

The linguistic impact of parenthetical expressions: A study of The Suns of Independence of Ahmadou Kourouma.

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the use and linguistic impact of parenthetical expressions in *The Suns of Independence* of Ahmadou Kourouma, a renowned francophone African writer from the Ivory Coast. One of the remarkable features in the writings of Kourouma is the rate at which he uses some forms of syntactic structures which are embedded in main clauses but do not contribute to their immediate meaning. These are the types of syntactic structures we refer to as parenthetical expressions. The study identifies and analyses the various forms of parenthetical expressions in use in the novel. The objective of this identification and analysis is to establish the linguistic impact of their use and relevance to social discourse. It also helps to determine their contribution to meaning in a bilingual or multilingual, polyphonic discourse situations such as what we find in this novel of Kourouma. The study is conducted on the basis of data collected on the phenomenon from the novel and examined through the theoretical frameworks of critical discourse analysis and literary reflections. It establishes that such as parenthetical expressions do not partake in the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they appear, they contribute substantially to the global understanding and interpretation of their meanings. The paper consequently concludes that parenthetical expressions as used in *The Suns of Independence* are peculiarities of oral speech which have found their ways into written text. They help to create an atmosphere of linguistic reality as they reaffirm the conversational and humorous tone of the text. They also enhance the understanding of implied sociolinguistic and cultural meanings of the series of events that make the stories in the novel. As such, they contribute to the stylistic exploit of Kourouma as a renowned novelist in African literature.

KEYWORDS: linguistics – parenthetical – sentence – syntactic – style – semantics

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the stylistic characteristics of the writing of Ahmadou Kourouma in his Award-winning novel, *Les Soleils des Indépendances*, translated as *The Suns of Independence*, is the use of parenthetical expressions. Considering the nature of our topic, we find it useful to give a brief historical background of the text upon which we focus our study, and its writer. We believe that this will significantly help in a better appreciation of issues to be examined in the study.

The Suns of Independence is the very first novel of Ahmadou Kourouma, an Ivorian national born in 1927 in Ivory Coast. Kourouma had his education in Bamako (Mali), but was expelled following his active involvement in a strike. He later undertook military service in his native country. Following his refusal to suppress a riot in Ivory Coast, Kourouma was transferred to Indo-China. He later on continued his education in Lyon, France, to become an actuary. He passed away in Lyon (France) on the 11th December 2003.

The novel was first published as “*Les Soleils des Indépendances*” in 1968 in Canada, following the refusal of editors and publishers to do so in France as a result of the language and style of its writer being considered a grave violation of classical French language grammatical rules and linguistic norms. It was not until 1970, following its acceptance in literary circles across the world, that Editions du Seuil, a French publishing house, published its first copies in France. Ever since, Kourouma has become and remains one of the most important writers in Francophone African literature of the Post-Independence era, even after his death. Besides *The Suns of Independence*, Kourouma wrote « *Monnè, Outrages et Défis* », « *En Attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* », « *Allah n'est pas obligé* », and « *Quand on refuse on dit non* » published posthumous. Kourouma remains one of the most controversial figures in Post-independent Francophone African Literature by virtue of his language, style and themes. The use of parenthetical expressions is one of the manifest stylistic features of the writing of Kourouma, hence our desire to study its linguistic impact on social discourse in *The Suns of Independence*. The choice of this novel over the others is motivated by its representativeness of Kourouma's literary exploit.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted on the basis of a critical analysis of linguistic data gathered on parenthetical expressions in the novel. This critical analysis of the relevant data will consequently lead to the determination of the linguistic impact of this syntactic phenomenon in *The Suns of Independence* of Ahmadou Kourouma. In this regard, our first preoccupation in this paper is to establish what a parenthetical expression is. Our second concern is to identify its various forms and usage in the text under consideration. Lastly, we will examine its impact in social discourse as depicted in this novel of Kourouma.

What is a parenthetical expression?

According to Villy Rouchota (1998):

Parenthetical expressions are linguistic constructions, words, phrases or sentences, which occupy a syntactically peripheral position in a sentence, are typically separated from their host clause by comma intonation, and which function as a gloss or comment on some aspect of the meaning (or the form) of that sentence. (p. 97)

Rouchota further reveals that “A list of the various kinds of parenthetical expressions can be found in Espinal (1991: 726-727). With regard to the importance of parenthetical expression, Rouchota affirms that “parenthetical expressions are significant for the speech act framework because they are examples of linguistic devices which are meaningful but whose meaning does not contribute to the truth-conditions of the sentence in which they occur.” (p. 98)

English Plus (1997-2006), an online source, affirms that “A parenthetical expression is an expression which is inserted into the flow of thought. It may be in the middle of a sentence or between sentences, but it does not deal directly with the topic at hand.”

Considering the above definitions, we can sum up that parenthetical expressions are words, phrases or sentences that are really not part of the main idea of a sentence, that interrupt the main sentence. According to Kenneth Gordon: “A parenthetical sentence is a full sentence separated by parentheses or dashes. They are generally not vital to the meaning of the sentence or paragraph they appear within but are clearly related and help by adding further clarification or information.” Gordon further asserts that “Because a parenthetical sentence is not a fragment, (...) it can be used as an independent sentence in parentheses.” Parenthetical expressions are not indispensable to the understanding of the clauses in which they are found. In this regard, they can be removed from the main clauses without any syntactic or semantic disintegration in the main clauses. These types of expressions are named as such because we consider them to be some forms of parentheses or afterthoughts or incidental ideas emanating from a narrator or a speaker in the cause of the presentation of his / her main thoughts in a statement or sentence.

By their nature, parenthetical expressions can be found in parentheses, in opposition, separated from the main clause by two commas, or by dashes, if in the middle of a clause; or by either a comma or a dash and a full-stop, if put at the end of a main clause. A combination of all the types of parenthetical expressions plays important stylistic roles in the writing of Kourouma in *The Suns of Independence*. In this paper, however, we will focus our attention on those found in parentheses, those separated by two commas or in opposition, and those separated by a comma and a full-stop. As a result, we will identify and analyze examples of some of these three categories of parenthetical expressions from the selected text. This will enable us to evaluate the linguistic impact of their use in the production of the novel. In an attempt to work within the number of words limit required for this paper, we will be very selective in our illustrations of each of the types of parenthetical expressions identified in the text, in order to privilege analytical depth at the expense of quantitative data.

Parenthetical expressions in parentheses

These include words, phrases and sentence structures that are in parentheses in the corpus. The very first of its kind is found on page 3. The narrator recounting what would have happened to the mortal remains of Ibrahima Kone, but for the new era of Independence, says:

You seem skeptical. Well, I swear it's true, and what is more, I swear that if the deceased had been of blacksmith caste, and if we weren't living in the era of Independence (*the suns of independence, the Malinke say*), no one would have dared bury him far away in foreign soil. (p. 3)

The parenthetical expression highlighted in italic in the above quotation incidentally explains the title of the novel and unveils its enigmatic nature. As such, the reader henceforth understands that the title “the suns of

independence” in Malinke refers to the “era of independence”. In the original French version it is captured in this word: “... **l'ère des Indépendances**”. The phenomenon announces the conceptualization of norms negotiation through the harmonization of two different linguistic norms and regulations: Malinke on one hand, and French on the other. This parenthetical expression is explanatory. It contributes to the understanding of the title and refocuses the attention of the reader on the orientation of the story. Another example is found where the narrator deplors the deteriorating socio-economic and political status of revered Malinke praise-singers and elders in the era of Independence. He states:

Since every funeral ceremony pays, one can readily understand why Malinke praise-singers and elderly Malinke, those whose trading activities were ruined by Independence (*and God alone knows how many old traders ruined by Independence there are in the capital city!*) all ‘work’ the burials and funeral rites. (p. 4)

The example highlighted in the above quotation is an exclamatory finite sentence structure which sounds like an outcry of sympathy for the uncountable number of Malinke praise-singers and elderly Malinke traders of yesteryears. It does associate the current status of these people to the era of Independence. However, the immediate noun phrase which follows this quotation unveils the hidden irony in that seemingly sympathetic cry. It reads: “Real professionals!” (p. 4). This irony is further reinforced by the succeeding explanation to define the noun phrase “Real professionals!”: “Morning, noon and night they keep on the move from one neighbourhood to another, in order to attend all ceremonies. The Malinke most unkindly refer to them as ‘the vultures’ or ‘that pack of hyenas’”. (p. 4). These terms evoke the depth to which Malinke elders and great traders of the pre-independence period have sunk as a result of the sociopolitical and economic changes characterizing the Post-Independence era, the period of the suns of independence. Decrying the woes of Fama following the Independence he (Fama) has fought for, the narrator says:

But when Africa discovered, first the one-party system (*the one-party system, you know, is like a society of witches, the highest-ranking initiates devour the others’ children*) and then the co-operatives that ruined trades, there were fifty opportunities to do Fama a favour by making him secretary-general of a party subsection or director of a co-operative. (p. 14)

The parenthetical expression, (*the one-party system, you know, is like a society of witches, the highest-ranking initiates devour the others’ children*), a compound sentence structure, explains the characteristics and inner-workings of “the one-party system”. It helps the interlocutor or the reader to appreciate the plight of Fama, the main character of the story. Indeed, this is another clear example of an explanatory parenthetical sentence structure. Nevertheless, it is also informative, because it provides further information to help understand the sociopolitical and economic orientation of the text and the involvement of the various characters.

In another example, the parenthetical expression in parentheses identifies Salimata as one of the most peerless beauties who have fallen on the field of the practice of female genital mutilation. It reads: “The field took only the most peerless beauties (*like Salimata*).” (p. 22). This parenthetical expression establishes the significance of the exceptional beauty of Salimata to the story in the entire text. Let us now look at examples of parenthetical expressions separated by commas or in apposition.

Parenthetical expressions in between commas or in apposition

The parenthetical expressions marked by two commas come in various syntactic forms in the text. They come in the form of a word, a phrase and a finite or a non-finite sentence. For instance: “One week had passed since Ibrahima Kone, *of the Malinke race*, had met his end in the capital city, *or to put it in Malinke: he’d been defeated by a mere cold...*” (p. 3). In this quotation, there are two parenthetical expressions as marked in italic. The first one, “of the Malinke race”, is a prepositional phrase by which the narrator establishes the unambiguous identity, in this case the racial identity of the deceased. This parenthetical expression serves as a foregrounding for the revelation of the socio-cultural belief of the Malinke about the dead in the subsequent paragraphs. Having an anaphoric reference to Ibrahima Kone, this parenthetical expression is in apposition to it. The second parenthetical sentence “or to put it in Malinke: he’d been defeated by a mere cold...” is made up of two clauses: a non-finite one “or to put it in Malinke” and a finite one “he’d been defeated by a mere cold”. The combination of both creates an explanatory parenthetical expression which helps the reader to understand the euphemistic construction “had met his end” by which the demise of Ibrahima Kone is related in Malinke. Recounting the historical undertones of Fama’s bitterness against the new era and his new circumstances, the narrator intimates: “When his father died, Fama, *the legitimate son*, should have succeeded him as chief of all Horodugu.” (p. 13). Here also the noun phrase sandwiched between two commas after the name ‘Fama’ refers to him in an anaphoric relation. This parenthetical expression is an apposition that lays emphasis on the aristocratic

lineage of Fama in order to ironically decry the unfairness of the era of Independence to him. This is an attempt to humorously justify Fama's shameless public outbursts among his Malinke brothers and peers. Let us now examine parenthetical expressions separated by a comma and a full-stop.

Parenthetical expressions in between a comma and a full-stop

As we have already stated, one type of parenthetical expressions used in *The Suns of Independence* is the one separated from main clauses by a comma and a full-stop. They are found after a comma placed after the main clause. In this case, the clause should have actually ended semantically with the "comma" which therefore should have rightfully been a "full-stop". But the thought of adding an emphatic and significant afterthought leads to the attachment of the parenthetical expression. This can be identified in the analyses in the following examples. "Their names had come to mind, *the names of those who had fallen under the knife.*" (p. 22) Indeed, the parenthetical expressions in this position tacitly serve as a cogent summary of the content of the main clause. For instance, in the following quotation: "Mussogbe of her mother's age-group had fallen, *a beauty all Horodugu still remembered.*" (p. 22), the lasting impression is embedded in the parenthetical expression in italic between the comma and the full-stop. The noun phrase "a beauty" in this parenthetical expression creates the resounding sentimental impact that attracts much sympathy for the late Mussogbe, one of numerous victims of female circumcision in the text.

"May God reward Salimata's good deeds twice over, *and grant her many children!*" (p. 40). This quotation is a variety of the 'comma' + 'full-stop' type of parenthetical expressions. However, instead of a 'full-stop' it ends with an exclamation mark punctuating a religious invocation. This parenthetical sentence reveals the intimate desire of Salimata as implied in the prayerful invocation at her instant. In a pleasant response to these prayerful wishes, "Salimata laughed out loud with pleasure, *like a bird displaying its shining throat in song.*" (p. 40). Here again, the laughter of Salimata is assimilated to a bird showing its shining throat in a song, a mark of great satisfaction and much pleasure.

In revealing the religiosity of Fama as a fervent and ardent Muslim as well as a traditionalist, the narrator recounts how not even sickness and aging can deter him from praying. He states: "In spite of his state of health, he woke every morning before cock's crow in order to say his morning prayer, *the soothing prayer that prepares you to face the shades of your ancestors and the judgement of God.*" (p. 118). The parenthetical expression in italic marked by a comma and a full-stop is an explanatory parenthetical. It evokes the nature and significance of the prayer that Fama never misses. Although the main sentence - 'In spite of his state of health, he woke every morning before cock's crow in order to say his morning prayer' - makes complete sense without the appendage - '*the soothing prayer that prepares you to face the shades of your ancestors and the judgement of God.*' - the spiritual impulse of this religious act would have been lost on the interlocutor without this parenthetical sentence structure. It has made the implied meaning explicit.

A careful examination of these types of parenthetical expressions points to the fact that they help create a lasting impression on the interlocutor or reader. The impact of the content of the main clause gets lost on the interlocutor or reader at the expense of that of the parenthetical expressions. From the above analyses, what is the linguistic impact of parenthetical expressions in this text of Kourouma?

Linguistic impact of parenthetical expressions in *the Suns of Independence*

The use of parenthetical expressions in the novel contributes largely to making reading quite tedious and confusing. The construction of meaning becomes more complicated as a result of the embedded nature of clauses and additional information that the parenthetical expressions bring along. The paradox however is that, these additional pieces of information appear in the long run semantically useful to the global understanding of the entire novel. They serve more or less as internal footnotes that are embedded in the body of the text since the novel has no place for such additional pieces of information.

The parenthetical expressions used in *The Suns of Independence* have varying degrees of linguistic impact on the holistic development of the text. Notable among these are explanatory, informative, denunciative and digressional. Besides, they impact significantly on the text as indices of linguistic norms negotiation between oral and written communication. Moreover, the parenthetical expressions reveal the degree of implication or otherwise of the narrator and the various characters in their utterances.

In these varying degrees of impact, the parenthetical expressions correspond to the stylistic exploit of the writer by contributing to the prevalent conversational tone in the text. Indeed, they enhance the humorous as well as the sarcastic orientation of the novel as a piece of sociopolitical satire. Besides, they help the narrator

and the various characters to strengthen their arguments so as to convincingly hammer home their submissions in order to woo readers or interlocutors to their side. They reduce the speed of the text, as they retard the early completion of clauses in making the text.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we can say that the use of parenthetical expressions in Kourouma's *Suns of Independence* contributes largely to the expansion of the textual volume of the novel and makes reading and interpretation quite difficult for readers. It is difficult for readers to easily reconstruct meaning instantly as a result of the complicated nature of the embedded clauses and additional unexpected information that the parenthetical expressions introduce into the body of sentences in which they appear. The use of these expressions gives rise to the proliferation of lengthy complex and compound sentences in the text. It also prevents the free flow of ideas and introduces multiples voices in the development of the text. This use also leads to breaks in the thinking processes of the various characters as they assume the speech act in the novel. As such, the parenthetical expressions retard the finality of the ideas contained in sentences in which they appear.

IV. FINAL FINDINGS

The paper establishes that, despite the above challenges however, the use of parenthetical expressions reflects the conversational nature of the text in *The Suns of Independence*. It helps in the voice moderation and the presentation of incidental comments from one character to the other. The humorous and ironical import of the narration in the novel is found in the incidental comments and information which the parenthetical expressions carry. They also serve as internal footnotes that are embedded in the body of the text since the novel has no place for such additional information. Although parenthetical expressions do not form part of the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they appear, they remain semantically significant for the holistic understanding of the entire novel. Indeed, parenthetical expressions supply the inferential missing links between the narrator, the characters and the readers. The use of parenthetical expressions forms part of the stylistic markers of Kourouma's aesthetic exploit in *The Suns of Independence*.

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