Discourse Construction of Social Reality in Newspaper Opinion Articles on Chinua Achebe's Death

Adeyinka Olusola Adeoye

Department of English, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria

Tel: +2348034988848

E-mail: trgist2003@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines how the Nigerian Newspaper opinion articles construct social realities. The study is oriented by Fairclough's social theory of discourse (STD) and Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG). The data are two purposively selected opinion articles, one from *The Punch* and the other from *The Guardian*. Findings reveal that the grammatical elements of discourse, such as connectives, transitivity, theme, nominalization, and vocabulary choices, help to construe the social reality of high hegemonic status on Achebe. This positive stance about Achebe is constructed in the context of the negative representation of the Nigerian nation and situation as problem-prone and confusion-laden. The paper concludes that newspaper opinion articles on the dead are eulogistic discourses which culturally create an ideal world for their subjects by praising them but rarely give recourse to any flaws the subjects might have.

Keywords: Discourse Representation; Newspaper Article; Stance; Worlds of Discourse; Critique

1. Introduction

Newspaper opinion articles are writings from individual members of the public. The articles appear under newspaper regular columns that have titles, such as 'opinion' or 'viewpoint'. This column is a newspaper public forum where individuals can express their thoughts on salient societal issues. The 'editorials' and 'letters to the editor' columns are other aspects of the newspaper public forum (Mikhailova, 2011:523). These forum pages are seen as instruments of participatory democracy, a conduit for airing one's value-laden view to the mass public (Hoffman and Slater, 2007:58).

Following the death of the writer, Chinua Achebe, on Friday, March 22, 2013, the newspapers published a number of opinion articles in respect of his life, career, and ideologies. These articles are also imbued with discursive elements that depict macro-social realities. This research, therefore, seeks to make an example of these eulogies of Chinua Achebe in revealing how the discourse of newspaper opinion articles on the micro-situation of a prominent figure can also construct socio-political realities on a macro-scale.

Theoretically, social realities are objects in the real world that discourse relates to. They are the views of the social world that discourse construes. Such a construction of social reality in discourse relates to the ideational function of language (Gregory, 2002: 17, 18) which, in Fairclough's conception, alludes to 'the role of discourse in social signification and reference' (Fairclough, 1992:169). Discourse represents the worlds that exist outside the discourse (Johnstone, 2008:10, 33) through reference and signification since it 'includes reference to preconstituted objects, as well as the creative and constitutive signification of objects' (Fairclough, 1992:60). That is why this study critiques the aspects of social reality which the selected articles refer to and signify.

Some extant studies on the media discourse of newspaper public forum have focused on the content analysis of the article's ideological complexity and value frames (Hoffman and Slater, 2007; Jensen and Honneland, 2011), and on different models of argumentation used in media debates on public issues (Bander, 2008:96). Other studies (e.g. Gogging and Long, 2009) have found that letters to the editor in daily newspapers are powerful discourses which aid productive community activism. Also, while Moore (2005) investigates elements of propaganda in public opinions in Zimbabwe, Mikhailova (2011) studies electronic letters to the editor on a riot and a bombing incident in Russia, and finds that the letters represent public opinions that favour 'banal nationalism' over 'extreme nationalism' (p.523). Further, using the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Thomas (2003) explores the competing public discourse on schooling in Australia, and submits that these discourses constructed schools as being in crisis. Such a representation ideologically gives authoritative voice to a group while diminishing the authority of the other. A similar methodology is also used by Von Seth (2011).

As seen in the foregoing review, apart from Thomas (2003) which deploys purely the methodology of CDA, many studies on writings in newspaper public opinion forums pay scanty attention to the role of textual elements in the implicit construction of social meanings. Also, the studies have not investigated public opinions on a personality, and then map the linguistic items in the opinion text to relevant macro-social meanings. The present research is an attempt to fill this gap in scholarship.

2. The Writer, Chinua Achebe

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on 16 November, 1930 in the Igbo village of Ogidi, Anambra State, Nigeria and died in Boston Massachusetts, on 21 March 2013 at the age of 82. He was seen as one of Africa's most widely read novelist, one of the continent's towering men of letters, and the grandfather of Nigerian literature.

From the time of his early education at St. Philips Central School in his village and at Government College in Umuahia, to the time of his tertiary education in the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Achebe has always demonstrated high intelligence.He began to demonstrate his skills and zeal for writing while on campus. He wrote several fictional pieces for campus magazines, such as, *University Herald* and *The Bug*. His debut writing is entitled, 'Polar undergraduate' (Ezenwa Ohaeto, 1997:38, 39). In 1958, he wrote his first novel, *Thing Fall Apart*, which has sold over 10 million copies worldwide, and has been translated to over 50 languages (Text A of this data). His other notable fictional works are *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *The Man of the People* (1966), *and Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). He also wrote many short stories, poems, and essays, critical works, non-fictional writings, and political commentaries. Shortly before his death, he published the last of his major political writings, a memoir which drew a lot of controversy, titled *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (11 October 2012). With these and other writings for children, Achebe was really a renowned writer.

He was rewarded for his writing proficiencies. Some of the Awards he got included Man Booker International Prize (2007), Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and St. Louis Literary Award. He was the recipient of over 30 honorary degrees from universities in England, Scotland, Canada, South Africa, Nigeria, and the United States, including Dartmouth College, Harvard, and Brown University (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, p. 285). Given these highlights of his life, Achebe is considered as a prominent person, and this is evident in the outpouring of written tributes to him from which two have been selected for this study.

3. Methodology and Design

This research is modulated by Halliday's systemic functional grammar (SFG) and Fairclough's social theory of discourse (STD). The two theories are combined for use here because the latter is actually a reflection of the former. While SFG helps to account for the social functions of language items, STD provides the framework by which discourse functions are identified as social practice, and, thus, helps to uncover implicit meanings which construct social realities.

The data for this study are drawn from *The Punch* and *The Guardian* which are two foremost Nigerian newspapers. Between March 21, 2013 when Achebe died and March 29, 2013 when this research was embarked on, three opinion articles on Achebe were published in each of the papers. Two of these six articles were selected as data for this research purposely and in virtue of their similar titles. The titles of the articles are parodies of the title of the last book written by Achebe, *There was a Country*. The article titles are the following:

Text A – 'Achebe: Indeed, there was a man' (*The Punch*, Monday, March 25, 2013, p.26).

Text B – 'Chinua Achebe: There was a country' (*The Guardian*, Wednesday, March 27, 2013, p.67).

The sentences in each of the texts are numbered for ease of reference. While Text A has 49 sentences, Text B has 46. The analytic techniques used are both quantitative and qualitative.

Obviously the similarity in the article titles, on the one hand, lies on their intertextual reference to Achebe's book. Another point of similarity in the titles relates to the near-perfect parallelism observed in their syntactic structures, i.e. S/(A)/S/O/P/C. This similarity, among other things, is an index for assuming that the narrative perspective or voice, and the knowledge representation in the articles' field of discourse will be very similar.

This assumption is the analytic standpoint for this study, as the two articles are seen as being of the same field of discourse referring to and signifying the same social reality in their representations of voice and knowledge. A critique of these issues is presented in Section 5 below. Meanwhile, Section 4 presents the theoretical considerations while Section 6 concludes the paper.

4. **Halliday's Functional Grammar and Fairclough's Social Theory of Discourse**

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) is a modern descriptive grammar which gives priority attention to the functional use of language in context (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). This focus is a departure from the formalist perspective (e.g. Chomsky, 1965) in which 'langue' or competence is seen as the only item of language that should concern linguists.

SFG does not merely account for language via its form or how it should be. Rather, it investigates word choice and other grammatical resources from the perspective of their functions and uses in society. According to Bloor and Bloor (2004:2), SFG recognizes meaning and use as central features of language and tackles grammar from this point of view … Grammar is *semantic* (concerned with meaning) and *functional* (concerned with how the language is used) (Italics in original).

By this, SFG is a ready tool for studying how language is used to construct social meanings, as it takes the analysis of grammar to be 'an insightful mode of entry to the study of discourse' (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 10).

Halliday identifies three metafunctions which any piece of language use performs simultaneously. They are the ideational function, which relates to the message or field of discourse; the interpersonal function, which relates to participant's role relation in discourse; and the textual function, which indicates the logic of the text (Halliday 1971; Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 1-6).

Further, SFG sees grammar and lexis as an inseparable continuum, and uses the term, lexicogrammar to refer to the nature of the two. Lexicogrammar is a first component of the content of the complex semiotic system that is an adult language. The second is semantics. A clause is seen as the centre in the lexicogrammar from which meanings of different kinds are mapped into an integral structure of grammar (Bloor and Bloor, 2004: 284; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 24).

Moreover, Fairclough's social theory of discourse is a model which attempts to see through language (discourse) elements, and makes explicit implicit ideological meanings which help a group to exert control, influence and power over another (Fairclough, 1995:71). Like Halliday did about grammar, Fairclough also formulated a three- dimensional frame work for the analysis of discourse, i.e., discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice and discourse as social practice (Fairclough, 1992:73 – 84; Blommaert, 2005:29). These three dimensions are co-terminus with Fairclough's three levels of research methodology respectively i.e., description, interpretation, and explanation. He also identified three functions of language which corresponds to Halliday's three metafunctions.

The notion that discourse constructs social reality is present in Fairclough's social theory of discourse. Notably, this notion is related to Halliday's conception on clause as message and clause as representation. The potency of the two theories in uncovering implicit meaning, and the similarities between them make the two theories suitable for the present critical analysis.

5   Analysis

5.1   Connectives and Argumentation

Connectives are aspects of text cohesion which, together with the sentence structure they construct, 'provide a way into looking at the sort of argumentation that is used, and the sort of standards of rationality it presupposes' (Fairclough, 1992: 171). Such presupposition points to social realities. Some connectives or conjunctions used in sentences that directly say something about Achebe signify three different worlds or social realities: the good world of Achebe, the bad world of Nigeria, and the ideal world of notable situations and people in the global society.

The following is an example.

1. In Nigeria, ***despite*** the lopsidedness in our socio-political system, a few men still stand out when it comes to honour, integrity and altruism. Chinua Achebe, a teacher, poet, author, broadcaster, social crusader, and political activist certainly belongs to this class (Text A, Sentences 4 and 5). The adversative connective 'despite' makes a contrast between Nigeria's socio-political system and the good world of 'few men' who stand out, and Achebe belongs to this group of men. Also in Text B, Sentences 27 and 31, an adversative connective is deployed for the same ideological service.
2. In 1983, Achebe reflected again on the debacle of Nigeria's inability to achieve   socio-economic and technological transformation… Development does not come from miracles and prayers ***but*** from intense investment in human capital…

Other connectives, which are used for constructing different incompatible worlds and which are reproduced as discursive practices, are presented in the following table.

Table 1: Connectives Used for Social Representation

Sample text	Connective type	Textual Element	Excerpt	Sentence No
3	Causal	*No wonder*, the novel has sold more than 10 million copies…	Text A	14 &15
4	Causal	*No wonder*, he found the allure of foreign nation so irresistible!	Text A	27 & 28
5	Temporal	*After* he had been involved in an accident … Achebe preferred to reside in the US.	Text A	29
6	Additive	*Aside from* his literary proficiency Achebe was famous … for always standing on the side of truth …	Text A	35
7	Adversative	*In a country where* hypocrisy, deception and opportunism have become a national pastime, Achebe was able to keep his dignity.	Text A	36
8	Temporal	*Throughout* his lifetime, he was always on the side of the people.	Text A	37
9	Adversative	*As* many shamelessly hobnob with some of the oppressors …, Achebe continuously distanced himself…	Text A	38
10	Temporal	*Twice, in 2004 and 2011*, he rejected the enticing offer of national honours…	Text A	39
11	Causal	Professor Achebe identified the trouble with Nigeria *as* the indolence of the leadership caused by the providential riches of oil.	Text B	34
12	Causal	*As a theoretician of development and change*, Achebe fervently believed in the power of literature…	Text B	37
13	Temporal	*By the time* Achebe died at 82, there was no publishing house in Nigeria or Africa that could play a role…	Text B	43

The table above shows selected connectives used to position Achebe, other favoured personalities like Nelson Mandela, and other foreign worlds in a positive, ideal stance while the Nigerian world is 'perjorated' and projected in a negative light. Thus, the various connectives construct a two-fold mode of argumentation and rationality. One fold eulogizes Achebe as a hero, the other criticizes the Nigerian problematic situations which, and the people who serve as antagonists to the hero.

5.2 Grammar

5.2.1 Transitivity

Transitivity in Halliday's conception refers to the ideational dimension of the clause. It is clause as representation (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, Chap 5), dealing with the types of processes and participants involved in the world that the clause represents (Toolan, 1996:75).

The majority of the clauses which say something directly on Achebe in the texts are in the process that represents doing some physical activities, i.e., they are in the material process. A few are in the process of characterizing, i.e., they are in the relational processes. Although there are occasional verbal processes, mental processes are rarely seen in those clauses – only in one instance. The analyses are presented in the following table.

Table 2: The Distribution of Processes in clauses that give messages about Achebe

		A	b	C
		Text A	Text B	Mean value (a + b)÷ 2
I	Total number of sentences	49	46	47.50
Ii	Total number of ideational clauses that give direct information about Achebe (∑IC)	67	59	63.00
Iii	No of clauses in material process (MtP)	45	47	46.00
Iv	No of clauses in relational process (RP)	19	09	14.00
V	No of clauses in verbal processes (VP)	03	02	2.50
Vi	No of clauses in mental processes (MnP)	-	01	0.50
Vii	Percentage value of MtP/ ∑IC	67.16%	79.66%	73.01%
Viii	Percentage value of RP/ ∑IC	28.36%	15.25%	22.22%
Ix	Percentage value of VP/ ∑IC	4.48%	3.39%	3.96%
X	Percentage value of MnP/ ∑IC	-	1.69%	0.79%

Key
IC: Ideational Clause
∑IC: Summation of IC
Mtp: Material Process
RP: Relational Process
VP: Verbal Process
MnP: Mental Process

The variable columns a, b, and c shows, respectively, figures related to Text A, Text B, and the averages of figures in a and b for a given role. In Texts A and B, and in the columns showing their averages, the percentage value of clauses in material processes is the highest followed by the value of clauses in relational processes, and, then, those in verbal processes. The fact that the material processes are predominant immediately suggests that a lot of physical activities which signify social realities are being instantiated in the clauses that directly relate to Achebe in the articles.

Further, in these texts, the participants who are constructing social realities through these physical actions are humans and the participant entities are cast around Chinua Achebe. Some examples are the following.

14. Text A, Sentences 4 and 5:

> *In Nigeria, despite the lopsidedness in our socio –political system, **a few men** still stand out when it comes to honour, integrity and altruism. **Chinua Achebe**, teacher, poet, author, broadcaster, social crusader and political activist certainly belongs to this class.*

The main clauses in Sentences 4 and 5 above have *a few men* and *Chinua Achebe* as their subject respectively, and they perform the participants' role of mediums, using Toolan's (1996:79) term. Notable is the fact that the two NP's are in hyponymous semantic relation. 'Chinua Achebe' is a subordinating term to 'a few men' -- who are good in the country. The social meaning constructed here is that the country, Nigeria, may be bad; there are good people in the country. Achebe is constructed as a prototypical good Nigerian, and, indeed, an ideal African man. Therefore, 'Achebe' is mentioned in the text alongside other ideal African personality, such as Elaine Showalter, Nadine Gordimer and Nelson Mandela.

This kind of discourse representation recurs in the texts making it a discursive practice. Also many clauses in Text B equally cast Achebe in the social position of a powerful and influential Agent or Actor. Consider the following.

15. Text B, Sentence 21:

> ***Achebe's stories** have charmed and counselled millions of people across the world.*

16. Text B, Sentence 38:

> *As a theoretician of development and change, **Achebe** fervently believed in the power of literature and the creative arts to heal …*

One thing to note is that, although, Achebe is discursively represented as being socially powerful in these praise expressions about him, he may not really be at the high hegemonic position in the real world, especially, considering the barrage of criticism that were launched against his personality on account of his book, *There was a Country*. The major controversial point of the book is Achebe's indictment that Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba who died in 1987, and the Yoruba race aided the genocide on the Igbos during the Nigerian Civil War (1967 -1970). This indictment has been vehemently refuted (See for example, the cover stories in *The News*, 25 Feb., 04 Mar., & 11 Mar., 2013). It appears that the newspaper opinion discourse; especially, the ones that eulogize a person, culturally project the dead in a bright light.

Other processes in the texts also reinforce the above submission. For example, the clauses that function in the relational processes also give glowing attributes to Achebe, and identify him as a hero. Some are the following:

17. Text A, Sentence 17:

> *Like the Biblical light that cannot be hidden, Achebe's literary expertise was not concealed to the rest of the world…*

18. Text A, Sentence 23:

> *At the Brown University, Boston, Massachusetts, United States ... one of his essays is recognized as one of the most generative interventions on Conrad.*

19. Text B, Sentence 23:

> *He is adoringly regarded as the father of African fiction.*

The highlighted parts in the clauses above depict attributing relational processes which characterize Achebe desirably.

5.2.2 Theme

The theme of a clause is the focal point of the clause, and it occurs always at the starting point of that clause. The entity that is predominantly or pervasively thematized in the clauses of a text is the centre of the discourse. Thus, the thematic process can help to determine the text's field of discourse.

In our sample texts, many clauses illustrate the thematic prominence given to Achebe as the one, for whom the text was created. Examples include:

20. Text A, Sentence 29:

> *After **he** had been involved in an accident that cruelly damaged his spine on March 22, 1990, Achebe preferred to reside in the US.*

21. Text A, Sentence 20:

> *Achebe was a joy and an illumination to read.*

22. Text B, sentence 40 & 41:

> *The manuscript of his Things Fall Apart novel found a European publisher by sheer accident. Achebe was to convert this chance to a formidable literary arsenal when he became the founding editor of the African Writers series under the aegis of Heinemann of London.*

23. Text B, Sentence 35:

> *Professor Achebe identified the trouble with Nigeria as the indolence of the Leadership ...*

The highlighted parts of the clauses are the thematized ones, and, thus, are the foregrounded information which points to the Achebe-centeredness of the discourse.

5.2.3 Nominalization

Nominalization is a non-congruent option in which a noun is used in a text instead of a verb. According to Fairclough (1992:179), it is "the conversion of processes into nominal, which has the effect of backgrounding the process itself". Nominalized processes abound in these selected texts, and as such, they are taken as a discursive practice. Examples are the following.

24. Text A, Sentence 34:

> *Aside from his literary proficiency, Achebe was famous in Nigeria for always standing on the side of truth…*

25. Text A, Sentence 17:

> *Achebe's literary expertise was not concealed to the rest of the world…*

26. Text B, Sentence 1:

> *The passing away of Chinua Achebe at 82 years on Friday, March 22 reminds us of the African saying…*

27. Text B, Sentence 28:

> *In 1983, Achebe reflected again on the debacle of Nigeria's inability to achieve socio-economic and technological transformation nearly 25 years after the attainment of independence from Britain.*

The highlighted items in the clauses above are nominalized. The process and participants are backgrounded. Thus, they are marked or non-congruent. 'Aside from his literary proficiency' can be made congruent as 'Achebe was proficient in literary writing' while 'The passing away of Chinua Achebe' can be denominalized as 'Chinua Achebe' passed away…'

The nominalized forms as used above help to represent the messages not as reports nor commentaries, but as unmistakable hard facts. It also lends credence to the message, representing the text producer as an authority who is adequately knowledgeable, and who can give a verdict on the issue at hand.. The use of normalization as a form of grammatical metaphor in this text socially positions the texts, not as subjective individuals' opinions, but as objective expository discourse.

5.3   Vocabulary
Under 'Vocabulary, two items to be analyzed from the data are word meaning, and metaphor. Each of the items is socially variable and socially contested.

5.3.1   Word Meaning
Words have senses, and with recourse to context, the senses can construct social realities in a discourse or a chain of discourses. The different senses of the words, as used, can then establish 'particular configurations of meanings, particularly, hierarchies of salience relationships among the senses' of the word (Fairclough, 1992: 188).

In the two texts of our data, the word 'story as a case in point, is recurrently used in different socially significant senses.

28. Text A, Sentence 8:

> *In Things Fall Apart … Achebe told the **story** of intrigues and contradiction …*

29. Text A, Sentence 13:

> *Things Fall Apart represents a compelling **story** that was told in a fashion that has remained unequal, till date.*

30. Text B, Sentence 12:

> *Achebe creatively recycles the epic **story** of Okonkwo in subsequent narratives…*

31. Text B, Sentence 30 & 31:

> *The mind or intellect or **story**, Achebe reasons, is the fount of the ideas and technologies that engender progress. As he puts it poetically, people create **stories** create people.*

In Sample 28, 'story' has the denotative sense of a literary writing; in 29, it has that of event; in 30, it has that of history, while in 31, the sense of history in the first instance is juxtaposed with that of event, in the second instance. As used in these different senses, 'story' refers to Achebe, and socially depict him not just as a literary writer, but also as a writer who is alive to the salient historical events in the society.

5.3.2   Metaphor

Metaphors are not only foregrounded in poetry, they are significant and constitutive aspects of all sorts of discourse as Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) study has convincingly proven it. To illustrate this point, three cognitive metaphors will be isolated from the data:

32. Text A, Sentence 49:

> *The great **son** of the world from Mother Africa.*

33. Text B, Sentence 12:

> *Achebe creatively **recycles** the epic story of Okonkwo in subsequent narratives.*

34. Text B, Sentence 14:

> *In about seventy years of plunder and repression, the   British have managed to **clone** together over 500 languages into a single country.*

In 29, the familial metaphors represented by 'son' and 'mother' are used to construct Achebe in an affectionate and beloved stance. The social reality here is that although he is from Africa, Achebe is a loved son of the world. Also in 13, engineering metaphors are used: 'recycle' belongs to the semantic field of industrial engineering, and 'clone' is used in the field of genetics/computer engineering. While 'recycle' is used to positively appraise/evaluate Achebe as having ingenious creativity, its social meaning is the derogation of the Nigeria's colonial master who, as is depicted, unhealthily and unnaturally confederated peoples of diverse cultures together in one geographical entity called Nigeria.

6. Conclusion

Newspaper opinion articles on a personality are written and should be from the writers' viewpoints on the subject. However, as this paper has attempted to illustrate, the discourse of such articles construct social realities which not only give a social appraisal of the person, but also connote social representations about institutions, groups, countries and the worlds created by the discourse.

In the case of our data here, eulogies on Achebe have implicit positive representations about his character, trade, vision, and even his death. Positive stance is also extended to entities in the frame of which Achebe is compared and assessed. These are entities or personalities, such as Nelson Mandela, Nadine Gordimer; and countries like the US and Japan.

The glowing tributes showered on Achebe upon his death contrast the controversy which attended the book, *There was a Country*, which he wrote just before his death. This may be in consonance with the popular view that 'you don't speak ill of the dead'. It can then be safely concluded that although eulogies or opinion articles on the dead are presented as facts   and   objective   assessments,   they   are   ideological   discourses   which   only

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emphasize/foreground the positive sides of the subject but de-emphasise/background, the negative sides. Readers should be circumspect when reading of such articles.

In the case data examined, no mention is made of Wole Soyinka, another African Nobel Laureate in Literature who is also from Nigeria, the same country where Achebe came from. Instead, a prominent mention is made of the South African Nobel Laureate. Nadine Gordimer. This silence (Johnstone, 2008:70) as well as other absences in this genre of discourse is an equally important aspect of discourse which can be targeted for further studies.

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