

Sunday O. Anozie

Structural Models and African Poetics

Towards a Pragmatic Theory
of Literature

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Preface

What is structuralism? What is semiology? What relevance do both have to literary criticism in general and African poetics in particular? These are some of the problems which this book sets out to examine.

The justification for this is obvious. During the past few decades there has developed in Africa a body of literature written in European languages which, by its sheer volume, variety and sophistication alone, should command serious critical attention. Also, behind this modern literature lies an immense and largely untapped reservoir of oral and vernacular tradition for which the proper tools of analysis and interpretation have yet to be found. Finally, the determination of the relationship between these literary traditions — the written, the oral and the vernacular — within the context of a comparative study of models of discourse and creativity in Africa and Europe is a task worth undertaking. It promises to increase our experience and appreciation of literature produced in the developing nations of Africa through application of appropriate aesthetic and critical criteria.

This book does not pretend to furnish *the* critical direction as such, although its argument is based upon the recognition of the fact that the criticism of African literatures could use more method, and a more rigorous ordering of sense. On the contrary, since structuralism's literary programme consists mainly in the elaboration of systems of poetics, the guarantee of whose validity and universalism is the immanence of language which it proposes as its model, this book, a general introduction to the subject, merely restates this fact and also acts, if you will, as an interpreter between the new structuralist

dispensation and critics interested in the conventions of its use and naturalization in Africa.

I could not have embarked upon the writing of this book without three special qualifications. The first is my direct experience of this literature, the fact that as an African, I am part of its text, its context, and perhaps also of its 'pre-text'; in short, its history and its problematic. The second qualification is the exposure which I received as a doctoral student at the Sorbonne to structuralist ideas and methods between 1965 and 1969. In fact this work is the result of copious notes taken both during class seminars, discussions and conferences held at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris. Many of these notes did not find a convenient place in my main dissertation topic: 'Realism, Structure and Determination in the West African Novel: A Typological Study' — a work already published (see Anozie, *Sociologie du Roman Africain*, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1970), and for various reasons had to wait. The last but not least of my qualifications in writing this book is the five very fruitful years I have so far spent teaching and lecturing on interdisciplinary and comparative theories in literary criticism in various university institutions in the USA, coupled with my experience as founder and editor of *The Conch*, a journal of commentary on African literature and languages with a structuralist bias, and, recently, also of a new series of monographs, *Studies in African Semiotics*.

Thus my indebtedness to my friends and colleagues in Africa, Europe, and the USA, to my professors at the Sorbonne, and to my graduate students, especially at the University of Texas at Austin, is so numerous and so varied that it cannot be adequately or individually acknowledged here. Nevertheless I wish to express my special gratitude to Professor Roland Barthes, not only for the encouragement he gave me and the interest he took in my work throughout the period of my study in Paris, but also for the friendship and knowledge he liberally shared with us both inside and outside of the seminar classroom. I should also like to thank Monsieur Claude Bremond, Monsieur Jacques Leenhardt, and posthumously, Professors Roger Bastide and Lucien Goldmann, both of the Sorbonne, and many more including some members of the Editorial board of *Tel Quel, Communications*

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and *Critique* with whom I had corresponded, both as graduate student and as editor of *The Conch*. Several people have either verbally or in writing expressed their encouragement as well as useful criticism of my work. Among these I should like to thank Professor Bernth Lindfors, University of Texas at Austin, Professor Ezekiel Mphahlele, formerly of the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia for the first comprehensive review published about *The Conch*, Professor Louis Tremain of Indiana University at Bloomington for an important critique of my ideas in relation to Lucien Goldmann's, Professor Thomas Sebeok, Chairman, Research Center for the Language Sciences of Indiana University, Bloomington, who originally commissioned from me the article which now forms the first chapter of this book; Leslie Fiedler, Samuel Clemens, Professor of English and former Chairman, Department of English, for offering me in 1977 the opportunity of a visiting lectureship at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and Professor Leonard Duroche, University of Minnesota at Minneapolis, for inviting me to present a paper at the Sixth Annual Conference on Comparative Literature held in 1978. I should like, however, to give special thanks to Professor Richard Klein of the Department of Romance Languages at Cornell University who read through this manuscript and warmly encouraged its publication, and Professor Linda A. Waugh of the Linguistics Department also at Cornell University, for finding the time during her recent collaboration on a book with Professor Roman Jakobson to read my chapter on Jakobson's poetics.

Sunday O. Anozie

Acknowledgments

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1 Introduction: From Structuralism to Semiology

The aim of this introduction is to present in general terms the nature of the thinking which has preceded the writing of this book. It is neither a justification nor an apology for the work itself. If it serves any useful purpose to be stated, the gestation of this book began in Paris in 1966, when the author was still a graduate student at the Sorbonne. This was the period of the rise of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and, consequently too, of the decline of Sartre's existentialism¹ in France. Some social historians of this period have even gone as far as attributing the students' riot in Paris in the spring of 1968, which brought the Gaullist regime to eventual capitulation, to the French 'nouvelle critique' which was inspired by the structuralist teachings in ethnology and sociology. To any foreign graduate student it was as much an intellectual excitement to be studying in Paris during this period as it certainly must have been for those, especially from Africa and the Caribbean, who lived and studied in Paris in the years immediately before and following the end of the Second World War, though perhaps for different reasons.

Literary dynamics and the problems of linguistic classification in Africa

The end of the Second World War saw not only the rise of nationalism but also rapid development of modern literature — mainly political tracts, fiction, and poetry — especially in West Africa. This literature is written in English and French, the two main colonial languages still widely spoken in Africa.

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The period of nationalism was also one of increased interest both in African oral tradition and African linguistics. Although various collections of African folktales, myths, and legends were available at this time in the translations, this did not automatically stimulate academic interest in the structural investigations of African traditional narrative forms and techniques. Instead the recording of African oral tradition served primarily a utilitarian purpose by providing European anthropologists and historians with additional testimonies about African cultures and societies, while preservation of their traditional heritage gave some African scholars a sense of pride and mission. For instance, in 1959, Rev. J. S. Mbiti, the distinguished East African scholar and specialist of African religions and philosophy, informed the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists as follows:

That there is virtually no published vernacular literature in East Africa cannot be denied. It is a very pathetic truth. . . . Phenomenal changes are taking place everywhere in East Africa, with such rapidity that the more the Africans adopt the Western way of life . . . the more the traditional literature of these Africans will drown beneath the fuming forces of westernism

Thus with a burning urge and zeal to save this literature, I began, in 1954, to collect all the folklore, stories, legends, myths, tales, fables, riddles, proverbs, poems (songs), tongue-twisters, and many other relative information, of my own tribe, the Akamba. The tribe numbers some 800,000 people, and occupies a large area of some twenty-thousand square miles, in the central-south part of Kenya. Kikamba is the tribal language, which belongs to the large Bantu language group of East, Central and South Africa. . . . So far, I have in manuscript form, at least one thousand such stories, tales, etc.; and about four hundred proverbs and riddles. I am still collecting whatever there is left, hoping to eventually obtain in record, every little bit of this vernacular of my tribe.²

The failure of African scholars to take a more academic interest in their folklore and vernacular literature, and in

studying especially the empirical relationships, if any, between this and modern creative systems, has obviously cost us a chance of seeing develop a distinctly African school of formalism comparable in impact perhaps to the movement in Russia between 1915 and 1930. Against this view it may be argued, first, that in Africa folkloristics has never existed as a science but as a communal art, since folklore forms an integral part of the cosmological as well as ethical systems of the various East and West African tribes or societies; and second, if the Russian experience is taken as typical, that the tradition which produced such literary Formalists as Vincent Propp and Jakobson, did not, in fact, start in Leningrad in 1928, but was the product not only of the post-1917 Soviet nationalism but other developments in related academic fields, particularly linguistics.³

Since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African linguistic studies have been dominated by the missionaries, colonial officers, explorers and persons with hardly any language training. The emphasis was on the compilation of dictionaries and the translation into the vernacular of the Bible and other religious materials. In this effort the missionaries secured the cooperation of West African scholars⁴ such as Rev. Dr Samuel Ajai Crowder of Nigeria and his several associates from Sierra Leone. Through the joint efforts of European and West African missionary scholars, a center for the study of African languages was established in Freetown, Sierra Leone, during the nineteenth century, and in 1927, its European counterpart, the International Institute of African Languages and Culture, was founded under the joint chairmanship of two eminent German and French linguists of the day, Westermann and Delafosse, with the expressed object of 'coordinating and focusing the results of the work and research which different European nations and individuals were carrying on in Africa. ...'⁵

However, not until the Second World War were there serious attempts made at the classification of African Bantu languages that could claim to be reasonably free from such ethnocentric biases as had been responsible for the spread in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the so-called 'Hamitic' theory⁶ of African languages.

The pioneer of the new morphological school of African

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linguistics was the American Joseph Greenberg,⁷ who in rebuttal to the culture-bound linguistic typologies of Westermann and Heinrich Lichtenstein, sought to introduce a new synchronic dimension into African linguistic classification and research. In his *Essays in Linguistics* (1972), Greenberg makes the following observations:

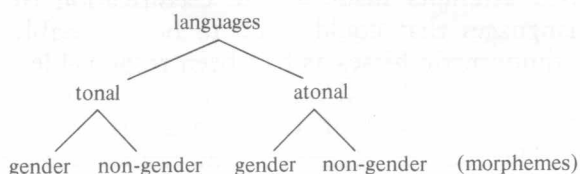
Language can be approached in either of two ways: as a system of signals conforming to the rules which constitute its grammar or as a set of culturally transmitted behavior patterns shared by a group of individuals.⁸

It is the second of these two approaches which provides the conceptual basis for Greenberg's linguistic typologies of Africa. Undertaken to correct some of the shortcomings of earlier typological attempts made by Westermann (both Westermann and his disciple Meinhoff, for instance, would exclude the African language Fulani from the West-Sudanic group on the basis that it is pre-Hamitic non-gender language, that is to say, that it marks an evolutionary stage between Bantu and Hamitic-Semitic gender), Greenberg's classification is based upon sound-meaning resemblances between African languages. Using phonetics as a criterion for linguistic classification has, of course, its proven validity (the work and later influence of the Prague School, especially the contribution of the Czech philologist Trubetskoy, is a case in point), since it permits the languages to be easily reduced, for example, to two basic systems such as 'tonal' and 'a-tonal'. Nor would this method, at least for comprehensiveness of exegesis and classification, necessarily exclude the use, either simultaneously or at a later point, of a purely semantic criterion, in which case a further reduction of the languages can be obtained, namely, to 'gender-morphemes', and 'non-gender morphemes'. The resulting classificational systems would be something like this tree diagram:

Typological levels

Phonetic:

Semantic:



Using a system of classification whose essence or structure can be represented as above, Greenberg isolates four main groups or families of African languages, together with their sub-families. The result is as follows:

- I CONGO—KORDOFANIAN
 - IA Niger—Congo
 - IA1 West Atlantic
 - IA2 Mande
 - IA3 Voltaic
 - IA4 Kwa
 - IA5 Benue-Congo
 - IA6 Adamawa-Eastern
 - IB Kordo—Fanian
 - IB1 Koalib
 - IB2 Tegali
 - IB3 Talodi
 - IB4 Yumtum
 - IB5 Katla
- II NILO—SAHARAN
 - IIA Songhai
 - IIB Saharan
 - IIC Maban
 - IID Fur
 - IIE Chari-Nile
 - IIE1 Eastern Sudanic
 - IIE2 Central Sudanic
 - IIE3 Berta
 - IIE4 Kunama
 - IIF Koman
- III AFRO—ASIATIC
 - IIIA Semitic
 - IIIB Egyptian
 - IIIC Berber
 - IIID Cushitic
 - IIID1 Northern Cushitic
 - IIID2 Central Cushitic
 - IIID3 Eastern Cushitic

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- IIID4 Western Cushitic
- IIID5 Southern Cushitic
- IIIE Chad

IV KHOISAN

- IVA South African Khoisan
 - IVA1 North South African Khoisan
 - IVA2 Central South African Khoisan
 - IVA3 Southern South African Khoisan
- IVB Sandawe
- IVC Hatsa

(Note: See Joseph Greenberg, *Linguistic Classification of Africa* (1955) both for the geographical locations and distribution of these languages in Africa as well as for detailed comparisons of their phonetic and morphological features.)

Greenberg's typology has often been challenged by other professional linguists but has not yet been replaced by another classificational system of comparable simplicity, lucidity and comprehensiveness. More pertinent to our purpose still, no attempt has so far been made to test the usefulness of the comparative and distributional method of Greenberg's approach in the typology of other African extra-linguistic or creative systems, such as the novel, poetry, drama and the arts in general, based upon internal evidence and form only. This of course is not to suggest that Greenberg's approach is the only possible or correct one; in fact, it is doubtful if his model, both mechanistic and statistical, can be flexible enough to take into account other developments in African literature such as those relating to specific themes and the styles of the authors. Nevertheless, it has the merit of cutting across African lines of ethnicity, to define relations in terms of shared or collectivist linguistic symbols and codes.

The point being stressed here is that few indigenous African linguists were actually involved in the dispute about linguistic morphology and classificational devices in Africa. Their preoccupation at this post-war period, at best, was with sociolinguistics and the problem of language and national integration in Africa.⁹ In evaluating the work done in African linguistics to this date in specific relation to the development of a structuralist criticism in Africa, one is constrained,