The Language of Time in Poetry

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Abstract

This paper continues the on-going discussions on Time. It acknowledges the contributions of Physics, and other disciplines to clarifying issues on the concept but also notes the hither-to absence of a conclusive or inclusive definition. It proposes that Time, language and poetry relate closely to define and clarify one another. Through the analysis of three poems from Africa, language is observed to have been used in some peculiar manner to construct time. The paper concludes that African poets have either consciously or unwittingly used time concepts to create, specify and manipulate phenomena in their poems.

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Time in either its conceptual or notional forms has remained enigmatic as the concept seems to elude precise definition; Yefim, B and Boris P(1999), Marta Cellati,(2008). Arguing on the notion of time, Yefim and Boris assert that time has not been vouchsafed a constructive definition and that before the relativity theory time was even considered to be stable. This was the conception prior to the relativity theory of 1905. The authors consider time through its attributes: 1. time is a measured magnitude through the clock. 2. it has a standard which is defined by the angle of the earth's rotation around its axis, thus making it a continuous process. 3. time is also the rate of a process, that is, duration; and of all processes, the earth's rotatin around its axis was chosen as the time standard. And, in spite of the fact that clocks are the designed instrument for measuring this standard, it is rather their own time that they measure at different sites under peculiar conditions to those sites.

Marta Celleti explains the concept of time by deploying to a poststructuralist perspective, which tends to focus more on the various applicaions of the concept rather than its definition, known as the *Nomad thought.* In George Bateson's use, the term refers to:"the level of aggregation and activation of a specific combination of concepts [...] the attainment and maintenance of an intensity that creates a field of forces and involvement that continue and sustain the activated combination for extended durations"(3). These concepts are applied retaining the meanings and uses with which they have previously been known. She demonstrates this with an application of the concept to Augustine's time perspective thus: "what is time? If no one asks me about it, I know; If I want to explain it to the one who asks, I do not know"(2). This implies that time is naturally

inherent in everyone, everyone does perceive it but no one is able to share the knowledge of this time with others. Time is therefore viewed as passing and not as a rigidly measured entity as had earlier been thought by Bergson (18), but is discussed in its "abstract and in its experiential conceptualization" as Heideger(24) had earlier pointed out.

On his part Gilleas Deleuze (387 – 467) suggests the examination of the active combinations which time maintains with couples of concepts such as cyclicity and habit, linearity and memories, chaos and becoming. Time is that thing therefore which helps in interpreting and maintaining such patterns as seasons, pulse, going to bed and rising etc. Holderlin (26) maintains that these habits are formed on the basis of knowing what happens in the natural world and time has the role of representing this knowledge and of making this knowledge useful in practical terms. This mode of time is the cyclical or astrological time. It is distinguished from linear time where the generation of memories is required in understanding causes, the succession and concatenation of phenomena.

But, again looking at the circumstances that make sense of time Cellati opines that cyclical and linear time may fall short of dealing with complex post-modern conditions if we rigidly keep to them. Rather, "circumstances seem to imply that a multiplicity of times may coexist in a continual change of form" (24).

Raja Ramana observes, differences in time perception in macroscopic studies where it seems "time moves in one direction" in contrast to microscopic studies where "Time becomes reversible and one can even speak of negative time". Further to this, Raja hails the contributions of the Einsteinian theory of relativity to debates on Time, by which "it has now become clear that the measurement of time is not same for all observers"(1) and that it depends on the relative speed or physical condition of the observer.

Other writers who discuss time have deftly veered off the hair-pin assay of time definition to explore its other dimensions as does Joseph Hutchinson, who turns to the aspectual dimensions of the subject. "In Aspects of Time in Poetry", Hutchinson explores the kinds of time in lyric poetry and how they manifest themselves in language; he identifies time's three aspects namely, empirical time or clock, subjective time and duration. Empirical time he says, refers mainly to length, for example how long it takes to read a poem say, by syllable per second or minute. The depth of our engagement, he continues conditions our experience of time; thus the more we are engrossed in an event the faster time seems to run and vice versa.

Linking this aspect of time to poetry, Hutchinson asserts "Obviously there is nothing empirical time in a poem, unless it lay simply in the poem's length; thus empirical time will be reckoned by something appropriately ridiculous like syllables per second" (1-2). Noteworthy of his submission on time aspects, too, is the claim that a theoretically empirical time can be transformed into a subjective time proper to the poet's imaginative experience and that rhythm performs this transformative function by charging empirical time with emotion. Thus to him, rhythm serves as the clearest manifestation of time in both language and music.

Harvey Gross thinks in line with Hutchinson's time claims. He avers: "In the arts of time – music and literature – rhythmic forms transmit certain kinds of information about the nature of our inner life" (11). Being a time art therefore, poetry discourses can hardly be complete without recourse to time notions and concepts that tend to appropriately situate it in space. As for subjective time, Hutchinson opines that it manifests itself technically in prosody, syntax and semantic density, aspects which we shall dwell on later below.

Arguments have also been posited about the existence or non existence of time. Many, assert that Time per-se does not exist, and that human beings have only been brain-washed into believing that there is Time. What exists, it is claimed, is just the repetition of patterns (rhythm) taught us by our parents who had in turn been taught by their forebears; 'time does not exist, time is an illusion created by man in an attempt to gain control over his world and quite possibly over his neighbour" (Gray, 1).

This notion of illusive Time is said to have been originated by Einstein in his thoery of relativity. Similarly, Julian Barbour the British physicist and author of *The End of Time: the Next Revolution in Physics* asserts that time does not exist. "If you try to get your hands on time it's always slipping through your fingers" (1). Barbour proposes a discontinues time, by which idea he attempts to explain in a theoretical context a universe composed of many "nows" which are not fleeting moments that came from the past and shall die in the future but one now among million nows which all exist at the same time.

On the other hand Josh Lowe reports Lee Smolin the theoretical physicist's preference for a universe where real time operates. To him, a universe in which time is 'real' and in which universal laws continue to change leaves more space for the role of human imagination in solving social and philosophical problems. He is said to have argued further in his book *Time Reborn:the crises of Physics and the Future of the Universe* that time is "the only aspect of our everyday experience that is fundamental" (2), stating also that the laws of nature cannot exist or operate outside of time, instead they are evolving. His opinion thus runs contrary to the Einsteinian concept of a timeless and unchanging laws of physics.

We will consider just a few definitions of poetry that will help to sharpen the focus of our discussions here. In defining poetry, Victor William stresses the importance of physical aspects of language. He likens poems to music but notes that while the two may work in the same way, instead of sound and rhythm created in music by instruments, poetry uses the sound and rhythm of words. With regard to the concentrated language of poetry, he opines; "a good poem has […] been intensified by removing the non-essential words […] (4). This accounts for the short nature of poems. Significant in the foregoing is the reliance on language, the word and rhythm. Arthur Mampel expresses the same idea when he states "I think that poetry may be the one medium today that still communicates life through words" (2). We need therefore to understand the meaning of words, in this case words which construct a language of time, to further comprehend the communication of time in poems.

Discussions on the Poetry/Time relations assume higher propositions and concretizations in Katherine Hayles' elucidations. She intimates that poetry has its own time in both its print and digital forms, though she equally and promptly cautions also that there is difference in the time of a print text and the time of performance of a digital poetry text. The thrust of her thesis however is that both poems act as machines that organize their time though, and still in different ways. With the print text , writing and coding become virtually the same activity from the point of view of the author; whereas in the electronic poem, due to collaboration with programmers, sound artists, graphic designers and so on to create a multimodal work, the temporal division into writing and coding corresponds to a distribution of intellectual labor, that can involve quite distinct time sequences (182/183). The new field of electronic literature has therefore come with a certain freshness that defines the erstwhile imperceptible nexus between poetry and time.

So, too, does poetry have language. It is generally acclaimed that poetry's uniqueness arises from its figurativeness; but language and postlanguage discourses – nascent

American poetry feats – have shifted a tangent on issues of metaphors, imagery and connotation that are poetry's distinctive features.

Mark Wallace has shown that in the language Poetry preoccupation language is seen as being constructed by relations of power and not as either transcendent, universal or natural. Many language poets in fact have emphasised "the way in which grammar structures tend to support the power structures of western societies" (1).

Postlanguage poets, too, agree with language poets but because they are rather avant gardist they incorporate in their poetry use of some structures otherwise rejected by language poets such as the poetics of everyday language, lyric, spirituality and so on. They are overly interested in "pluralaesthetic" work that deploys to the language arts in tandem with the non-word based arts such as music and the visual arts.

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Philosophers, logicians, psychologists, literary critics, creative writers, linguists and many other areas of academic endeavour have been interested in language and have defined it from the point of view of their disciplines. The term "language" can be understood better in terms of its properties or characteristics. For Robins (1985) in Syal and Jindal, language is "a symbol system based on pure or arbitrary conventions […] infinitely extendable and modifiable according to the changing needs and conditions of the speakers"(3).

For Verma and Krishnaswamy, "there is no comprehensive definition of language. The only answer to the question "what is language is, language is language' (16). They continue that human language comprises the following features: I it is arbitrary, ii It is non-instinctive, conventional, iii It is symbolic, iv It is systematic, v It is vocal, vi It is a form of social behaviour, vii It is human viiiIt is open ended, extendable and modifiable ix It is structurally complex (17).

Language can be used in different facets of human interaction, that is, time, space and person. In pragmatics, the expressions that refer directly to 'person', 'time' and 'space' are deictic. For person deixis, expressions such as I, You, That or This are common while expressions of Time (temporal) deixis include now or then; locational deixis (space or place) expresses here or there, respectively.

There exists a close relationship between language and time. Vrasidas Karalis opines that "[…] language is a phenomenon which itself is found in Time and is used and developed in Time […], language is a means for structuring, representing and conceptualizing time. Language is one of our chief instruments,(probably the most important one) for understanding time" (17 – 18).

Studies on language change,(in Historical Linguistics) support the claim above. Olaoye asserts that "language undergoes changes along three lines, namely: (a) Time or temporal line, (b) geographical or locality line and (c) social line' (99). For Time or temporal line of Time change, Olaoye adds that "linguistics studies and compares the structure of one language at two different periods, say the 5th and the 20th century. (99). Between these two periods, the language in question must have changed dramatically in almost all the aspects of the language system; meaning that it has been affected by time.

Language structure, too, can be said to have relationship with Time. At the level of phonology for example, the English intonational system is said to be stress-timed in contrast to Nigerian English which is syllable-timed. Syllable-timed rhythm is employed by nigerian users of English with a reduced system of intonation. Juncture, too has its Time occasioned by the transition from one structural element (unit) to another.

At the level of lexis(vocabulary), Agbara informs that"Time adjuncts are used to express duration, frequency and point of time" (158). These time items succinctly represent the above claims as follows: today, Monday, briefly, before, earlier, often, never, soon, recently, since, then, occasionally, late, always, initially, et.c. When classified, these items will be found to represent both its cyclical and period aspects. Prepositions also help to demarcate time into 'when' and 'duration'. Those that are used to indicate time 'when' include: at, in, on,; while the prepositions indicating 'duration' include for, during, over, through, from, et.c. (Abochol, 84-85).

Time also causes language change. The two linguistic terms 'diachronic' and 'synchronic' readily come to mind when talking about time and language change. Here again, Olaoye is of the view that "diachronic linguistics makes statements relating to the changes that take place in any language during the passage of years. It studies or deals with language development over a period of time[…] (99). This stands in contradistinction to sychronic linguistics which describes a stage of a language at a given time, say the 19th century during which it assumed that no changes are taking place. Olaoye further clarifies that "it (synchronic) deals with the present stage of language, that is, the NOW of language"(100). The implication here is that it is sychronic linguistics that articulates 'real time', which is the NOW time.

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We shall now turn to illustrate the language of Time and Time communication in selected poems of Africa. We have chosen for this purpose Chinua Achebe's *Love Cycle,* Keorapetse Kgositsile's *We are Like The Present* and Yusuf Kassim's *Maji Maji.*

The nature and purpose of Achebe's poem is obviated in its title. It is located in cyclical Time that encapsulates recurrent natural activities that operate rhythmically and untempered by human influence. This cyclical – durational phenomenon is however, couched in language that suggests continual and revolving love consummation.

The poem is divided into five stanzas which are structured in a revolving fashion such that the end could signal the beginning of the poem while the actual beginning could become its end, depicting in effect a cyclical, ever-continuing but never-ending activity in an eternity that carries mankind along its flow.

The first stanza of the poem opens with a definite Time marker, "At dawn" that stands in contrast to "for evening" found in the closing line of the poem. The action at dawn is shown not to be a glib one, but that which covers a duration indicated by the adverbial 'slowly'. This slowness signifies casual time because the sun's arms are 'long' so it takes time to abdicate. The language of the poet is apt, he uses the continuous interaction between the diurnal/nocturnal Phenomenon while simultaneously playing on a supposedly human love consummation to communicate eternal truth that reveals itself in Time and eternity. Achebe seems therefore to subscribe to the opinion that time itself is eternity.

The second stanza reveals the timelessness of Time. Sleeping "Earth […] wakes". This Time related activity inherent in the soul, is merely repackaged and regulated by the clock. Time is marked out here by revolving eternity of dawn and evening, sleeping and waking. The poet communicates a rustic sense of time which relies on natural phenomona, earth and sun to create and reckon time. The two, like human beings are locked in a harmonious, proficient relationship that lasts all time producing morning,

evening, night, day etc. This way, the poem's locative time is the beginning and end of time. And the timelesness of the poem is marked by neutral verbs in the present simple tense denoting all time activity. These include 'withdraws' 'leave', 'wakes', and 'waits'. The third stanza of the poem serves a transitional role in Time. An event is on-going when a Time adverbial 'Later' is introduced shifting action to other events that will take place in a future time and a modal auxiliary 'will' is used here as a pointer to succeeding events.

Consequently action shifts also from day to evening.
" Long accustomed" in stanza four points to recurrent activity in Time that the earth is wont to. The practice of waiting by earth depicts habitual Time, just as 'patience', too, negates sudden activity. Thus the word 'patience' also encapsulates Time as it refers to an enduring activity.

The last stanza signals a return to a repeat and continuous repetition of the previous activity. This is spelt out by the two words 'another' and 'will'. It is like saying that sun and earth will go over their activity at another time; ushering in an ever continuous activity in a timeless universe.

Keorapetse Kgositsle's *We are Like the Present* (61) avidly demonstrates purposeful use of the Time concept to formulate and deliver up a philosophical idea to great effect.
The poem specifically uses Time as a metaphor for freedom in the peculiar South African situation. Time wise, the poem shifts from the past to the present, while it equally anticipates a future time.

Notwithstanding, the poem's emphasis is on the present, the 'here' and 'now'. Stanza one introduces two characters who had met by chance in a past time. One immediately proposes love through a desire to embrace the other, who is rather surprised at this gesture and runs away. Two past participle markers, 'met' and 'ran' are used here in addition to a Time adjunct 'when' as well as 'has been' as a habitual marker to justify the second character's fear and aversion for strange and suspicious love that 'leads' rather to loneliness. This also accounts for the poet's insistence to 'probe' this love 'landscape'.

Stanza three of the poem anticipates a spatial and temporal Time marked by 'walk' and 'is'. The reference to temporal Time is further heightened by the following: " I am the son of NOW"; "The time that has always been here" and "any time or place". To the poet persona therefore Time is constant and ever present, and is also related to place; but the real and ideal Time is the NOW Time to which he is son. The poet continues the final stanza of the poem with time markers in the present simple and perfect tenses, demonstrating also the function of tense as Time. We find these in: 'I probe', 'I come', 'I have been', 'I know', 'is', 'here we are'. In the concluding line of the stanza, the past is relived and recast to contrast it with the poet persona's desire for everything on the moment and not in the past or in the future.

Thus, Time is portrayed as being same, but the poet reemphasizes his crave for a now Time, the 'here now'. By this, the poet has joined many other people who hold the view that the only ideal and real time is the NOW Time.

Yusuf Kassim's *Maji Maji* (59) is an ambitious attempt to harmonise Time taking note of events in the past and bringing their consequences to bear on the present. The poet uses a wise old man to relive and recast the story of the war between the Germans and the Tanzanians.

In the first stanza of the poem we are confronted with the notorious issue of Time, duration and memory. Memory is affected by time and mankind is thus challenged to recall, incidents between time past and time present and the poet employs apt action verbs to denote duration and its impact. The first stanza of the poem contains the words 'sitting', slow motion', 'recall' and 'starred', all which refer to activities covering space and time or duration. And the *Mzee* is tasked to recall and recount the incidents he witnessed and which he has narrated in the two stanzas that follow.

The language of stanzas two and three contains action verbs that locate the poem in a real past time. These include 'stirred', 'rustled', 'talked' and 'pledged'. We have two reports in the poem, that provided by the wise old man about the Germans and the one given by the poet.

The invasion by the Germans and the aftermath effect show duration, as can be seen in the following phrases, 'for many days', 'resounded', and 'long years'; while the action itself took place in a real past time, "came and went".

The language of the last line of the poem "No drums beat again" refers to an eternal now that equally suggests a continuation in a future time. Both the people who beat the drums and the drums themselves have been silenced permanently, eternally in a previous, and continuing Time.

V

This study, has proceeded by first examining the seminal components of the central discourse namely time and language in their separate domains. Second, it has put the components together to synthesise the reflexive relationship that exists between them. Third, the study has put these components together to ascertain how they work in tandem to lend credence to poetry aesthetics and comprehension but particularly, how African poets have utilized them to effect.

We have sifted the contributions of various individuals to the definition and explication of time, either as a notion or concept and how it works in practical reality in its eternal, sacred or temporal status. Variations in opinion have been found to be based either on discipline specific bias or ages and eras. Consideration of a superior or most apt demonstration, seems to us a process and product of a comparative study which ours is not. Suffice it to state that each argument is situationally cogent.

Language as a symbol system, in all its variations serves a communicative function. Language tense and aspect are invaluable in expressing time. And the genre of poetry has language that is unique and expresses issues in some way that is uncommon to other forms of literature. This uniqueness has led to the emergence of both language and postlanguage poetries. Time in poetry is in turn expressed in peculiar forms of language. This study has thus revealed that time, language and poetry are not just closely related but they are complementary.

Our examination of the language of time in three poems of Africa has brought the discovery that African poets have either consciously or unwittingly used time in its related concepts to create, specify and manipulate phenomena in their poems.

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