

A LEXICO-SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF TONY MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the lexico- syntactic features of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The focus is to examine the use of different types of sentences and other syntactic features as used in the novel. A sentence consists of a subject and a predicate. It is a basic unit of English grammar. This study adopts Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) as highlighted by Halliday (1985 and 1994) as the theoretical base of the work. The theory is suited for this work because it specifically looks at language as a whole system of choices existing in complex structural relations. The data for this research were sourced from the selected text using a non-probability sampling technique. The findings of this study among others reveal that, Morrison uses more simple sentences than compound and complex sentences in her novel. She also made extensive use of excessive commas, AAVE, and other lexico-syntactic features.

Keywords: Grammar, Sentence, types, Lexico-syntactic features.

Introduction

A sentence is the basic unit of English grammar. It consists of a subject and a predicate. A sentence can contain many elements but there must always be a verb. The other elements that may be found in a sentence besides subject and verb are objects, adverbials or adjectivals. Tomori is of the opinion that:

The sentence is one of the most difficult linguistic terms to define; this is partly due to the fact that an all-inclusive definition of any concept is almost impossible to achieve, and partly because it is virtually impossible to combine the distinctive features of a written and a spoken sentence in the same definition. (19)

However, despite this difficulty, some scholars have defined the sentence using many variables. Francis (1958) emphasizes on phonic substance of a sentence when he argues that "a sentence is as much of the uninterrupted utterance of a single speaker as is included either between the beginning of the utterance and the pause which ends a sentence-final contour or between two such pauses" (cited in Tomori 1977). In addition, Bloomfield (1933) lays emphasis on grammatical independence of the sentence when he asserts that, "each sentence is an independent linguistic form, not included by virtue of any grammatical construction in any larger linguistic form". What these definitions have in common is that a sentence can be defined using many variables but bearing in mind its independent nature. The sentence in the Systemic Functional Grammar constitutes of elements such as:

Subject (S); Predicator (P); Complement (C) and Adjunct (A).

This research therefore adopts Functional labeling/ Tree diagramming in the analysis of the structural elements of sentences as used in Morrison's selected texts. The reason for this is to show how the various constituting elements are used to produce a meaningful whole.

In view of this, the present study analyses how Toni Morrison uses different types of sentences as well as other syntactic features in her narration. What are the unique

techniques at the lexico-syntactic level employed by Morrison in expressing the myriad of problems, social and cultural differences as well as difficulties and racial tendencies exhibited in the selected work? It is based on these very crucial aspects of communication between the characters that this study anchors the analysis of the data.

Toni Morrison: Biographical brief

Chloe Anthony Wofford or Toni Morrison is an acclaimed writer from the United States of America. She was born in Ohio in 1931 and attended Howard University and Cornell University for her first and second degree in English language respectively. She had a stint as a lecturer in Howard University before leaving to become an editor at Random House with specialization in black fiction.

Morrison began her creative career in the 1970s. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was written in 1970. It was followed in 1974 by *Sula*, the work that catapulted her for nomination for the National Book Award. In addition, her book *Song of Solomon* (1977) won Morrison the National Book Critics Award in 1977. She is a prolific writer who has written many books like *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1988) which won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, *Jazz* (1992) and *Paradise* (1998). In view of her outstanding works, Morrison became the first African- American to win the Noble Prize for Literature in 1993. Furthermore, in 2012, Morrison was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and she also adds another feather to her cup of achievements by winning the 2016 PEN/SAUL Bellow award.

However, despite the lofty achievements of Morrison in works of fiction, her books the *Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1988) “are among the most challenged and banned books in America” (Guillermo 2016). A challenged book in America means a book that is not permitted to be used in the library or school curriculum.

Toni Morrison was married to a Jamaican architect Harold Morrison and blessed with two sons even though they divorced after six years. Presently, Morrison is a Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Princeton University in the United States of America. *Paradise* (1997) The book is set in Ruby a fictional township in Oklahoma in the 1970s. The novel depicts a community’s struggle between its past, present and what the future holds. After the American Civil War, many African-Americans migrated to the West of the country in search of better living conditions. However, besides looking for a better life, they were also trying to isolate themselves from white segregation.

The characters in the novel try to create a community free from evils that are prevalent in the outside world. They want a community that is like paradise. However, their sought – after community can only be achieved if human beings are perfect. The clamor for racial purity, unity, harmony and love, though desirable in any society, is sometimes a mirage that can only be wished. This is attested by how the community falls apart by disallowing American Indians, whites and light-skinned African-Americans into their midst and their inability to come to terms with what they mean by love. Does love mean what happens between a man and a woman? Alternatively, is it between a woman and a woman? How do women view a patriarchal society? The inability of the people in Ruby to come to terms with this leads to the creation of two different worlds in the book: the town of Ruby led by the men and the Convent which serves as a sanctuary for women who run away from men and cherish the freedom they have as well as challenge the patriarchal dominance in the society. With this development, it is only a matter of time before the inevitable happen. The men from Ruby decide to launch an attack against the five women

(one is white) in the Convent because they represent what the people resent, that is, white people and light-skinned blacks. The men enter the Convent and “shoot the white girl first. With the rest [of the women] they can take their time.” (p. 3). With these developments, *Paradise* encapsulates a community that portrays good and evil, righteousness, uprightness, love and hatred, violence and wickedness. It is a community polarized between greed, jealousy, lies, murder, adultery and above all a search for freedom and emancipation.

Objectives of the Study

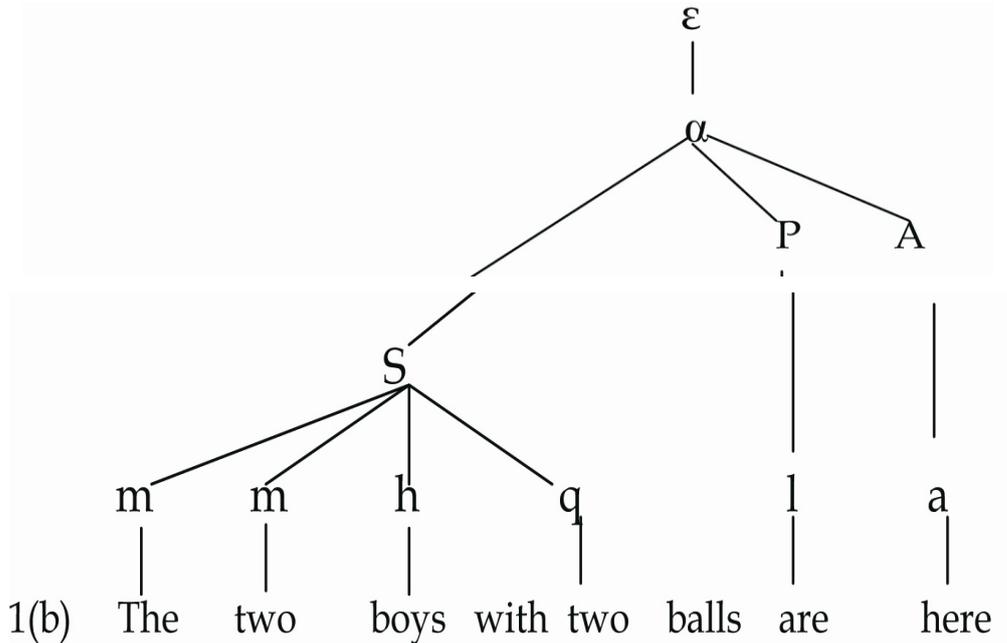
The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the lexico-syntactic features Morrison’s *Paradise*
2. To investigate the use of language as used by Morrison in the text
3. To analyze the types and nature of sentences using SFGs perspective
4. Theoretical Framework

The model of grammar for this analysis is the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) propounded by Halliday (1985 and 1994). He was in the forefront amongst scholars who were regarded as followers of J. R. Firth. They steered the theoretical perspective away from its earlier position of ‘scale and category’ to what came to be known as ‘systemic functional’. The term ‘systemic’ emanates from the claim that language has a network of systems. According to Farinde et al. (2015: 89):

The model looks at language as a whole system of choices existing in complex structural relations. By this, it means a system in which the choice of one thing dictates the choice of another. In the model, the notion of ‘constituency’ is vital to the analysis of grammatical structures.

Similarly, Eggins postulates further the idea of constituency that “constituency simply means that things are made up of or built out of other things”. (37) In essence, this refers to the relationship between structural elements that combine to make a meaningful sentence. To achieve a grammatical analysis of a sentence, Halliday argues that “When we take into account wordings of more than minimal length and complexity, there is the need for constituency analysis since some more structures are involved.” (17) This could be done through the use of constituency bracketing and functional labelling/tree diagramming:



Functional Labelling/Tree Diagramming Culled from Farinde et al. 2015

Farinde et al. (2015) conducted a research on the English clause and its relevance to the analyses of a sentence. They discovered that the “clause adds a lot of values to the English sentence. These include its centrality to grammatical rankshift, embedment and configuration of sentences. This research adopts Functional labeling/ Tree diagramming in the analysis of the structural elements of sentences as used in Morrison’s selected text. The reason for this is to show how the various constituting elements are used to produce a meaningful whole.

Methodology

The main data for this study derives from Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. The data was selected taking cognizance of the lexico-syntactic features of the work, that is, types of sentences and their functions, punctuation marks, disordered syntax, etc.

A Lexico-Syntactic Analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*

The analysis at lexico-syntactic level centers on types of sentences (simple, compound and complex), use of mixed syntax, African American Vernacular English, anastrophe, double negatives, vulgar language, asyndeton, excessive use of comma, dash, colon, semi-colon, and elision.

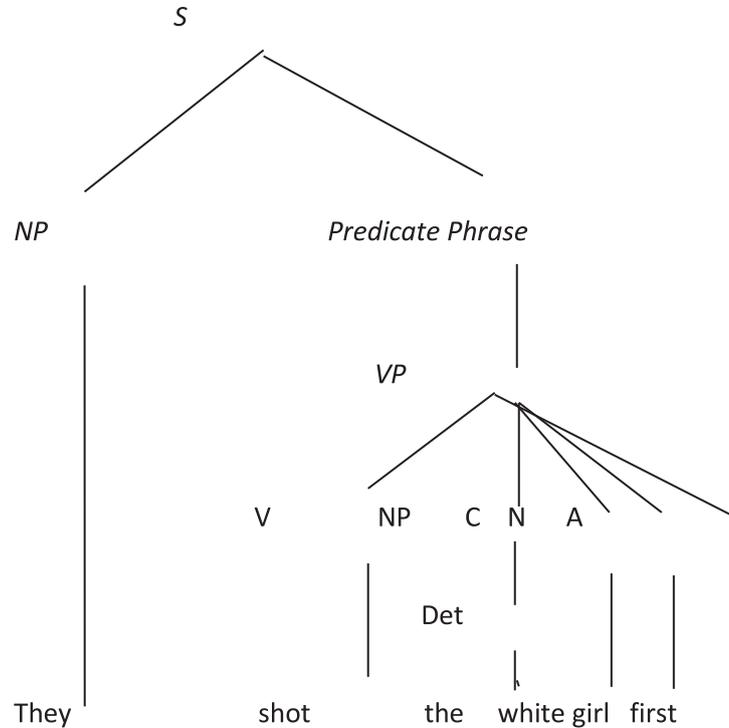
Use of simple sentences

A simple sentence is also called a clause. It contains a subject and a predicate. A simple sentence can convey a statement (declarative), question (interrogative), command or exclamation.

1. "They shot the white girl first" (p. 3).
2. "He carried the equipment box through the dining-room" (p. 53)
3. "You can't stay here by yourself"(p. 97).

In the sentence, "They shot the white girl first ", we have three structural elements:

S P C
They/shot/ the white girl first.
This sentence can be analysed using the Functional Labelling/ Tree Diagramming in the following way:



In Systemic Functional Grammar, the clause can either be alpha (α) or beta (β). The alpha clause refers to a clause that can stand alone and make sense while the beta clause cannot and has to rely on the alpha clause for its meaning. All the simple sentences above are alpha clauses.

However, in *Paradise* the analysis shows that Morrison uses different and varied simple sentences.

Declarative sentences:

1. "I feel better now" (*Paradise* p. 177).

Interrogative sentences:

1. "How long will it be?" (*Paradise*, 16)

Imperatives:

1. "No need to shout now" (*Paradise*, 38)

Exclamatory:

1. "Ow, look! A beetle!" (*Pradise*, p24)

Besides the varied types of simple sentences, the sentences have simple structure but differ in length. Some have only 4 words whereas others contain up to 5 words.

The above shows that Morrison uses disordered syntax as a style of narration in *Paradise*. There are many instances where the characters use disorganized or non-standard English syntax.

The above passage describes their house as solitary, lonely and broken. The use of non-standard English here is attributed to the way the slaves were brought up. In addition, the sentences are sometimes not only disjointed but incomplete, for example: “Well, ah, this is not the, a man can’t, Ole Garner, what I mean is, it ain’t a weakness, the kind of weakness I can fight ‘cause ‘cause something is happening to me, that girl is doing it, I know I never liked her no how, but she is doing it to me...” (p. 126-127). The use of form of expressions by the characters indicates their disordered world, uncertainty and inability to understand the society they live in.

Use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE)

African American Vernacular English is a variety of speech commonly associated with Black communities in the United States of America. This pattern of speech is a consequence or effect of years of racial segregation that separates America’s citizens along racial lines. AAVE has special characteristics that are discernible at the phonological, morphological and syntactic level. However, this work will only analyze AAVE at the syntactic level.

1. “What you mean?” (p. 26).
2. “What you say me and you go to California?” (p. 39)
3. “People be out to buy” (p. 40).
4. “Whose mother you?”(p. 48).

The use of the auxiliary verb ‘be’ or lack of it, which is referred to as zero-copula, is very common in AAVE. Morrison disregards some auxiliary verbs in many parts of her novel as depicted above.

Use of Anastrophe (Inversion of word order)

Anastrophe refers to the inversion of the usual syntactical order of words for rhetorical effect. There are instances of the use of anastrophe in Morrison’s novels, for example:

1. “Behind a chain-link fence bordered by wide seamless concrete he saw green water” (p. 57).
2. “Gigi glaring, the earring man smiling, they left the snack bar together” (p. 66).
3. “Holding on to her hair and squinting against the wind, Gigi considered walking back toward the food store” (p. 68).
4. “At the squeal of the brakes, the sunning figure did not move” (p. 75).

Inversion of natural words order style features prominently in *Paradise*. Most often, when Morrison wants to emphasize a point, an idea or argument, she uses inversion to draw the reader’s attention.

Use of Double Negatives

Double negation is usually associated with African American Vernacular English, Southern American English and some British regional dialects.

1. “I wasn’t expecting no danger” (p.23).
2. “Can’t do nothing about it anyway” (p.41).
3. “This ain’t about no Billie Delia” (p. 59).

The above gives examples of Morrison’s use of two negative words or two forms of negation which can be easily discerned in *Paradise*. In all these instances, it is the black characters that use double negation. Morrison’s use of double negation is meant to make the reader appreciate and fully grasp the various challenges and interpersonal

relationships that the black characters faced and had to endure. The example in *Paradise* also touches on the hostility between the self-acclaimed 'righteous' and the branded 'unrighteous'.

Use of vulgar language

Vulgar language means not having or showing good manners, good taste or politeness. It also relates to the common people or the speech of common people.

1. "He didn't penetrate- just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face" (p. 26).
2. "A man and a woman fucking forever" (p. 63).
3. "The naked girl yawned and scratched her pubic hair" (p. 76).
4. "Want some pussy, pussy" (p. 164).

Morrison's use of vulgar language is very apt as shown in the examples above. *Paradise* is a novel about the struggles between good and evil. Some characters are considered 'righteous' and others 'unrighteous'. Those considered unrighteous are also looked upon as rude, offensive and interested only in carnal pursuits. It is therefore very common to hear them using vulgar language.

Use of Asyndeton

Asyndeton refers to the omission of the conjunctions that join words or clauses.

1. "More men came out, more" (p13)
2. "Enough in, enough at hand (p25)
3. "Fewer police, fewer streetlights" (p36)
4. "No, no, no, I don't want to argue (p74).

Morrison uses asyndeton in her work to produce rhythm in some sentences. This usually evokes or stirs emotional reaction during discourse among characters. It also makes the writer to conveniently remove conjunctions like 'and', 'but', etc. Morrison uses this rhetorical device to make the character's speech more dramatic, effective and rhythmical as well as emphasize the importance of the dialogue.

Excessive Use of Commas

The Comma is used to indicate a pause in a sentence. The comma is used in many places: to separate or list items in a sentence, in letter salutations and to separate a question tag from the rest of the sentence.

1. "...but only a few have seen the halls, the chapel, the schoolroom, the bedrooms"(p. 3).
2. "The ornate bathroom fixtures, which sickened the nuns, were replaced with good plain spigots, but the princely tubs and sinks, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt" (p. 4).

The author made excessive use of commas which interrupts the smooth flow of thought as shown above. Similarly, when the characters use a great deal of commas it portrays a lack of comfort or comprehension of their surroundings.

Use of Dash (-)

The Dash (-) has a complex grammatical usage. It is used to separate thought in a sentence, to show emphasis, explain or separate clauses.

1. "Loving what Haven had been- the idea of it and its reach-they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it from Bataan to Guam..."(6).
2. "And if it hurt- pulling asunder what their grandfathers had put together-it was nothing compared to what they had endured..."(6).

3. “Her funeral-the town’s first-stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity” (17).

The author uses dash to make emphasis, separate clauses and add information to happenings, events or concepts.

Use of semi-colon

The Semi-colon is a punctuation mark that is somewhere between the pause of a full stop and a comma. It is used to join phrases and sentences instead of a conjunction.

Hey good dog; stay good dog; old good dog;” (p. 54).

1. “A man like that could encourage strange behavior; side with a teenage girl; shift ground to Fleetwood” (p. 56).
2. “We are men here; men of God” (p. 59).

Morrison uses semi-colon to join phrases and sentences instead of a conjunction as shown in the examples above. She uses this to indicate contrasting of ideas, reiterate a point in a sentence or separate items in a list that contain commas.

Use of Elision

Elision means to cut off some letters, sounds or a whole syllable during the characters’ interactions. It is commonly used in connected speech so that people can have ease of communication.

1. “M’am” (p. 21) = madam
2. “Don’t need more’n a mosquito’s brain” (p. 30).
3. “Hit worse’n I am, may be” (p. 60).

Elision is a style that is constantly used by Morrison. In *Paradise* she uses elision like ‘more’n for ‘more than, “whyn’t for “why not, etc. All this is meant to ease communication among interlocutors.

Conclusion

This work analyses the lexico-syntactic levels of Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*. The study uses Systemic Functional Grammar as its theoretical framework. The model as used in the text shows how the author uses language to portray the characters overall feelings and perceptions of events. She uses different types of sentences like simple, compound, complex, disorganized syntax, African American Vernacular English, inversion of word order, double negation and other lexico-syntactic features.

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