

Discourse Techniques in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Chants of Despair*

Ofoegbu Cyril Okechukwu¹; Esther Chukwunonyelum Okoli²

¹Department of English, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam Campus, Anambra State.

² Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Corresponding author: Ofoegbu Cyril Okechukwu

Phone: +2348060030450

Email: co.ofoegbu@coou.edu.ng

Abstract

The use of language is a very important aspect when analyzing a given discourse. According to Woods (2006), discourse is language plus context. That is the analysis of a given discourse in a given context to create effective meaning. Discourse analysis looks at how language is used in a given context. This paper looks at the discourse techniques in *Chants of Despair*. It explores the creative use of language in poetry. The data used in this work was got from Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Chants of Despair*. A descriptive approach as put forward by Ofoegbu (2022) is employed in this work. This paper also focuses on the creativity in assimilating African proverbs in the lines of the poem. It looks at the deliberate and conscious use of code-mixing to convey salient issues inherent in the present Nigerian society. The placement of words and diction elevates this work to the pedestal of descriptive writing. Finally, the paper x-rays the use of figures of speech and efforts to portray the very innate feelings of the average Nigerian. It can be concluded that the discourse techniques used in this analysis exposes the suffering, poverty and pains of the citizens living in Nigeria.

Keywords: Language, Discourse Analysis, Discourse Techniques, Discourse, Descriptive writing

Introduction

Many scholars have defined language as an important tool of human communication and have also identified language as an effective means of human interaction. Ofoegbu (2022) defines

Language as the general human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. Language is man and man is language. Man uses language for his everyday interaction. Ofoegbu (2021) argues further that

language is man's most important tool, his most important asset with which he interacts. He further says that man uses language to communicate his individual thoughts, inner feelings and personal psychological experiences. He defines language as a creative and productive phenomenon. That is speakers and writers of a language are at liberty to be creative and flexible in their language.

Language according to Akindele and Adegbite (1999) is characterized by a set of vocal sounds which can be decoded. They describe language as a human phenomenon that has form which can be described in terms of the units of sound, words, morphemes, phrases, sentences and paragraph or discourse. They finally submit that form refers to the means by which sounds are connected with meaning in language.

Man uses language to communicate his individual thoughts, inner feelings and personal psychological experiences and this is evident in this study. The poet has used language to express her innermost feelings about the hardship and sufferings of Nigerians and their day to day encounters with poverty. Her use of language in this poem is descriptive and symbolic.

Language is used for effective communication and Chuma-Udeh has communicated her feelings effectively to her audience. This paper focuses on the discourse techniques used by Ngozi Chuma-Udeh in her *Chants of Despair*, to express her innermost feeling of the sufferings of Nigerians in Nigeria.

What Is Discourse Analysis?

Discourse Analysis is a branch of linguistics which deals with the analysis of written, spoken or sign language. Little wonder Woods (2006) asserts that discourse analysis "is language plus context." She says that discourse is basically concerned with language in use. That is how language can be used in an identified context, to bring out its effectiveness. She believes that any act of carefully examining a particular discourse, brings about its analysis.

Johnstone (2008) believes that the process of discourse analysis is a process of separating the two terms. She says that discourse is the actual instances of communicative action in the medium of language. Johnstone (2008) believes that analysis is ambiguous and should be narrowed down to linguistics analysis because discourse is linguistics inclined.

Olateju (2004) describes discourse analysis as an explicit, systematic account of structures, strategies or processes of text or talk in terms of theoretical notions developed in any branch of linguistics. She believes that every process of discourse analysis must be sufficient to provide for the information. She talks about accounting for every feature used in a work of discourse. She finally submits that discourse analysis is systematic in approach because it tries to analyze the language habit contained in a given discourse through empirical methods.

What is Discourse Technique?

Discourse Techniques refer to the language techniques used by authors to achieve an aim in a given piece. Ofoegbu (2012) refers to discourse techniques as the language habits of a writer. It looks at the use of language by a writer especially in a work of literature. These discourse techniques vary from author to author; writer to writer etc. Ofoegbu and Umeh (2015) stated that the aim in discourse techniques is to drive home a point or sink home a message. Discourse techniques have been employed by very many writers and to this end we can say that very many writers have evolved a kind of discourse techniques, used by them alone. Some Discourse

analysts may call it stylistics but this paper refers to it as discourse techniques. Our focus in this paper is on the discourse techniques of Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Chants of Despair*. We shall explore her language habit in this poetic piece and see how she has used language in this work.

Discourse Techniques in Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's *Chants of Despair*

As mentioned earlier, discourse techniques refer to the language habits of a writer in a given text. This paper explores how Ngozi Chuma-Udeh used African proverbs, code mixing, diction/placement of words and figures of speech to pass her message in *Chants of Despair*. This section focuses on the method of data collection and it aims to analyse the discourse techniques in Chuma-Udeh's *Chants of Despair*. The discourse techniques that were employed in this poetic piece will be analysed alongside the possible reasons for their use.

Methodology

The data for this study was got from Ngozi Chuma-Udeh's poetic piece, *Chants of Despair*. A descriptive approach as put forward by Ofoegbu (2022) was used in this research. The approach tries to explain how speakers actually use their language without

reference to an approved standard or the grammatical structure of the mother tongue. It focuses on describing the manner how either native or non-native speakers use their language on daily basis. When language is studied descriptively, it tries to find the unconscious rules people follow when they say or write things.

Data analysis and Presentation

The following are examples of the discourse techniques used in the poem

a. The Use of African Proverbs

Proverbs, to Africans, are part and parcel of their identity. This was why Achebe saw it as the palm oil for words or speech. Chuma-Udeh's use of African proverbs formed a better part of *Chants of Despair* and these African proverbs, which were wisely chosen, suited and conveyed substantial information in virtually every line and stanza.

"Despair", in *Chants of Despair*, attributes his plight and predicament- as one trapped in the shackles of poverty- to fate and as such, should not be blamed. He laments thus:

"But do not laugh yet at the old woman whose wrapper is torn at the bottom until you

get to the root of the dilemma between her buttocks and the wrapper" (1, line 14-17)

"Do not misconstrue the walking gait of the chameleon as the dignified step of the affluent until you take a roll call of his quandaries with the earth". (3, line 17-21)

"Do not be so fast to jump to conclusions as to why the fire turned the pot black until you have the delight of being trapped between the fire and the pot" (1, line 17-23)

"The termite was peacefully living in its underground until fate decided to draw trouble on its head by mandating it to fly and flying, it flew to its doom" (12, line 1-4)

In further describing the anguish of despair which is known and understood by only those in despair, the writer says:

"It is only he who ate the meat that knows the exact tooth its pieces were stuck into" (9, line 5-7).

"It is he who wears the shoes that can point out the exact place of pang" (9, line 7-8).

"Only he who wears the ant-infested trouser knows the exact place of the bites" (9, line 9-10)

"A man who has never slept in an insect-infested bed can

never claim knowledge of the mad fire dance". (9, line 10-12)

"You cannot know the agony of the tortoise until you carry your house on your back as he carries it" (9, line 12-13)

The poet further describes the dejected and neglected state of the poverty-stricken people thus:

"It does not matter for how long the chicken angles for the corn in the covered basket, its years is in vain (26, line 1-3).

"Even if the rat does a hundred metre dash around a pot covered with another, in vain does it toil (26, line 3-8)

The poet states also, the parallel disparity or differences that exist between the rich and the poor in the following lines:

"What is the fate of the worm that went to rendezvous with the snakes? That the worm and the snake share the same feature is mere effusive expression because when the snake begins its characteristic gyrations from tree to tree, would the worm have the resilience to follow suit?" (33, line 12-19)

Again, in *Chants of Despair*, there was the involvement of what some scholars called *wellerism*, which is a type of proverb. *Wellerism* is a type of proverb attributed to

having been said by a fictional character which could be an animal, a god, an object, a man e.t.c. Some instances of *wellerism* in *Chants of Despair* include.

"The bat said it stands upside down not because it gives it joy but because it doesn't want to be left out in the latest trend of events in the already topsy-tunny nutty world" (8, line 8-16)

"The chicken says it cannot afford to be involved in a cudgel fight for it has no head to be bludgeoned", (9, line 16-18)

It is obvious from the above lines that "the bat" and "the chicken" never said anything because animals don't talk like human beings, but it is an undeniable fact that their body language says it all.

Use of African proverbs in *Chants of Despair* was not done randomly; they were carefully and expertly woven and they aligned with Despair's despaired state and disenchantment towards life. The judicious use of African proverbs captivates the mind of the readers. Beyond that, the reflection of different types of proverbs in *Chants of Despair* shows that the poet has attained mastery in the use of African proverbs and knows her onion and how to manipulate them when the need arises.

b. Diction and Placement of Words

Diction and placement of words are the authorities of every work or piece. They determine the fate and lifespan of a work. They distinguish a work among others. While diction is concerned with the choice of words, placement of words is focused on the arrangement of words to create effects. Both work hand-in-hand to beautify excellence in a work. Chuma-Udeh's choice and placement of words are such that creates a mental picture in one's mind. They draw an image of what she is trying to point out. Her words make the mind conjure the meaning she is trying to create.

"Fate that tussles a human being like a doll at the hands of a rascally, over-pampered bourgeoisie child" (1, line 8-10)

The above creates a scene on one's mind, of fate tussling a human being. The effects of her use of language and arrangement of words, foregrounds an image.

"How can you who have never been a dwarf talk of neighbourhood with the ground?" (2, line 3-4)

"How can you attempt a guess as to the genesis of my name when you have not

passed through the eye of my world?" (2, line 6-9)

Her placements of words were to an extent, euphemistic. Again, her words were not enigmatic or complex. They are words that are simple and easy to comprehend. She boycotted the use of jaw breaking words and this made her poem friendly to readers. Her choice of words also wore the cloth of exaggeration and pains.

"Never is it because of the abject scarcity which has become my dearest companion". (3, line 12-13)

"While my mother had no choice but to function as both doctor and midwife put together, my mother's strangulated gnarls of pain" (4, line 3-5)

"Pay mother's helpless labour screeching attracted the hands of fate, as she labored aided by hordes of flies" (4, line 5-7).

In as much as the poet's choice and placement of words depicted pain, poverty and sufferings, the poet also presented her words through the ironic path without losing an effect of sorrow on the reader. She did this without losing the meaning or taste of the lines.

"And out of the wordings of his ever philosophical mind, one interesting word

penetrated my mother's pain muddled brain" (5, line 14-16).

"One fascinating word passed through the waves of suffering into my mother's pain dazed consciousness" (5, line 16-18)

"My mother would spend hours listening to the cascade of vocabs as they roll out one after another from the mad teacher's mouth" (5, line 23-27).

"Ikoro came blowing his endless grammar just as I dangled between the dark world of the womb and the harsh world of want and penury" (6, line 3-7).

Chuma-Udeh's style was unique to such an extent that she titled her words towards the figurative world. She made them resemble the figurative devices; in all, majestically retaining the content which was the main purpose of arranging the words in that order. Although she was descriptive, not as extremely descriptive as Asika (2011) in his poetic piece, *Omeile*.

"Perhaps, soul brother, you may not understand the anguish of being despair" (9, line 1-4)

"Who would want to wear the hot coat of poverty?" (9, line 15-16)

"Only the fated ones, those doomed to it can possess and eat" (10, line 7-10).

"When it comes, it comes all its relations and reduces a man to a mirage" (11, line 16-18)

"But she had the grace of shrieking her labour pains into financially sympathetic ears" (16, line 3-5)

At times, the poet makes her lines comic. She infuses some kind of fun for the refreshing of the reader's mind, without tampering with her central message. Most of her sentences were long. In other words, she applied more of the compound, complex and compound-complex sentences.

"Dazed by the hullabaloo of voices, the baby refused to let out a yell" (20, line 6-8)

"Terrified by the ear-splitting world it has landed into, the poor baby simply kept mute and that of course earned it the dirtiest of slaps" (20, line 19-16)

"As a result of the thoughtlessness of mother and child, fire could not kill anything that night and there was no supper" (23, line 15-20)

"...to fill his belly with the hot fiery liquid one shot after another until the whole world becomes a blur" (24, line 5-11).

“I can manage diamond in a tea cup and a sauce of gold and just a little pounded emeralds” (25, line 15-19).

Chuma-Udeh also injected biblical lines into her poem, though it was not continuous. She used it to elucidate on the rivalry between fate and man. She used it also to imprint the fiasco and debate of man.

“The holy book says, “man has dominated man to his injury”. (28, line 1-2)

Chuma-Udeh’s placement of words is structured using the pattern of striking imageries. Virtually every statement made strikes a picture in the mind of a reader. She uses simple, readable words to conjure these images. Her highly-nurtured pattern of imagery- filled writings has made her style stand tall as an individual stamp, peculiarly hers.

c. Code Mixing

Code mixing is the usage of two different languages in a given language discourse or a sentence string. It shows proficiency in bilingualism. The application of this technique in *Chants of Despair* shows that Chuma-Udeh has acquired a higher level of proficiency in both her mother tongue the Igbo language and the

English language. Her mixture of the Igbo language and the English language shows that she is versatile with the vocabularies of the languages. This was evident when she said;

“How can you attempt a guess of which fly is blind when you have never cooked the ogiri paste?” (2, line 10-15).

Chuma-Udeh also code-mixes to achieve a descriptive effect thus:

“The poor baby simply kept mute and that of course earned it the dirtiest of slaps... until out of sheer pain and terror, she lets out a wild lamentation; Uwaaa, Uwaaa, Uwaaaaaaa” (20, line 13-21)

From the above extract, the poet simply could have said that the baby let out a wild lamentation, but she went ahead to describe this cry with the onomatopoeia of the Igbo language. Her use of code-mixing mirrors the prowess of one who has deep insight into the vocabulary of the Igbo language. These code-mixing words give the reader some insight to the background of the poet.

“...But if this woman comes face-to-face with Ozokamkpo, the fiery, will her hands still

remember the location of her two over-valued breasts?” (27, line 13-17)

“...But the baptism of the babies must be done in broad day light and in the full glare of the igwemmadu” (32, line 7-11)

“...Then off the husband heads to Mama Ike’s joint where Akpuluachia holds sway on his likes” (24, line 3-5)

Chuma-Udeh is so creative and inventive in a way that she uses the code-mixed Igbo word in the adjectival form to describe an English word. This adds a feather to her personality as a bilingual descriptive specialist. It affirms the fact that she is at home with the descriptive words in bilingualism.

*“When a woman is running from the **Ulaga** masquerade, she runs holding her two breasts with her two hands”. (27, line 11-14)*

Another striking point in the poem was the involvement of other languages which were not the Igbo language in her code-mixing. This shows a kind of closeness with other native languages. Some instances are stated below:

“His Agbada comfortably would have been for twenty more men” (31, line 22-24)

*“And the proud father dragging almost half of the cows in **Mallam’s** drove (31, line 16-17)*

From the above, the Yoruba (**Agbada**) and Hausa (**Mallam**) languages are used respectively. Also, the poet states:

*“He heads to the blood bank for the business of **idemudianism**, sales of blood for life” (24, line 17-19).*

From the above, the reflection of Festus Iyayi’s major character, **Idemudia**, in his *Violence*, is portrayed in the poem. It is only one who is familiar with the character of **Idemudia** that can decode the implication of “**Idemudianism**” in the poem.

Chuma-Udeh paints her *Chants of Despair* with flavours from three Nigerian languages respectively – The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages. She tries uniting there three languages in her poem while telling of the woes of the poor. The much-pronounced use of Igbo code-mixing is evident of the fact that the poet is more proficient in the Igbo language.

d. The Use of Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are figurative languages used in works of art. Figures of speech add flavour to a work of art, poetry most especially. It constitutes 90 percent of

the language of poetry. It is the spirit of poetry, its skeletal structure and backbone. Poetry relies on it for meaning, economy of words and beauty; its relevance to poetry thus, cannot be over-emphasized.

Chuma-Udeh made expert use of figures of speech in her *Chants of Despair*, the most prevalent being rhetorical questions and simile. The reader comes in contact with “Despair” throwing questions at the rich, to the world, at fate. He asks these questions not for the fun of it. It was a curious mind desiring to know why he was given birth to in a gruesome environment and in a disillusioning and dehumanizing manner; why the poor has to get poorer and the rich, richer; why the rich had to adorn themselves in the most expensive apparels while the poverty-stricken beside them barely had enough clothing to cover their malnourished body. There were also countless comparisons evident in the poem. The figures of speech used include:

1. Rhetorical Questions

“How can you who have never been a dwarf talk of neighbourhood with the `ground?” (2, line 3-4)

“Of what use are the eyes when they can get you nowhere?” (9, line 25-28)

“If wretchedness is a kind of food, who would eat?” (10, line 15-16)

“Do you say leave me alone to destiny?” (12, line 7)

“How can a man who never suffered from diarrhea comprehend the joy of wearing the loin cloth?” (2, line 4-6).

2. Simile

“Fate that tussles a human being like a doll at the hands of a rascally, over pampered bourgeoisie child” (1, line 8-10)

“Well, your guess is as good as wrong” (2, line 2)

“Not because of the stabs of bleakness swarming around me like our ever present neighbours, the green-eyed houseflies” (3, line 8-11)

“Do not yet misconstrue the walking gait of the chameleon as the dignified step of the affluent” (3, line 18-20)

“Ikoro whose wasted knowledge still burns like the Harmattan wind” (4, line 23-24).

3. Hyperbole

“Some are born more naked than others” (14, line 21)

“Ask fate for a huge neighbor, and it will gladly tell the ocean to come to your assistance. (28, line 17-19)

“The disparity was so striking it could blind the eyes” (29, line 10-11)

“Her lace wrapper weigh more than the armour of an ancient Egyptian warlord” (30, line 3-4)

“Her canopy... head scarf so enormous; the circumference such that all the people behind her were not part of the ceremony” (30, line 6-11).

4. Personification

“Fate came strolling around the make shift maternity ward in the person of Ikoro” (4, line 8-12)

“Wears begging in vain to be allowed to rest in peace” (32, line 5-6)

“My mother in her illiterate pain... took cognizance of the word (8, line 20-23)

“I was born... only to face the naked truth that some are born more naked than others (14, line 19-21)

“If you want to hear the voice of deprivation, ... ask me” (37, line 14-20).

5. Euphemism

“Neither is it because of the abject scarcity which has become my dearest companion” (3, line 12-13)

“The fish of fortune is sharp and spiky” (10, line 5-6)

“Head already roughened by hard manual labour for antenatal” (17, line 14-15)

“Head already rockened by paternal brutality for when the husband of the ghetto woman gets roughened by the travails of fate” (17, line 15-18)

“The presence of co inhabitants marauding the night and reducing every unguarded thing including fingers and toes that can be reduced to mere knucklers” (36, line 12-18).

6. Alliteration

“I was named despair because when I was born beside the putrid...” (4, line 1)

“My mother who was a devoted disciple of the nutty English speaking teacher” (5, line 19-20)

“Ikoro came blowing his endless grammar just as I dangled between the dark world of the womb and the harsh world of want and penury” (6, line 3-7).

“He spoke a word which was rather sharp enough to pierce through the pains of parturition to my mother’s ears” (6, line 17-20)

“Despair despair, the “sweet” sounding word enthralled my mother” (8, line 25-26).

Chuma-Udeh's prolific use of figures of speech concretizes her use of imagery in painting vividly, the woes and travails of "Despair" and his kind.

Conclusion

This study presents and explores the discourse techniques in *Chants of Despair*. It looks at the use of language based on the creativity of the author. From the data collected, it was discovered that discourse techniques were inherent in this poetic piece. This paper has pointed out the peculiar language habits she employed to reach out to her audience. For example "*It is only he who ate the meat that knows the exact tooth its pieces were stuck into*" and "*It is he who wears the shoes that can point out the exact place of pang*" are examples of African proverbs from the work. Also "*How can you who have never been a dwarf talk of neighbourhood with the ground?*" and "*How can you attempt a guess as to the genesis of my name when you have not passed through the eye of my world?*" are examples of diction and placement of words. Again "*...But the baptism of the babies must be done in broad day light and in the full*

glare of the igwemmadu" and "*...Then off the husband heads to Mama Ike's joint where Akpuluachia holds sway on his likes*" are examples of code mixing embedded in the work. The poet also used some figures of speech like Rhetorical questions like *If wretchedness is a kind of food, who would eat?* , Similes like *Ikoru whose wasted knowledge still burns like the Harmattan wind*, Hyperboles like *Some are born more naked than others*, Personifications like *Fate came strolling around the make shift maternity ward in the person of Ikoru*, Euphemisms like *Neither is it because of the abject scarcity which has become my dearest companion* and Alliterations like *I was named despair because when I was born beside the putrid...* to drive home her points. Her creativity is evident in her discourse techniques which this study reveals by way of analysis.

It was observed that the discourse techniques in this work served a creative purpose for the writer to put forth salient issues bedeviling the Nigerian state. It was also observed that people usually employ discourse techniques consciously or unconsciously in order to drive home their message (s) in a given piece.

Finally, it must be noted that discourse techniques vary from author to author and from writer to writer and the work under study is the peculiar language habit of the author. This is evident in her use of African proverbs, diction and placement of words, code mixing and figures of speech.

More researches are needed in order to provide more ways of applying discourse techniques to other areas of language and language use. This paper can therefore be seen as an invitation to further one's knowledge on the identified language analysing technique.

References

- Akindele, F and Adegbite, W. (1999). *The Sociology and Politics of English in Nigeria*. Ile-Ife: Debiyi-Iwa.
- Asika E.I (2011). *Omeile: The Poetic Ballads Of A Warrior Caught In Chains Of Civilization*.
Volume I. Awka: First class Publishers.
- Chuma-Udeh, N. (2008). *Chants of Despair*. Onitsha: Malchjay. Oxford University Press.
- Johnstone, B. (2008). *Discourse Analysis*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing.
- Ofoegbu C.O (2012). *Discourse Techniques in Asika Emmanuel Ikechukwu's Omeile*. Journal of Arts and Contemporary Society. Minna. Vol 4. 17 –24.
- Ofoegbu C.O and Umeh R. (2015). *Discourse Techniques in Chief Willie M. Obiano's Inaugural Address, "Expanding the Frontiers of Excellence..."* ANSU Journal of Language and Literary Studies. Igbariam. Vol 1 No 2. 46 – 53.
- Ofoegbu, C. O. (2021). *Issues in Language and National Development in Nigeria*. Revised ed. Onitsha: Ralph Mustard Limited.
- Ofoegbu, C. O. (2022). *Syntax: an Introductory Text*. Revised ed. Onitsha: Ralph Mustard Limited.
- Olateju, M. (2004). *Discourse Analysis: Analyzing Discourse in the ESL classroom*. Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press Ltd.
- Woods, N. (2006). *Describing: Discourse: a Practical Guide to Discourse Analysis*. New York: