

A Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Sefi Atta's *Swallow*

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Abstract

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive lexico-semantic analysis of Sefi Atta's novel, *Swallow*. *Swallow* is a novel that explores the theme of identity, migration and the challenges faced by women in a changing society. Utilizing the combination of corpus linguistic and semantic analysis, this study examines the lexicon and semantic structure employed in *Swallow* to shed light on the author's linguistic choices and underlying meanings. The key lexico-semantic elements for this study are synonyms, collocation, substitution, reference and linguistic variations. By analyzing the lexical choices, it examines how language is used to construct and convey complex characters, relationships and socio-cultural dynamics within the text. It also investigates the semantic nuances embedded within the text, highlighting their contributions to the overall meaning and themes of the novel. The methodology involves a close reading of the novel combined with a systematic analysis of relevant linguistic features. A quantitative approach will be applied to identify the recurrent lexical patterns and semantic fields used in the text. This study aims to highlight the significance of the lexico-semantic study as a linguistic approach used for demonstrating how linguistic choices can enrich the narrative, deepen messages and offer insight into the socio-cultural fabric of a particular setting.

Keywords: lexico-semantic, *Swallow*, dialectal features and linguistic approach

INTRODUCTION

Writers communicate their message through the use of the linguistic features that make up the structure of language. Communication is an important factor which authors or scholars consider when deploying their intended message to their audience. It is impossible for a human being to pass information without the use of language. It is hard for any intellectual or artistic activity to take place in its absence. According to Wibowo (2001:3), language is a system of symbols that are meaningful and articulate sound which are arbitrary and conventional, which are used as a means of communication by a group of human beings to give birth to feelings and thoughts.

The scope and diversity of human thought and expression are placed in great demand on language and how it is employed in a particular context. Scholars use language to display their style and creativity of communicating to their readers on a subject matter. Oladipupo (2004:35) opines that the writer uses language as a tool to reveal meaning that serves as a means of reflection on the human condition and aiding cohesion. The linguistic devices used for

determining the context of a writer's message can be lexical, grammatical, semantic and social variations. Literary writers produce their text by exploring the use of linguistic elements. Lexis is the vocabulary, words, sentences or morphemes in a language. Semantics is the meaning of words or utterances in a language. Lexico-semantics explains the meaning related to words and sentence level in a text. It involves the in-depth meaning of words or phrases related to how it is interpreted in the mind of the reader. Abioye (2014) asserts that lexico-semantic is comprising of words, phrases and idiomatic expression that are related in meaning. Sefi Atta's novel *Swallow* presents a rich tapestry of Nigerian society and culture, exploring themes of identity, migration, and the challenges faced by women. It was published in 2008. However, there is a gap in the understanding of the lexico-semantic elements employed in the novel and their contribution to the overall meaning and themes. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the need for a comprehensive lexico-semantic analysis of Sefi Atta's *Swallow* to uncover the linguistic choices, cultural references, and semantic structures that shape the narrative and enhance the reader's understanding of the novel. This paper examines the prominent lexical choices, recurring semantic patterns and semantic shifts in the narrative. Also, the study demonstrates Atta's mastery of language and her ability to paint a vivid picture of Nigerian society through the use of certain dialectal features that are socially accepted in the clime it is used. Sefi Atta is a contemporary Nigerian who sojourns in the United States and the United Kingdom. She has won several awards. Her novel *Everything Good Will Come* won the Wole Soyinka Prize for literature in 2006. Most of her novels are highly accepted in English-speaking countries and this has given her a place among the most relevant twentieth-century writers in the world today. Her works display certain ideologies which focus on socio-political and gender commitment.

Edebor (2015) reviews *Swallow* by examining the image of the male gender against the backdrop of the oppression of women by men in an African society. He concluded that both genders can coexist without one being subsumed by the other. He further explains that Atta describes the male gender as a tyrant who exploits their women in domestic duties, income and procreation to cover up their inadequacies.

Olufunwa (2012) analyses the novel on the rising issue that Nigerian women are less prepared to bemoan gender injustice labelled on them, rather than make a conscious effort to improve their own lives. This paper explains how the women in society strive to fight through any form of oppression imposed on them by their male counterparts.

Nwiyi (2014) analyses *Swallow* from the feminist perspective. The research explores the thematic and narrative concerns from a largely gendered view. It

narrates how the female gender is vulnerable to socio-economic victimisation as portrayed in the novel. This is because of the social and cultural factors that are largely associated with their gender (female) and also how they survive in a Nigerian polity or circumstance that tends to take advantage of the girl child sexually, emotionally and physically.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The field theory is used for the data analysis. The theory was introduced in 1931 by Jost Trier. He postulates that words acquire their meaning through their relationship with other words within the same word class. He considered the vocabulary of a language as a system of words related in a sense. Cruse (2004:148) classifies sense relation into two groups. Those that express identity and inclusion between words meaning and those that express opposition and exclusions. He states that lexical fields are easily definable with no overlapping meaning. For instance, the words 'bake', 'steam', 'fry', and 'roast' can be classified under the word 'cooking'. The meaning of words can be determined through the use of sense. This means to know the meaning of any lexemes, the relationship between them should be explained. Lexical units are an aspect of the field theory. The devices that will be examined in this paper by employing this theory are synonyms, hyponyms, collocation and a variety of Nigerian English or dialectal features.

METHODOLOGY

The method of this study is qualitative. It offers an effective way of describing phrases or expressions used by the author in creating context. The primary source of data is the novel *Swallow*. The data for the analysis are key lexical units such as synonyms, hyponyms, collocations, substitution and words or phrases that are dialectal features. These devices are collected to show the relationship between words and concepts in the novel and to shed light on the author's intended meaning and thematic concerns. The lexical and semantic elements were randomly selected from different chapters, paragraphs and pages in the novel. These lexical and semantic patterns were investigated to explore how the writer reflects the social and political aspects of the text by paying attention to the linguistic elements, cultural nuances and other varieties. Some of the extracted words are itemised using a tabular form and sentence structure. The secondary sources of data are journals, articles and studies by other researchers/research. They analyze and evaluate information found in the primary source of data.

SYNONYMY

Synonymy is the semantic relationship that exists between words with closely related meanings or nearest in meaning. Richard and Schmidt (2002:533)

define synonymy as ‘a word which has the same sense or nearly the same as another word’. For example: difficult-hard, place-residence. Also, these words are used to replace another to avoid repetition of the same word. The following are extracted synonyms from the text:

Extract A

1. May this and that be dashed and crushed and destroyed, all in the name of Jesus. (SWL P. 147)
2. definitely were not women who sat around contemplating sins or wondering where the drugs came from and where the drugs were going Pakistan, Amsterdam. (SWL P.137)
3. No one ever wants to give support or encouragement. SWL (P. 24)

The use of the underlined synonyms is to create, convey different meanings and expressions of her main theme to her readers. Extract A (1) shows the speaker's use of the words, ‘dashed’, ‘crushed’, and ‘destroyed’ to explain his feeling of hatred for evil powers. These words indicate how words can be used to explain someone's feelings. In Extract A (2), the words ‘contemplating’ and ‘wondering’ are nearest in meaning. The statement was made by Rose to her friend Tolani to assure her that swallowing drugs should not be something she should be afraid of, because some ladies did it without thinking about the consequences.

HYPONYMY

Hyponymy means the super- and subordinate relationships between words. The meaning of a word is included in the super-ordinate form. For example: ‘sweeping, scrubbing, and mopping’ have the included meaning from the headword ‘Cleaning’. The table below contains hyponyms extracted from the novel.

EXTRACT B	SUPER-ORDINATE	CO-HYPONYMS	
1	Services	Car repairs, tailoring, photocopying and hairdressing.	SWL (P.26)
2	Pedigree	Dobermans, Rottweilers, Mongrels.	SWL (P. 71)
3	Simple tables	Four ferries two, four ferries thee, four ferries four	SWL (P.107)
4	Car park	Volkswagen, Benzes, Peugeotts	SWL (P. 146)

Extract H1 and H2 are descriptive. The hyponym explains the kind of services rendered by different labour forces and describes the species of dog breeds. These words illustrate that their meaning is included in the super-ordinate word. The relationship between the words shows that the meaning is attached to the headword. This is used by the writer to explore her underlying message in different climes in her text by engaging the readers' understanding of her choice of linguistic device.

COLLOCATION

Collocation is a sequence of words that occur more often or belong together. Examples are beautiful lady, handsome man, pull-down, old fashioned, cut off and so on. The words in the table below are examples of collocation:

EXTRACT C	COLLOCATES	TEXT
1	Lovey-dovey	SWL (P. 7)
2	Greyish white	SWL (P. 9)
3	Mid-morning	SWL (P.32)
4	Well - known	SWL (P.54)
5	Play wrestled	SWL (P.72)
6	Air-conditioned	SWL (P.35)
7	Step aside	SWL (P.43)
8	High heeled	SWL (P.47)

These collocates are both conventional and unconventional. Some of the examples are coinage that is accepted in a particular context it is used. Extract C (1) is an example of a conventional collocation. The phrase is an adjective which explains the kind of love Rose thinks Tolani's boyfriend is displaying. She feels Sanwo is being too sentimental about the commitment that comes with marriage. Extract C2 is a coinage. The words are formed with the added word 'white'. This phrase creates a different meaning from the original word. The lexical item is used to describe the colour of houses in the novel. Extract C3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 are collocates that are conventional. C3: mid-morning implies the time before noon. C4: well known indicates the popularity of an individual or a thing. C6: air-conditioned is used to explain how friendly Tolani's workplace is comfortable to customers. C8: high heeled is a part of shoes that supports the foot heel. Extract C5 is unconventional. The words are formed to create an extra meaning to the writer's message. This phrase is used by the

author to describe the kind of romance acted by Tolani and her boyfriend Sanwo.

SUBSTITUTION

It is the replacement of a word or phrase with other words such as ‘one’, ‘so’, or ‘do’ to avoid repetition. Substitution is used to avoid redundancy in a particular context. Let's examine the following extracted sentences:

EXTRACT D

1. Fear had turned me into a hard woman I initially pretended to be (P.96)
2. Mr Salako didn't emerge from his office to officiate as he normally did. (P.153)
3. Wasn't their mother crazy too? How do you know is not hereditary? It was a matter of time before Rose went off. (P. 51)
4. Rose, I said, I don't understand. This is the man you can't walk away from? After my journey, she said. I will (P. 157)

The underlined lexical items show the writer's style of avoiding the repetition of the same word thereby reducing the length of the utterance. Examples 1, 2 and 4 are verbal substitutions. The writer uses an auxiliary verb to refer back to the meaning of the main utterance. Extract 3 is an example of verbal substitution, but the phrase is changed to emphasize the author's message.

DIALECTAL FEATURES

This is a specific feature of an utterance that makes it agreeable to the language user's linguistic sense which is the choice of words used by the writer to create a context that is understandable and meaningful to the reader/receiver or audience. The words below are dialectal features that are accepted in a Nigerian clime:

EXTRACT E	DIALECTAL FEATURES
1	Esusu group (P.24)
2	4-1-9”(P.105)
3	Pomade (P.132)
4	Roforofo (P.142)
5.	Oyinbo (P.33)
6.	Ole (P.13)
7.	Bobo (P.7)
8.	Area Boys (P.73)
9	Papa (P.42)

4-1-9: a slang used by Nigerians which means the fraudster.

Pomade: a word used to refer to body cream. This is a variety of Nigerian English.

Roforofo: a word used by Nigerians to refer to gossip.

Esusu group: a contribution scheme that deals with monthly, weekly or yearly savings of an individual's money.

Oyinbo: this is a neologism used for addressing Westerners. This lexical term is socially acceptable by Nigerian speakers because the meaning of the word can be deduced.

Ole: This refers to addressing someone as a thief. It is a form of a variety of broken/pidgin used by Nigerians.

Bobo: This is a dialectal feature that is used to address a guy.

Area boys: This is also a form of Nigerian variety that refers to one behaving like a tout or hoodlum.

Papa: This is a variety of Nigerian English that is used for addressing a man who is an elder or a father figure.

These examples also indicate that some of the words are derived due to one's mother tongue interference. Most words derived from Nigerian English are code mixed with English to create a sense of belonging when used for communication within a particular group or ethnic group. The example used by Atta is to incorporate these elements to gain readers' acceptability that her characters are Nigerians, existing in a Nigeria clime. Atta uses the words to create awareness of certain formations that could be accepted by the readers who could comprehend the meaning of any message in the text because most of the phrases or expressions include a variety of existing patterns of English used by Nigerians.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of Sefi Atta's *Swallow* based on the linguistic and semantic features found within the novel. Through a meticulous examination of the text, this study explores the intricate relationship between language and meaning, shedding light on the deeper layers of Sefi Atta's work. The research delves into the lexicon employed by the author, uncovering the richness and diversity of vocabulary that Atta employs to construct her narrative. The study reveals how Atta skillfully employs words,

phrases, and expressions to create vivid imagery, evoke emotions, and convey cultural nuances.

Furthermore, the study explores the semantic dimensions present in *Swallow*. It highlights the various layers of meaning embedded within the text, including cultural, social, and historical aspects. By examining the semantic associations of key terms and concepts, the analysis uncovers the deeper messages and thematic threads that underpin Atta's storytelling. This study provides a valuable contribution to the understanding and appreciation of Atta's novel. The study brings attention to the intricate web of language and meaning woven throughout the text, shedding light on the linguistic brilliance and thematic depth of Atta's narrative. By analyzing the lexicon and semantics of *Swallow*, this research enriches our understanding of the novel and invites further exploration into the complexities of Sefi Atta's literary world.

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Writer's Brief Data



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