

# Ethical Issues in Select Nigerian Children's Fiction: A Linguistic Perspective

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## Abstract

The notion of ethics in literary creation pertains to the transforming powers of literature as well as issues of appropriateness and adequacy. Literature for children has the capacity to support children to think ethically and it also imposes pressure on authors and publishers to make ethically appropriate choices in language, content and form. Patterns of linguistics structures deployed by authors of select Nigerian children's fiction have been analysed using the systemic linguistic descriptive frame (SFL). Findings revealed conformity in some lexico-grammatical choices. Clausal elements and sentence typology (simple compound and complex) have been identified and their meta-functions ascertained as interrogative, assertive, and exclamatory. Findings could serve as linguistic check list for authors, publishers and teachers of children's literature.

**Key words:** Ethical issues, Children's literature, Lexico- grammatical choices and meta-functions.

## Introduction

Children's literature is created and handed down to children without any input from children. In this light, children can be said to be highly vulnerable. What they learn through literature can make or mar them. Scholars in the field of cognitive psychology have agreed that children's minds are impressionable and their cognitive developmental process occur in stages. Psychologists propose that all children develop cognitive abilities especially language ability in some specific stages.

### Child Developmental Stages

The contributions of Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who theorized on children's cognitive developmental stages from infancy to adulthood will suffice here. His argument is that it is essentially impossible for children to begin to talk about concepts they know nothing of. Children, first of all interact with their environments and construct their own understanding of the world starting with concepts of relativity in sizes and later acquire words to express them. This process is held as universal. Language development in children reflects the different stages of their

logical thinking and reasoning. The assumption of this theory is that children develop cognitive abilities such as language in four stages, namely:

1. The sensory-motor stage (birth to 2 years): Children are said to be born with ‘action-schemas’ which enable them to assimilate information from the world. This stage of development according to Piaget’s theory is characterized by movements and physical reactions. Children’s language skills are highly physical. They speak either to themselves or for association.
2. The pre-operational stage (2years to 7 years): At this stage, children’s language makes rapid progress. Their language becomes symbolically egocentric. Within this period, children seem to talk constantly showing awareness that others may possibly have diverse viewpoints. They express present, past, future and feelings in language.
3. The concrete operational Stage (7- 11 years): Piaget’s submission is that at age 7, children are already linguistic adults, having acquired all they need to be creative in language production and use. Accordingly, the child is able to use logic in solving problems about stories that are fact. Language at this stage is used to refer to concrete facts rather than to abstract ideas.
4. The formal operational Stage (from 11 or 12 years): At this stage, children are expected to use language to debate abstract and theoretical concepts such as those in mathematics, philosophy and logic.

The basic implication of Piaget’s theory is to promote the production and adaptation of learning materials to suit the developmental level of a child learner. Piaget’s theory set the stage for further researches in this area which saw to expansion and addition of more specific details as regards children’s cognitive development. One of such is the exploration of the developmental needs of children. Since this study is focusing on language use as it concerns children between the ages of 8 and 12, it is pertinent to assess the developmental needs of children within this age bracket. According to Eccles (1999), the years between 6 and 14 (middle childhood and early adolescence) remain very crucial in child development. It is a period children establish a sense of identity. This source further maintained that within this period, children experience biological and cognitive changes.

The implication of the above exposition on middle childhood developmental stages is to encourage authors of children’s literature to be guided on how to adopt appropriate approaches.

Tagoe (1992) submitted that at age 9-12 , children’s psychology, understanding and interest become mature and distinctive. Their linguistic skills and conceptual powers become sufficiently developed to enable them derive aesthetic pleasure from reading. It follows that middle childhood is a period children make cognitive and linguistic progress consciously showing what they know about language and what they are doing with it. Bauer, Lukowski & Pathman (2011) observed that children in middle childhood continue to add words to their vocabulary while Zember and Blume (2009, p. 193) maintained explicitly, that ‘semantic development in middle childhood seems to rely heavily on the context of conversation and children’s ability to figure out the meaning of words or phrases and by what another person intends to say rather than literal interpretation of word choice.’” An examination of the clausal structures which sometimes serve as the highest abstraction in the category of grammar in the case of Alpha clause and the attendant stylistic effects which reside in how children process and retrieve the underlying meanings as well as derive aesthetic pleasure from literature is a major contribution to studies on how children develop linguistic competence.

It has been established that writers of literature use language creatively and imaginatively as a raw material to articulate their artistic views while presenting human and world experiences for the reading pleasure of readers. According to Obi, Alhassan, and Osuji (2010), ethical issues in children’s literature will have to include the fact that: the heroes must necessarily be children or teenagers; the theme (idea, relationship and language) are simple not complex; and it possesses didactic effects - (must teach moral lessons as a means of grounding children in societal values). Since literature is a source of education, entertainment, information and socialization, Ngwu (1999) maintained that literature for children should be produced in language and style that suit the age of the target audience.

Given this background, the predominant sentence typology and constituent clausal element used by the authors of the select children’s fiction are identified and analysed to ascertain how they deploy language to promote the criteria of simplicity and clarity, characteristics of children’s literature.

In summary, a pedagogical consideration for authors would be to choose contexts, themes, style and levels of language that most appropriately suit the cognitive developmental stage of children for which the literature is written. These moral, social, cultural, philosophical aesthetic and linguistic considerations in the creation of children’s literature impose pressure on the need to evolve and sustain ethics in content, form and language of children’s literature. Ethics in this context is taken as the process of making morally conscious decisions based on our values. Literature presents events, character, settings and cultures which children can identify with. Ethics are

carefully taught to children following the skillful weaving of conflicts and resolution techniques authors deploy which expound morally ethical lessons. To this extent, this paper acknowledges the presence of the ethical issues in the content of children's literature.

The focus of this paper however is on what is considered appropriate and ethical as authors make choices from the linguistic repertoire to create literature suitable for the understanding needs of children. Hordttenova (2008) observed that children's literature is written in language and style that meet the needs of children at different cognitive stages. Ethical issues in language use are also closely linked with pragmatic, a context-based linguistic descriptive frame which supports appropriateness in language use among others. Jakobson (1960) noted that linguistic choices depend on communication factors like addresses, the message, context, code and content. In other words, these factors determine whether linguistic choice leads up to referential, connotations, phatic, meta-lingual or poetic interpretations in the discourse within which language are being used. Language used in literature exposes the influence of words in written form. Authors of children's literature manipulate this resourceful nature of language to arouse reading interest in children to the extent that children's literature appears to have a distinct voice.

However, despite the seemingly free license in language use, authors, teachers, publishers, educators and all that are involved in the shaping of children psychology in early stages of development are bound by ethical issues, appropriateness of style as well as conformity. To this end, Alhassan and Osuji (2010) noted that children's literature in Nigeria is written about children and for children. The themes, characters, settings, and plots should project the Nigerian culture; and specifically, the language must be deliberately made accessible to children. This imposes pressure on authors to couch language in ways that easily make meaning to children and at the same time achieve the built-in functions of children's literature.

This paper takes a cursory look at the clausal component of the language of children's literature in an attempt to discover how they have been deployed in these select fictions in order to communicate the desired meaning to children who are the target audience of this kind of prose.

## **2.1 Theoretical Orientation:**

All analyses will be based on the provisions of Systemic functional linguistics. The Systemic Functional Linguistics model (SFL) is a linguistic descriptive frame propounded by M. A. K. Halliday in the 1960s following after the earlier works of his teacher; J. R. Firth and that of Malinowski who insisted that language should be analysed based on context of situation and use

aside from the inherent components of grammar. Basically, SFL considers language as a social semiotics system. Language as social semiotic system in Halliday's sense proposes that linguistics is a kind of semiotics which central concern is to arrive at meaning. Rather than treat semiotics as an entity, SFL considers semiotics as a "set of systems which are meaningful and interrelated" (Halliday 1989, p.2). Language as a social semiotics therefore means that language is one among a number of systems of meaning that, taken all together, constitute human culture. The term 'social' points to the different realities that are above and beyond language which language serves to express. The many directions one can move outside to explain what language means is the consideration of language as a social semiotics.

The notion of system according to this theory is that language consists of systems of interrelated networks which are carriers of meaning while the notion of 'function' is 'a synonym with 'use'(Halliday 1989, p.2). The functions of language this source posits are exponential, ideational and textual. This means that this theory is a descriptive base for any context of human language. It proffers five basic dimensions for analyzing human language - the paradigmatic layer, stratification layer, metafunctional layer, syntagmatic layer and instantiation layer which can be collapsed into describing grammar from two broad perspectives: structural organizations and functional configurations based on systems of choices.

The central principle is that any act of communication involves choice. Therefore, choice is fundamental in systemic functional grammar. Language is viewed as a system of systems where paradigmatic relations are regarded as primary, and are described by organizing basic components of grammar in interrelated systems of features representing the meaning potentials of a language. Halliday's concept of the grammar of a language therefore emphasizes the notion of choice in analyzing texts as a continuous process of semantic choices. The functional layer of the theory rests on the fact that Halliday considers language as continuously evolving based on the pressure of the communicative function it has to serve. This means that this theory looks at meaning as a product of the choices a language user makes as he selects from options within the environment of other options. The power of language in use resides in the organization of networks of interrelated choices. It recognises two basic systems – open and closed systems. The open systems are so named because the terms within are 'open sets' of items whose number are constantly shifting grounds while the closed systems consist of terms that are finite or fixed in number. Functions inform choices from the available system networks and these in turn are mapped into describable structures in the fundamental categories (lexicogrammar).

The basic tenets of systemic functional linguistics as summarized by Berry, (1977); Osisanwo, (1999), Eka, (2004); as well as Halliday and Matessien (2014) recognize four fundamental categories of grammar – units, structure, class and system which form the bases for all grammatical patterns in any language. The unit of grammar comprises sentence, clause, group, word and morpheme which operate on a rank scale of delicacy. The structure deals with the syntagmatic ordering of words or sound of a language in a sequence of constituent elements. This means that words that make up a sigma are strung together in a patterned sequence of smaller units as constituents of larger units or they rank shift to operate in a lower unit.

## **2.2 Sources of Data**

Data for analyses are sourced from select prose fiction written by three Nigerian authors for children between the ages of eight and twelve. The selection is basically prose fiction of the adventure series published by Lantern Books, a publishing house that is noted for children’s books. The justification for the selection is that since they are all of the same literary category, the publisher should apply the same standards. Sentences which are the highest abstraction in the categories of grammar and the constituent clausal units that meet stylistic descriptions are isolated and analysed. Specifically, data are drawn from Herbert Barnabas’ *The Will of Hope*, ChineloIfezulike’s *Chima Laughs Last*, and Olajire Olanlokun’s *The Invisible Eye*.

## **2.3 Method of Data Collection**

Data are systematically collected after intensive reading of individual children’s fiction selected for this analysis. Stylistic features are isolated as data. Data are selected based on the embedding system. In practice, Mayring’s (2014) submits that embedding of materials within a communicative context situates content analytical procedures within communicative science and encourages the interpreter to specify which part of the communication process he wishes to relate his conclusion from the data analysis. Data for this study are embedded within stylistic parameters in the selected children’s fiction. Consequently, linguistic patterns are isolated based on descriptive stylistic outlines and instantiations made using three examples each from the three selected fictions.

## **2.4 Method of Data Analysis**

The descriptive stylistic methodology within the conceptual layer of content analysis method is used for analysis in this study. Content analysis according to Stone, Dunphy, Smith & Ogilvie (1996) is “any research technique used for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics within text”. Neuman (1997) describes it as a

“technique for gathering and analysing the content of a text.” The ‘content’, this source maintains refers to “words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or any message that can be communicated” while the ‘text’ is “anything written, visual or spoken that serves as a medium for communication” (pp.272-273). Linguistic data that meet stylistic description are categorized and analysed based on the descriptive principles of systemic functional linguistics which describes language patterns based on the structure of interrelated categories (lexicogrammar) and models meaning through three metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal and textual. Content analysis method should be fruitful to this study since it will expose actual language use in Nigerian children’s prose fiction to the extent of foregrounding its distinguishing features. It is also possible to make generalizations based on the analysis of this actual content.

### **3.0 Presentation and Analysis of Data.**

The sentence is the basic unit of expression with which we express our thoughts (Eka, 2004). Some others have defined it as words or group of words that express a complete thought (Tomori, 1977 and Radford, 1999). Although there are controversies over the later definition, there seems to be an agreement that the main feature of a sentence include expression of a complete thought and having a subject and predicate. For example: ‘All goats eat yams’. The ability to express a complete thought depends largely on syntactic relations of constituent elements in appropriate sequence of subject and predicate which are basic elements of structuring in systemic functional grammar. The subject of a sentence is a word or group of words about which some things are said. The predicate is the part of the sentence that gives information about the subject. The keyword is usually a noun or pronoun and the verb elements form the keyword of the predicate. In the fictions under study, three types of sentences are dominant: simple, compound and complex.

#### **The Simple Sentence**

According to Udofot and Ekpenyong (2001), a simple sentence is that which contains one independent clause. The authors of the six texts under study depend largely on simple sentence and simple diction. This is an indication that the authors did not intend to make the novels challenging for the comprehension of the children. The writers’ choices of words, sentence types and illustrations are everyday usages that everybody could understand no matter the level of education except for Olanlokun’s *The Invisible Eye* where terminologies are generously used. The following examples drawn from each of the three fictions will suffice:

#### ***The Will of Hope***

- 1 He was barely able to feed his family(p. 42). An Alpha clause expressing declarative mood, making a statement

- 2 Your father’s brother has forgotten us.(p. 46). A simple declarative mood of one clause structure demonstrating and teaching the use of possessive - “father’s brother”
- 3 Get out of my house! Gabriel said(p. 55). An Imperative sentence expressing impolite command

***The Invisible Eye***

- 4 He is now at Aero Neuro – Psychiatric Hospital, Abeokuta (p. 15) Declarative mood
- 5 Are you still interested in the force?(p. 25) .Interrogative mood.
- 6 The stewards were distinguishable in their white overall (p.35).Declarative mood

***Chima Laughs Lasts***

- 7 He gave him two hard kicks at the side of his stomach(p. 1) declarative mood
- 8 Once upon a time, Mr. Nweke began after clearing his throat (p.11) Simple declarative mood showcasing the popular opening phrase in folktale, typical of story-telling
- 9 Aah! Grasshopper, is it you?(p. 21). A Simple exclamatory mood expressing shock and surprise more in a rhetorical context.

The simple sentences used by the select authors are predominantly of SPCA, SPC; SPA, ASPA, ASPC structural patterns. As noticed, most of the simple sentences are declarative, affirmative, while others are interrogative and only a few were imperative and exclamatory. The survey reveals that generally simple sentence of short length are used and this makes the texts stiff, because the textual sequence consists only of the main idea with little or no room for elaboration. The linguistic foregrounding which is expected in literary texts is skillfully replaced with pictures which evoke scenes and images, a choice which triggers imaginative thinking in children. However, this reveals that the author’s choice of the simple sentence variety was to allow for clarity of expression, simplicity of presentation, accessibility of meaning and general elimination of ambiguity and wordiness.

**Compound Sentence**

A compound sentence is made up of two or more independent clauses joined by a coordinating conjunction. Although coordinating conjunctions are not many in English language, there seems to be a stylistically significant use of “and” / “but” among the authors of the selected children’s fiction. This choice draws children’s attention to how two simple sentences can be brought together to accommodate compound ideas. Some examples from the texts are:

***Chima Laughs Last:***

1. There was no electricity in Ubaro and many families gathered outside to tell stories at night. (p. 10)
2. He knew that Obinna would laugh at him and call him a girl meaning that he was a coward. (p. 32)
3. Some called them names but some kept quiet. (p.50)

***The Invisible Eye:***

- 4 His father approved his plan to go to Lagos and stay with his uncle (p.2)
- 5 Some of the questions were not too difficult but it will be a bit hasty to predict result. (p.3)
- 6 They all listened to the network news on television and Bade learnt that the man was an Assistant superintendent of police. (p.12)

***The Will of Hope:***

- 7 He had inherited a lot of land from his father and he farmed on them. (p.4)
- 8 He went inside and met his wife sobbing. (p.30)
- 9 People easily liked him and gave him gifts in appreciation of his good nature. (p.43)

From the above data, it can be observed that the writers mainly use the coordinating conjunction and in joining simple sentences. It is also evident that ‘and’ is mostly used in the texts to join single items and phrases together. It is a structural item often used to achieve expansion and accommodate elaborated ideas and details. Their usages do not show cohesive ties but rather they are used as functional components which merely tie up compound words, phrases, clauses and even sentences, which together create meaning in the text. On the other hand, the conjunction ‘but’ is mostly used in the texts to show contrast. Obviously, the main function of ‘but’ is to create contrast and balance in the syntactic paradigm. Structurally, the sentences under-study reveal “SPC (and) SPC” or “SPC (but) SPC” patterning.

The analysis reveals that this non-simple sentence structure is employed by the authors to give adequate, elaborate and vivid descriptions of events. Again, the teaching and learning implications for children readers are to allow them learn how to develop sentences and paragraphs to avoid monotonous use of the simple sentence typology. This way, children will be able to link sentences together, noting when to use ‘and’ to link sentences of equal rank and when to use the

adversary and contrastive ‘but’ to disagree with an opinion or negate an aforementioned idea. Furthermore, the three authors who make the most use of the contrasting structural linguistic item ‘but’ present contrasting thematic views of human behaviours, (good versus evil).

### **The Complex Sentence:**

A complex sentence is made up of one independent clause and one or more subordinate clauses. A subordinate clause is usually introduced by a subordinate conjunction or a relative pronoun. These connecting words make it clear that the clause depends on another part of the sentence for its meaning. From the texts, the following are isolated and analysed:

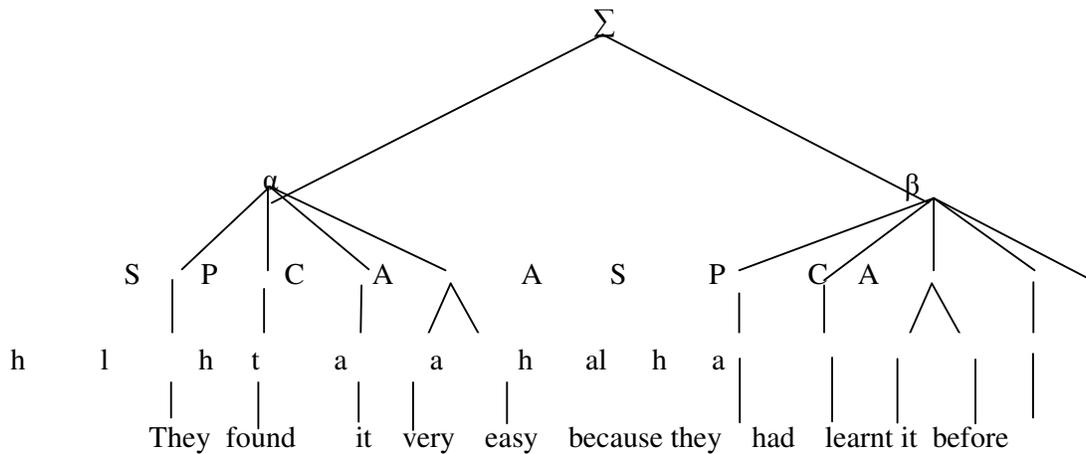
#### ***The Invisible Eye:***

1. Whenever a particular method was successful, it was noticed from empirical evidence that criminals used this as often as possible. (p. 46)

This is a complex sentence, with a fronted subordinate clause: *whenever a particular method was successful* and an alpha clause: *it was noticed from empirical evidence that criminals used this as often as possible*. It has the ASPSPCA structure.

#### ***Chima Laughs Last:***

The author of *Chima Laughs Last* uses many complex sentences. example: They found it very simple because they had learnt it before. (p.52) This is a complex sentence with the emphasis on “*they*”: “They” refers to Chima and Obinna, the two protagonists in the story being fronted in the alpha clause. It has the structure elements SPCAASPCA:



Although long windy sentences could pose comprehension problems for children in middle childhood, the use of this sentence type seems to be a characteristic stylistic feature to slow down the pace of the story as evident in *Chima Laughs Last*. Example: *Ifeanyi too was finding things difficult, he looked left and right seeking help, // however, he dared not do anything because// the examiner had noticed his movement and had fixed an intimidating stare on him. (p.56)*

The structural elements of this sentence are SPCASPCAASPASPC&PCAC: this structure is ridiculously long and the intended meaning is not easily accessible. we note that though the non-simple sentence above is clumsy apparently because the appropriate punctuation marks are not employed, it is in antonymous relation with the complex sentence earlier isolated. Here, a paradigm is drawn between Chima and Obinna (the serious pupils who find examination very easy and Ifeanyi who is the direct opposite). This sentence is replete with both subordinating and coordinating conjunctions, “and”, “because”, “however”: the use of the above sentence typology reduces the rate at which readers process the content of the text while enabling the author to be detailed, analytical and expository.

The author also depends on the coordinating conjunction “and” to link items of equal rank, while the subordinating conjunctions, *until, when, where, while* all perform specific clausal roles in the sentence within the context. Significant also, is fronting of nominals in all the examples taken from *Chima Laughs Last*. This is so because nominals are participants (major carriers of meaning in the English sentence structure) around which processes and circumstances are built; while the other ideas are subordinated.

***The Will of Hope:***

Barnabas Herbert's *The Will of Hope* examines the theme of determination. In the novel, the author depicts the sudden death of Mr. Alex and the heartless circumstances his widow and only son had to undergo in the hands of a wicked uncle, Gabriel. The work ends with the emphasis that with bravery, courage and determination one can succeed. The author uses predominantly complex sentences to drive home his message. Some examples are shown below:

1. The smoke of supper rose swiftly out of the kitchens of each hut to embrace the receding light of the day, to give way for the darkness [that had been waiting patiently to descend on the village]. (p.1)
2. That Sunday, just as the bell tolled the second time, // Mrs. Alex [who had already washed and powdered her face], picked up her bible, held it firmly under her left arm and walked gently and soberly to the church// [when the time for prayers came], she knelt down and poured her heart to God// (p.9)
3. Before Mr. Alex died, he told his brother, Gabriel, to take care of his property//until Michael was mature enough to manage it// (p. 36)

Herbert also stylistically uses complex sentences which are long and windy, a characteristic most of the authors selected for this study have employed. Herbert's choice of this sentence type enables him to elaborate and expand his idea so as to convey his message effectively. A task, he may not be able to accomplish with simple and compound.

Nominals in each of the extracts are fronted. They are seen to occupy the subject position and act as participants in varied processes within given circumstances. Furthermore, he uses rank-shifted clauses where there is need to supply additional information. These clauses within the sentence give the author the ambiance and liberty to deliberately expand and give detailed explanation to a preceding grammatical category. Generally, these very long sentences create syntactic parallelism because, through their length the author is able to express vividly and clearly his vision, mood and general world view. These non-simple structures SPAC, ASPSCAAC are significant in *The Will of Hope*.

## **Conclusion:**

The lexico-grammatical patterns of the data from the select children's fiction revealed a copious use of the simple and non- simple sentences as dominating structures the discourse. Within the simple sentence structure, the analyses showed the use of assertive, imperative, interrogative and a sparing use of the exclamatory sub-type. We also found out that this simple sentence maintained the structure of SPCA with obligatory element SPC. Other non- simple sentences expose a bit complex structures like ASPACSPAA.

In some of the structures as the study revealed, nominals occupied the initial positions. They were preceded by the "the" determinator. The noun group had obligatory and optional parts: the head (obligatory) modifiers and qualifiers. It was also observed that the compound sentences were coordinated by the conjunctions and, but, or. The point about the use was the absence of semi colon to mark off the initial items from the rest. Again, other non-simple sentence sub-types like complex and compound complex found were introduced by which, what, that, who. Most of these were rank shifted. Some of the usages indicate complex clause structures which were ambiguous.

The stylistic approach and the SFL descriptive frame adopted in this analyses in this paper have been resourceful since the actual use of language could be isolated and analyzed. It could be concluded that the authors of the selected fiction exhibit consciousness of the level of language when it pertains to syntactic structures. The complex structures are not heavily used. Intermittent uses of such structure are stylistically significant since they will expose the children and motivate them to attain higher level of language development.

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