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Conversions as Semantic Oddities in Dennis Brutus' Poetry

Wisdom Ezenwoali

Department of Languages,
School of General Studies,
Delta State Polytechnic,
Ogwashi Uku, Nigeria.

Esther Nkiruka Ugwu

Department of English and Literature,
Faculty of Arts, University of Benin,
Benin City, Nigeria.

All oppressive governments are not only anti-human but also bizarre as they endanger the survival of humanity: a contradiction of the very purpose for which they are set up. This paper addresses the prevalent semantic oddities we find in Dennis Brutus' collections of poetry. By applying Jan Mukarovsky's theory of foregrounding and the concept of deviation as expounded by Geoffrey Leech, we interpreted and unearthed the essence of the semantic oddities (in the form of conversions) which Brutus uses in his poetry: the South African apartheid regime and its absurdities are presented to readers through strikingly odd use of certain linguistic features. These semantic oddities are used to show the bizarreness of the oppressive apartheid.

1.0 Introduction

Literature (especially poetry) is known for its manipulative use of language: its practitioners are at liberty to use language in strikingly odd manners, especially in terms of the choice and combination of words. This is often strikingly odd and the oddity when carefully looked into is not often a product of linguistic infelicity. Rather, writers of literature often deliberately deviate from the standards of the language in which they write by manipulating the language towards making their message clearer and more impactful to their readers. It is the duty of the reader to discover the essence of the artist's use of deviant features by way of analogies. Even when there may be none, "the appreciative reader, by act of faith, assumes that there is one, or at least tends to give the poet benefit of the doubt" (Leech 59). In this paper, we seek to show the essence of Brutus' use of semantically odd conversions in his poetry using nine poems selected from *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* (1963), here referred to as *Sirens* for short; *Letters to Martha and Other Poems from a South African Prison* (1968), which we here name *Letters*; and *A Simple Lust* (1973).

2.0 Theoretical Background

This paper is informed by Mukarovsky's theory of foregrounding. According to him, "foregrounding is the opposite of automatization, that is, the deautomatization of an act" (44). It "means the violation of the scheme" (44). The purpose of foregrounding is "to attract the reader's (listener's) attention more closely to the subject matter expressed by the foregrounded means of expression" (44). This is to say that a foregrounded expression draws attention to itself.

To Havranek, foregrounding occurs when there is "the use of the devices of the language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention, and is perceived as uncommon ..." (33).

As Crystal notes, foregrounding is "a term used in stylistics (especially poetics) and sometimes in pragmatics and discourse analysis, to refer to relative prominence in discourse, often involving *deviance* from a linguistic norm" (our emphasis) (194). Foregrounding takes place either through parallelism or deviation where parallelism has to do with prominence achieved through patterns of regularity. This study is informed by the concept of deviation examined below.

2.1 Deviation

According to Bussmann, deviation refers to "property of expressions in a natural language which do not agree either explicitly or implicitly with compatible linguistic agreements (linguistic norms) or with linguistic descriptions (rule)" (303). This is not different from Leech's idea of deviation that:

a linguistic deviation is a disruption of the normal process of communication: it leaves a gap, as it were, in one's comprehension of the text. *The gap can be filled, and the deviation rendered significant*, but only if by an effort of his imagination the reader perceives some deeper connection which compensates for the *superficial oddity* (italics ours). (61)

Here, the normal process of communication refers to the standard or agreed rules guiding language usage. Any expression which disagrees with the normal process of communication is a deviation.

Most poets are known to always deviate from the standards of the language in which they write not as if they are rebelliously liberating themselves from any form of intellectual imprisonment, but because of a strong desire to be innovative. As Leech puts it,

... anyone who wishes to investigate the significance and value of a work of art must concentrate on the element of interest and surprise, rather than on the automatic pattern, (automatic pattern is here interpreted to be the normal pattern of a language system). Such deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms have been given the special name of 'foregrounding' which invokes the analogy of a figure seen against a background. (57)

Those elements of interest and surprise are what bring about endearment in the poem. As a corollary, the "foregrounded figure is the linguistic deviation, and the background is the language" (57). The terms *foregrounding* and *deviation* are often used interchangeably; but a better explanation is that the latter is used to refer to the process of achieving the former. That is, through deviation (odd or deviant linguistic features), foregrounding is achieved.

Leech names eight types of deviation: lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, semantic, register, historical, and dialectal (Leech). This centres on lexical deviation which results from the poet's freedom to "exceed the normal resources of the language" (42). It takes place in the form of neologism. Such neologisms are often "nonce-formations" since they are made up for the nonce, that is, for a single occasion only, and not often attempts to augment the [English] language word stock for some new need (42). Neologism in this case involves an application of an existing rule (of word-formation) "with greater generality than is customary" (42, our parenthesis). In other words, the usual restrictions are waved (42).

Common processes of word-formation here include affixation, compounding, and conversion (43). This is explained in the following subheading

2.2 Conversion

This is "a change in the function of a word, as, for example, when a noun comes to be used as a verb ..., is generally known as conversion" (Yule 67). It is equally known as class shift, category change, or functional shift. According to Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, "conversion is the derivational process whereby an item changes its word class without the addition of an affix" (441). This definition is later modified when they acknowledge that suffixation can take place in conversion as in when converting from an adjective to a verb as in "he blacked/blackened his face with soot" (442).

Hence, by conversion, the writers simply refer to that kind of neologism generally known as zero affixation where a word known to exist in a particular class(es) is used in a class(es) where it does not naturally occur with or without any modification of its pattern. A typical example as Quirk and Greenbaum provide is the verb *release* (as in *they released him*) which corresponds to the noun *release* (as in *they ordered his release*) (441). This happens when a noun functions as a verb, a verb as a noun, an adjective as a noun, a noun as an adjective, an adjective as a verb, and other kinds of conversion.

This idea of conversion is what Akmajian *et al* mean when they talk of new meanings becoming associated with existing words through numerous ways like changing the part of speech, metaphorical extension, broadening or narrowing of the scope of the meaning of an existing word, reversal of the original meaning of a word, and others (28).

In line with the notion of this paper, Yule confirms that the process of conversion "is particularly productive in modern English, with new uses occurring frequently" (67). It helps writers to form concepts to express new situations and events. Through conversion, we are able to create new experiences which might not have been taken care of in the language (English in this case). In other words, conversion helps writers to conceptualise new experiences.

The term, oddity, simply refers to "the condition of being odd" ("Oddity," def. 3) where to be odd is to be "unusual or peculiar in appearance or character" ("Odd," def. 3). Hence, we use semantic oddity in this study to mean those conversions that are strange or uncommon in the English language, and whose meaning can only be realised through the reader's or listener's imaginative interpretation. Simply put, they are those usages of words that are loony and can only make sense through an imaginative interpretation of the reader. (Leech, 48-9)

Therefore, by employing the above notions, this paper makes readers aware of how the strange conversions in the poetry of Brutus are used to show the bizarreness of apartheid.

3.0 Data Analysis

There is a general belief that Brutus has a great impact on African poets after him as "what (he) inspires in these poets is vision, is resilience, is the fact that poetry can be put to use against the forces of evil" (Etiowo 117). In these poems against the forces of evil lies largesse of semantically deviant or odd conversions creatively invented and used to express Brutus' dissatisfaction with the oppressive apartheid policy of South Africa.

In contrast to the position in Enotes' critical essay on Brutus which has it that "the political context of the anti-apartheid movement has limited the potential of his (Brutus') poetry" (Dennis *Brutus Essay - Critical Essays*, n. pag.), we are of the stand that Brutus' poetry is not by any measure limited in potential. The essay equally esteems *Sirens, Knuckles, Boots* as the height of Brutus' poetic achievement and that the pressures of political activity led Brutus toward a poetic style that lacked "both power and craftsmanship" (Brutus') poetry" (Dennis *Brutus Essay - Critical Essays*, n. pag.).

"A Troubadour, I Traverse All My Land," for example, is among Brutus' *Sirens* from which the poet portrays himself as one who continues to fight for his land's

freedom from this oppressive policy. In the poem, the voice proclaims a will to persistently fight oppression

... *disdaining those who banned
inquiry and movement, delighting in the test
of will when doomed by Saracened arrest,
choosing, like unarmed thumb, simply to stand.* (5-8)

As a dogged fighter, the voice delights in "the test / of will" (6-7) where *will* simply refers to the volition of the voice to continue fighting even "when doomed by Saracened arrest" (7). Here, there is a historical allusion to the Saracens who were Muslims that opposed the crusades ("Saracen," def. 2a). They unlawfully arrested and killed many of the Christian crusaders during the Middle Ages. But unlike its source, Brutus converts it to "Saracened" to function as an adjective qualifying *arrest* (*Saracened arrest*). It shows the unlawful and disturbing nature of those arrests faced by the Black South African majority just as the Saracens were a serious threat to the Christian crusaders. Brutus, we should remember, was arrested and imprisoned in Robben Island. That arrest was as a result of his criticisms of the oppressive apartheid government. Hence, the Saracens, as used here, is a symbolic representation (metonym) of the few Whites who made life unbearable for the Black majority of South Africa. Those who opposed them, like the Christian crusaders of the days of the Crusades, are the Black majority who must face arrest from the Saracens.

In such fights to stop the oppressive government, despair and despondency loom large and one begins to lose hope of ever becoming free. Thus the voice of "A Troubadour ..." ends up "quixoting till a cast-off of (his) land" (9). Like our first example, "quixoting" is an eponym converted from Cervantes' character, Don Quixote, who pursued imaginary monsters and enemies thereby making himself laughable as such pursuit is viewed as impracticable (*Don Quixote de la Mancha*). Therefore, the use of the eponym, "quixoting," is suggestive of despair and loss of hope. Such despondency cannot be ruled out even from the most dogged fighter in a world where all odds are against one. It is known that the Blacks of South Africa were without the political and economic power needed to fight the oppressive apartheid as they were denied access to political offices and good jobs.

Again, "This Sun on This Rubble After Rain," also from *Sirens* has the creative use of conversion. In the poem, the voice declares that:

*under jackboots [their] bones and spirits crunch
forced into sweat-tear-sodden slush
- ... glow-lipped by ... sudden touch:
- sun-stripped perhaps, (their) bones may later sing
or spell out some malignant nemesis
Sharpevilled to spearpoints for revenging
but [then their] pride-dumbed mouths are wide
in wordless supplication
- are grateful for the least relief from pain.* (4-12)

The conversion of the noun *Sharpeville* to a verb in "or spell out some malignant nemesis / Sharpevilled to spearpoints for revenging" (8-9) helps in the conceptualisation of Sharpeville as a place for numerous killing to reflect Sharpeville town in Eastern South Africa, a place where the massacres of 1960 and 1984-5 left about 69 and 19 Black as well as coloured rioters respectively dead (Tom Lodge). This is what is meant when we hear of the phrase, the Sharpeville massacre. It reminds us of that brutal experience where souls were sent to their early graves just for saying no to the law restricting their movement in their own land.

According to Senanu and Vincent, this verb formed "is a play on the name of the town Sharpeville, in South Africa, where ... black and coloured people, protesting against the pass laws, were shot dead by the South African police, and several others were wounded" (119). This verbalisation is odd as it is akin to saying *Benined* or *Aghored* if

an author was to form a concept from an important historical event to which the cities of Benin or Agbor could be synonymous respectively.

However, the oddity of the expression is a reflection of the bizarreness of the Sharpeville massacres. Hence, when one is Sharpevilled, one is being punished for *revenging* (fighting back) just as those who died from those massacres did so because of their riot (revenge) against the oppressive pass laws.

In "At a Funeral," we have overt cases of conversion. Some of the lines read: "Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tombed in dirt, / aborted, not by Death but carrion books of birth / Arise! The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth" (7-9). In these lines, the natural class of "frustrate" as a verb is changed. Instead, it functions as an adjective qualifying "ones." This ought to read "frustrated ones," the conventional adjective for "frustrate."

This feat helps to emphasise the message of frustration of the Blacks occasioned by the oppressive racism. Such usage is archaic, and by this archaism, Brutus can be said to have revived the language of the past, a thing often associated with creativity.

Also noteworthy is the use of the common nouns "death" and "freedom" as though they were proper nouns. Proper nouns often name persons and places or associations. Hence, we can infer that the use of death and freedom as proper nouns personalises these terms and brings to fore, the heightening effect of death in the poem. Freedom from oppression is the utmost message in Brutus' poetry, and as such, we see the reason why it is treated as a proper noun. Similarly, the treatment of *death* as a proper noun equally informs us of the poet's message against the numerous deaths caused by the oppressive policy in the country.

"Nithsong: City," also from *Sirens*, is equally replete with the use of conversion. There, the voice says, "sleep well, my love, sleep well: / the harbour lights glaze over restless docks, / police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets" (1-3). The use of cockroach in "police cars cockroach through the tunnel streets" (3) is a typical example of function conversion. Instead of choosing verbs as *move* or *run*, the noun *cockroach* has been verbalised to give the notion of the hostile posture of those cars. The presence of those cars is likened to that of a cockroach which evokes annoyance and disturbance as well as unruly interruption or intrusion whenever it is found around the home. Hence, the voice's use of cockroach as a verb is in its need to show the disturbance the people feel whenever those White South African police cars were around.

"Kneeling before you in a Gesture" is yet another poem in *Sirens* with the use of conversion. An interesting example is from the following lines:

We froze to an eternal image became unpersoned and
unageing symbols of humble vulnerable wonder
enfolded by a bayed and resolute maternalness. (18-1)

Here, "Unpersoned" is converted from *unperson*: "a person whose existence is officially denied or ignored" ("Unperson"). Such a conversion is a way of conceptualising the depersonalisation of Black South Africans resulting from the injustice and brutality from apartheid. Halize van Vuuren writes that "Dennis Brutus' *Letters to Martha* (1968), *Sirens Knuckles Boots* (in *A Simple Lust*, 1973) foregrounds disintegration of the self, or depersonalisation" (44). This *depersonalisation* (to deprive a person of individual or personal qualities) Vauren also calls *dissociation* which he says "is typified by a short attention span, an unreliable memory, a *grammatical and syntactical deterioration of language, the creation of neologisms (to the point where a 'neo-language' comes into being)* and increasing lack of logical thought processes" (our emphasis) (45). 'Neo-language' as Vauren has it is what results from the deteriorating experience of the South African apartheid. It leads to a point where memory fails and *anti-language* or neo-language comes into being. But this neo-language is to x-ray the unusual nature of apartheid.

In the same vein, the use of "maternalness" in "... vulnerable wonder / enfolded by a bayed and resolute maternalness" (20-21) is a nonce word from *maternal*. Instead of

using the noun derivative of maternal, *maternalism*, the voice converts *maternal* to *maternalness* to draw attention to the protection needed by the oppressed Blacks of South Africa. This usage is equally to achieve an end rhyme with *symbols* in line 19 of the poem.

From *A Simple Lust*, we have "For a Dead African" which gives us lines like
*We have no heroes and no wars
only victims of a sickly state
succumbing to the variegated sores
that flower under lashing rains of hate.* (1-4)

where "lashing," a noun meaning, a whipping, flogging or scolding ("Lashing," defs. 1 and 2) is converted into an adjective to qualify "rains" in "lashing rains" (4). Rains are supposed to be symbols of life, but that they are now *lashing* (whipping) is ironical just as the presence of the few immigrant Whites in South Africa became threatening to the Blacks. A stranger ought to be under the command of the natives, but when the reverse is the case, rain becomes lashing as the minor Whites reduced the Blacks, original owners of South Africa, to nothing. This is a contrast from what is expected in South Africa.

In fact, Kontein Trinya comments on the use of binary opposites in Brutus' poetry. According to him,

poetry provided the prominent platform from which Dennis Brutus staged his agitations against oppression. The poet's vision of South Africa was that of a conflict society, comprising a dissimilar but complemental [sic] pair. Accordingly, one often finds in the poems several levels of social oppositions that the poet describes, oppositions between apartheid on the one hand, and its several oppressed victims on the other hand. For example, oppositions in his images, in his lyricism, in his conception of his role as an artist, et cetera (2).

Similarly, the same poem, "For a Dead African," has:

*We have no battles and no fights
for history to record with trite remark
only captives killed on eyeless nights
and accidental dyings in the dark* (5-8)

In which "dyings" is from the present participle of the verb "die" (dying). The oddity here is in the strange conversion of *dying*, a verb, into a plural noun (*dyings*). This category shift is equally a way of conceptualising the continuous posture of death condemned in the poem. A conventional description would have been "accidental death," but the nominalisation of *dying* x-rays the recurring nature of those deaths in South Africa during the days of apartheid. This is in consonance to P. Suneetha who asserts that "Dennis Brutus ... was subjected to torture by a cruel regime. His writing is full of images of love contrasted with images of death" in the apartheid days of South Africa (401).

This same conceptualisation is achieved in "Celebrate the Fierce Joy of Victory" from *A Simple Lust* in which *unexiling* is coined from *exile*. The noun, *unexiling*, is a conversion from the verb form of *exile* to conceptualise the day that those exiled or banished from South Africa shall be *free* to return to their land. The lines of this poem read thus:

*Celebrate the fierce joy of victory
and necessary wounding
that the day may sooner come
of our unexiling:
of our return.* (1-5)

If the voice had used only the phrase "of our return," (5) the message would not have had the same effect without a reference to *exile* and the best possible way to express this is to convert *exile* to *unexiling* - the opposite of exile in Brutus' conception.

Similarly, the lines of "Landscape of My Young World" refer to the images of *soft hills and huts* from which the voice runs. The lines state,

*Landscape of my young world!
Land of soft hills and huts
of aloes and grey-green dreaming firs;
these are the images to lacerate,
against which I glass myself in distance
or a rebellious walling of reserve. (1-6).*

In these lines, the category of *glass* is shifted from that of a nominal to a verbal. *Glass* is used as a verb here to give a mental picture of the fact that the voice, though protected from oppression in the land as a result of distance (Brutus published *A Simple Lust* abroad in 1973), can still see it. He explains the essence of this *glassing* in the succeeding line as "... a rebellious walling of reserve" (6) to bring to fore the fact that his *walling* (self-protection) is "of reserve," that is, to reserve himself for greater days ahead. This is to clear the possibility of any misgiving about the likes of Brutus, who after the days of Robben Island, lived most of their lives in exile. *Walling*, in this case, is a verb which is converted to a nominal to conceptualise the voice's distancing of self from South Africa. The voice sees his walling as a way of going out of the battlefield to prepare for the final war against the oppressive apartheid.

In *Letters*, "Suddenly One Is Tangled" is equally noteworthy for its use of conversion. Being titled as the third letter to Martha, its opening stanza reads:

*Suddenly one is tangled
in a mesh of possibilities:
notions cobweb around your head,
tendrils sprout from your guts in a hundred
directions: (1-5)*

Here, the use of "cobweb" in "notions cobweb around your head" (3) is an obvious case of function conversion. Cobweb ought to be used as a noun to mean a web spun by certain spiders. It could also mean something like a cobweb as in its flimsiness or ability to trap. But that it is converted to a verb is a way of showing that those notions (possibly of the whole process of apartheid) are irritant and disturbing to the head (brain) of these oppressed people. These disturbing notions are those bothering on the essence of the brutality and killings expressed in the poem. Thus, we find the voice asking lots of rhetorical questions:

*why did this man stab this man for that man?
what was the nature of the emotion
and how did it grow?
was this the reason for a warder's unmotivated
senseless brutality?
by what shrewdness was it instigated? (6-11)*

These rhetorical questions raised in the poem bare the irrationality in the whole system of apartheid and as such, lead to a situation where notions *cobweb* around one's head. The questions show us that the whole process of apartheid is "unmotivated" (9). This odd adjective, *unmotivated*, converted from the noun, *motive*, sums up apartheid as one without motive - reason or cause. Hence, apartheid, and any other oppressive government around our world, is senseless.

4.0 Conclusion

From the above, it is shown that Brutus' poetry is not just about protest. It is equally rich in the use of oddities in the form of conversions. These features are woven into his poetry to reflect the bizarreness of the oppressive apartheid regime of South

Africa. They help to highlight the poet's message: apartheid is odd. The oddities in the use of these features help readers in appreciating the need for freedom for all humans around our globe.

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