased and the legacies he has left behind. He also informs his audience about what is expected of them as true and faithful followers of the past leader. Mood selection in the entire oration is mainly declarative with few imperative clauses.

Textual Analysis of the Oration

The use of repetition also reflects the paratactic pattern of the text showing projection and cohesiveness. The personal pronouns "we", "our", "you", "us", "your" are repeated all through the oration. This is for emphasis and reflects the deep feeling of the speaker and his sense of belonging. The long list of epithets used in the first paragraph of the oration, *leader, hero, teacher, mentor and comrade*, is repeated in the last paragraph to reiterate the message of the oration and produce a lasting impression on the listeners. The word "*celebrate*" is repeated four times purposely to lighten the mood of the audience. Other words repeated in the oration include "*victories*" and "*prospered*". These words portray the outstanding qualities, achievements of the deceased. The word with the highest occurrence of repetition is "*Nigeria*" with a frequency of 13 followed by "*union*" and "*leader*" with frequencies of 9 and 8 respectively. These are key words directly related to the context and content of the oration. Another type of repetition employed in the oration is anaphora as exemplified below:

> *Here lies* Nigeria's Labour leader number 1,
> *here lies* the iron man,
> *here lies* the man with fire in his heart …
>
> *we have* drank from your fountain of courage;
> *we have* tapped from your wealth of knowledge...

This device has been used by the speaker to produce a strong emotional effect on the listeners. The repetition of the same phrase several times creates a strong feeling in the listener.

Conclusion

From our analysis of the selected funeral oration, it is clear that the speaker's main objective is to recount the prominent roles the deceased played as the founding leader of the labour movement by means of which he championed the cause of the oppressed and positively impacted on the national life of Nigerians. The trend of the speech reflects a predominant use of declarative and few imperative clauses. The role language plays in the oration is "constitutive" and the type of interaction is "monologic". The medium of interaction is "spoken" with "phonic" channel and the speech is "persuasive".

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