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Transitivity and Political Satire in EmekaNwabueze's*A Parliament of Vultures*

by

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Abstract

This study examined the linguistic encoding of political satire in Emeka Nwabueze's *A Parliament of Vultures* through the lens of M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, with particular focus on the transitivity system of the ideational metafunction. Adopting a qualitative analytical approach, selected clauses from the play's dialogue were systematically analysed to identify dominant process types, participant roles, and syntactic patterns. The findings revealed that material processes overwhelmingly structured the speech of corrupt political actors, construing them as predatory agents who manipulated institutions and individuals. Relational processes functioned to legitimise self-ascribed status and authority, while verbal processes parodied institutional discourse and exposed the hollow performativity of democratic procedures. In contrast, morally positioned characters deployed mental, verbal, and interrogative structures to enact reflection, resistance, and ethical critique. The study further demonstrated how foregrounding strategies, particularly syntactic

parallelism, thematic fronting, and rhetorical interrogation, intensified the satirical force of the text. The paper extended existing scholarship beyond thematic interpretations and established transitivity analysis as a precise tool for uncovering the linguistic mechanics of political critique in Nigerian drama by foregrounding grammar as a site of ideological construction.

Keywords: Political discourse, Syntactic foregrounding, Satirical language, Systemic Functional Grammar, Transitivity.

Introduction

The relationship between language and power is one of the most productive areas of inquiry in modern linguistics. Critical discourse analysis, stylistics, and systemic functional linguistics have all, in their different ways, sought to illuminate how grammatical choices are never neutral but always encode ideological positions, social relations, and rhetorical intentions. In the domain of dramatic literature, this observation carries particular force: the playwright's choice of syntax is inseparable from character, theme, and dramatic effect. How a character speaks, the clause structures they habitually employ, the process types that dominate their speech, the circumstantial elements they include or omit is as much a characterisation strategy as the explicit content of what they say.Emeka Nwabueze's*A Parliament of Vultures* is a play whose language has been noted but not yet systematically analysed. Anyachonkeya (2011) draws attention to the rich linguistic repertoire of the play, observing that Nwabueze deploys language purposefully to unmask the corruption and hypocrisy of his political characters (p. 127). However, Anyachonkeya's analysis, while suggestive, remains largely thematic rather than systematically linguistic. Aniago (2017) notes the aesthetic significance of Nwabueze's choice and arrangement of words (p. 68), and Okonkwo (2023) observes that the playwright gets his inspiration from society and presents it in such a way that people's consciousness would be awakened for corrections to be made (p. 24). Yet neither scholar subjects the play's language to the kind of detailed syntactic and grammatical analysis it merits. This paper seeks to address that gap.

The theoretical framework adopted is M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), specifically the Transitivity System as the primary realisation of the Ideational Metafunction of language. According to Halliday and Matthiessen

(2014), transitivity is the overall grammatical resource for construing experience: it specifies the different types of process recognised in the language and the structure by which they are expressed (p. 212). The six process types of the transitivity system, material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, and existential each carry distinct semantic and ideological weight. Identifying which process types dominate a character's speech, and how participants are assigned to those processes, reveals the underlying world-view that the language construes. This framework is particularly suited to the analysis of satirical drama, where the gap between what characters claim and what they do is systematically encoded in language.

Statement of the Problem

The relationship between language and power has long been recognised as a central problematic in modern linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and systemic functional linguistics. Within the Nigerian literary tradition, the drama of political satire occupies a prominent and socially significant position, with playwrights deploying language as a precision instrument for the critique of governance failure, institutional corruption, and the betrayal of democratic ideals. This play stands among the most linguistically rich and politically incisive works in this tradition, offering a sustained satirical portrait of legislative corruption in an unnamed but unmistakably Nigerian political context. Despite the play's acknowledged significance in Nigerian dramatic literature, it has been subjected predominantly to sociological, Marxist, and postcolonial analyses that, while valuable in their own right, have consistently operated at the level of thematic content rather than at the level of linguistic form. The consequence of this methodological limitation is that the specific syntactic and grammatical mechanisms through which the play's political critique is encoded have remained largely unexamined.

Existing scholarship on the play reflects this critical gap in revealing ways. Anyachonkeya (2011) draws attention to the linguistic richness of the play and observes that Nwabueze deploys language purposefully to unmask corruption and hypocrisy, yet the analysis offered remains thematic rather than systematically linguistic. Aniago (2017) notes the aesthetic significance of the playwright's word choices and arrangements without subjecting those choices to grammatical scrutiny. Okonkwo (2023) recognises the play's capacity to awaken

political consciousness without explaining the linguistic mechanisms through which that awakening is achieved. The critical literature has, in effect, described the what of the play's language while leaving the how, the specific grammatical choices that constitute its satirical and ideological force, largely unanalysed. This represents a substantive gap in the scholarship, for it is precisely at the level of syntax that political satire achieves its most precise and durable effects.

The problem this study addresses is therefore twofold. Firstly, there is an absence of systematic linguistic analysis of A Parliament of Vultures using a rigorous grammatical framework capable of accounting for the ideological dimensions of syntactic choice. Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, with its foundational claim that the clause is simultaneously a unit of experiential, interpersonal, and textual meaning, provides exactly such a framework. The transitivity system of the ideational metafunction, through its categorisation of process types, participant roles, and circumstantial elements, provides a precise analytical instrument for mapping the ideological orientations encoded in a character's habitual syntactic choices. Yet this instrument has not been applied to Nwabueze's work in any sustained or systematic manner.Secondly, there is a broader methodological problem in the study of Nigerian political drama: the discipline has not yet fully developed the tools for reading how satirical language works at the level of grammar rather than merely at the level of plot, character, or theme. The existing studies of political satire in Nigerian drama have produced valuable accounts of what the plays say about corruption, power, and democratic failure, but they have not adequately explained how the language of those plays enacts its critique at the syntactic level. This study addresses both the specific gap in Nwabueze scholarship and the broader methodological gap in the linguistic analysis of Nigerian political drama by demonstrating that transitivity analysis, combined with foregrounding theory, provides a comprehensive account of how grammar functions as the primary instrument of political satire in A Parliament of Vultures.

Objectives

1. To analyse the dominant process types within Halliday's transitivity system as deployed in the speech of corrupt and morally virtuous characters in *A Parliament of Vultures*, with a view to establishing how grammatical choices

construct contrasting ideological orientations of predatory agency and moral resistance.

2. To examine how relational and verbal processes in the play's dialogue function to encode self-ascribed authority, institutional legitimacy, and the satirical subversion of democratic performativity, thereby illuminating the syntactic mechanisms through which political satire operates in Nigerian dramatic literature.

3. To investigate the foregrounding strategies, specifically syntactic parallelism, thematic fronting, and rhetorical clause structures, employed by Nwabueze to intensify satirical distance and to demonstrate how these strategies constitute grammar as a site of ideological critique in postcolonial African drama.

Research Questions

1.What are the dominant transitivity process types — material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural, and existential — in the speech of the corrupt parliamentarians and the morally virtuous characters in A Parliament of Vultures, and how do these distributions construct opposing ideological orientations of predatory agency and ethical resistance?

2. In what ways do relational and verbal process structures in the play's dialogue function to legitimise self-ascribed political authority and to expose the hollow performativity of democratic institutional discourse as part of Nwabueze's satirical strategy?

3. How do the foregrounding strategies of syntactic parallelism, thematic fronting, and rhetorical interrogation intensify the satirical force of the dramatic text, and what do these strategies reveal about the relationship between syntactic choice and ideological critique in postcolonial Nigerian political drama?

Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), developed by M.A.K. Halliday, is a theory of language as a social semiotic system. Unlike generative grammars that treat language as a system of formal rules, SFG views language as a resource for making meaning in social contexts. Halliday argues that language is organised around three metafunctions: the ideational (which construes experience and the

world), the interpersonal (which enacts social relations and exchanges), and the textual (which organises discourse into coherent messages) (Halliday&Matthiessen, 2014, p. 30). These three metafunctions operate simultaneously in every clause, making SFG a particularly rich framework for literary analysis.

The Ideational Metafunction, which is the primary focus of this paper, is realised grammatically through the Transitivity System. According to Halliday (1994, p. 106), transitivity is a system for representing patterns of experience: it construes the world into a manageable set of process types by encoding who does what to whom, in what circumstances. The six process types, as identified by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, pp. 213–320), are: (1) Material processes, which represent doing and happening, and involve participants called Actor and Goal; (2) Mental processes, which represent sensing, thinking, feeling, and perceiving, and involve a Senser and a Phenomenon; (3) Relational processes, which represent being and having, and encode identity, attribution, or possession; (4) Verbal processes, which represent saying and communicating, and involve a Sayer and a Receiver; (5) Behavioural processes, which represent physiological and psychological behaviours such as weeping, laughing, or staring; and (6) Existential processes, which assert the existence of a phenomenon.

Each process type is associated with specific syntactic structures, participant roles, and typical tense patterns, making it possible to identify process types systematically in a text. As Halliday (1994, p. 101) states, transitivity signifies the way the writer sees the world around them: it is a grammatical enactment of an ideology. In literary analysis, this means that the dominance of certain process types in a character's speech is not accidental but reveals the playwright's construction of that character's relationship to the world. A character whose speech is dominated by material processes is constructed as an agent who acts on others; a character whose speech is dominated by mental processes is constructed as a reflective or sensing subject; a character whose speech is dominated by relational processes is concerned with being, having, and identifying.

The concept of foregrounding, drawn from the Prague School tradition and closely related to Halliday's framework, is also employed in this paper.

Foregrounding refers to the deliberate deviation from linguistic norms ,whether by parallelism (regularised deviation) or by outright violation (motivated deviation) for aesthetic and rhetorical effect (Leech & Short, 2007, p. 27). In dramatic dialogue, foregrounding through syntactic repetition, unusual clause structures, or rhetorical questioning alerts the audience to significance and creates satirical distance. As observed by scholars who have applied SFG to literary drama, the transitivity choices of a playwright are the linguistic substance of characterisation, theme, and worldview (Thompson, 2014, p. 89). The combination of transitivity analysis and foregrounding theory provides a comprehensive linguistic account of Nwabueze's satirical language.

Synopsis of the Play

The play is set in an unnamed but unmistakably Nigerian legislative assembly. The principal characters include the corrupt parliamentarians, Chief Habamero (the Speaker), Madam Omeaku (an illiterate former street vendor elected to parliament), Mr. Brown, and Rev. Jossy and the principled opposition led by Dr. Parkers and Mr. Otobo. The play dramatises the corrupt faction's systematic campaign to seize total control of parliamentary institutions, loot public funds, and eliminate legitimate opposition. Aniago et al. (2021) describe how Madam Omeaku rose from an illiterate, low-class, street-side food-and-liquor vendor to a profligate parliamentarian through dubious political alliances, embodying the play's central metaphor of the vulture (p. 58). The play ends with a revolutionary uprising of university students and militant youths, who storm the parliament and tie up the corrupt legislators.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopts a **qualitative, text-driven analytical design.**

Data Source and Sampling: The primary data consist of selected excerpts from the play. The unit of analysis is the **clause**. A **purposive sampling technique** is employed to select clauses from politically salient scenes, particularly

(i) parliamentary debates,
(ii) conspiratorial interactions among corrupt legislators, and
(iii) confrontational exchanges involving morally oppositional characters.

These excerpts are selected based on their **discursive density**, that is, their capacity to foreground ideological tension, power relations, and satirical intent.

Analytical Procedure: The analysis follows a systematic four-stage procedure:

(i) **Extraction**: Relevant dialogue segments are identified and segmented into clauses.
(ii) **Classification**: Each clause is coded according to process type and participant configuration using SFL categories.
(iii) **Pattern Identification**: Recurring transitivity patterns are identified across character groups (e.g., corrupt vs. morally positioned characters).
(iv) **Interpretation**: The linguistic patterns are interpreted in relation to their **ideological and satirical functions,** with attention to how syntactic choices construct agency, authority, and resistance.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Material Processes and the Construction of Predatory Agency

Material processes are the syntactic backbone of the corrupt characters' speech in the play. The dominant participants in material processes are the Actor (the one who performs the action) and the Goal (the entity towards which the action is directed). Where a powerful Actor acts on a Goal that has little or no agency of its own, the clause construes a relationship of domination. A close analysis of Habamero's speech reveals a consistent pattern of material process clauses in which the corrupt parliamentarians are cast as powerful Actors and public resources, legitimate processes, or other characters are cast as Goals. Consider Habamero's statement to his co-conspirators: "With this method, we can control parliamentary decisions, and deal with Dr. Parkers and his group. Idiot. He doesn't know that the place for academics is in the university. And when we incapacitate him, Mr. Otobo, his accomplice, is reduced to nothing. Agreed?" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 30).The transitivity analysis of this compound clause is instructive:

We can control Parliamentary decisions

Clause Type	Process Type	Actor	Goal
Declarative	Material	we (Habamero et al.)	parliamentary decisions

Deal with Dr. Parkers Material we (implicit) Dr. Parkers and his group

Clause Type	Process Type	Actor	Goal
Imperative	Material	we (implicit)	Dr. Parkers and his group

The Actor 'we' appears in both clauses, establishing the corrupt faction as a collective, powerful agent. The Goals, 'parliamentary decisions', and 'Dr. Parkers and his group' are entirely passive. Parliamentary decisions should, by democratic logic, emerge from deliberation.Here, they are repositioned as objects of manipulation. Dr. Parkers, a legitimate parliamentarian, is likewise reduced to the object of an action 'deal with', a euphemistic material process that encodes the threat of political elimination. The syntactic structure thus, enacts the ideological reality that the paper is critiquing: the democratic process has become an instrument of domination.

This pattern is repeated inHabamero's further instruction: "We can control parliamentary decisions, and deal with Dr. Parkers and his group. Idiot. He doesn't know that the place for academics is in the university. And when we incapacitate him, Mr. Otobo, his accomplice, is reduced to nothing" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 30). The material process "incapacitate" is clinically transitive: Habamero's faction is Actor; Dr. Parkers is Goal. The relational clause that follows, "Mr. Otobo is reduced to nothing" uses a passive construction in which the Agent is deleted, softening the explicit threat while nonetheless asserting its consequences. This syntactic manoeuvre, the passive construction as a strategy of oblique threat is a characteristic feature of the corrupt characters' language. They speak of their actions directly when addressing their conspirators, and obliquely when the consequences of those actions might expose them.

Madam Omeaku's speech reveals an equally significant pattern of material processes, though oriented towards acquisition rather than suppression. Her declaration "Now that God has buttered my bread, I will never allow myself to be poor again. Not in this world, nor even the world to come. I'll make enough money to last me two lifetimes" (as cited in Ezeugo, 2021, p. 2) is analysed below:

Clause	**Process Type**	**Actor**	**Goal/Circumstance**
God has buttered my bread	Material	God	my bread (metaphorical).
I will never allow myself	Material	I	myself.
to be poor	Relational	—	poor (Attribute).
I'll make enough money	Material	I	enough money.

The opening clause appropriates a divine Actor, "God has buttered my bread" to legitimise what is in fact political corruption. By invoking God as the Actor, Madam Omeaku displaces her own agency in the process of enrichment and frames her corrupt gains as divine provision. This is syntactically shrewd. It depoliticises the acquisition by theologising it. The subsequent clauses return the agency explicitly to Madam Omeaku herself. The repeated first-person Actor "I" in "I will never allow" and "I'll make" enacts an assertive, acquisitive subjectivity. The material process "make money" is explicitly transitive, with money as the Goal of Madam Omeaku's future action. The accumulation of future-tense material process clauses constructs Madam Omeaku as a figure defined entirely by her intention to take: her world-view, syntactically expressed, is one of endless acquisition.

This pattern of material process domination in the corrupt characters' speech contrasts sharply with the speech of Dr. Parkers, whose utterances are characterised by a higher frequency of mental and verbal processes, sensing, reflecting, and proposing that construe him as a deliberating, conscientious subject rather than a predatory agent. This syntactic contrast is itself a dimension of the play's characterisation: Nwabueze constructs virtue as reflective and corruption as acquisitive, at the level of grammar.

Relational and Verbal Processes

While material processes construct the corrupt characters as agents of action, relational processes construct them as beings of status. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) identify two main sub-types of relational process. They are attributive ("X is a") and identifying ("X is Y"), in which either a quality is attributed to an entity or two entities are equated (p. 261). In the play, the relational processes in Madam Omeaku's speech are particularly revealing of how her entry into the political class has transformed her self-conception.Her rebuke of her husband, "Is that how you talk to an Honourable member of parliament?" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 13), encodes an identifying relational process in the form of an interrogative. The entity "I" (implied) is identified as "an Honourable member of parliament", a nominal group that carries the full weight of institutional authority. The rhetorical question form performs a double function. (i) It demands recognition of the relational identity she is asserting, and (ii) It simultaneously expresses contempt for the interlocutor's failure to grant that recognition. The circumstantial element "in parliament" further locates the relational claim within the institutional framework from which Madam Omeaku derives her newly claimed status. The syntactic structure of the question, interrogative mood rather than declarative shifts the burden of compliance onto the interlocutor, enacting the power relation the clause is also describing.

This pattern is reinforced in Madam Omeaku's boast to her husband about her material acquisitions. She reminds him that within a single year of becoming a parliamentarian, she has acquired houses in choice areas of the city, expensive cars, and overseas holidays, while he, after over thirty years of civil service, cannot afford any of these (Aniago, 2017, p. 72). The relational processes in these utterances, "I have acquired", "I have" work in concert with the material process acquisitions to construct a contrast between her new relational identity (wealthy, powerful, propertied) and her husband's relational identity (poor, immobile, powerless). Nwabueze's satirical strategy operates precisely at this level of syntax.The relational clauses expose the moral bankruptcy of the criteria by which political success is measured.

Verbal processes, which represent acts of saying, are equally significant in the play. Chief Habamero's speech is saturated with verbal process clauses, "I'm pleased to inform you", "I wish to announce", "I hereby declare" that mimic the

performative language of legitimate democratic institutions. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) note that verbal processes project reported speech and thus have the capacity to frame, interpret, or distort the meaning of others' words (p. 299). Habamero's use of formal parliamentary verbal process structures is deeply ironic.The formal register of institutional communication is deployed to authorise corrupt decisions. The mismatch between the performative solemnity of the verbal process construction and the corrupt content of what is being announced is a primary source of the play's satirical effect. As Affiah (2012) observes, the play is a hilarious political satire that takes a swipe at the abysmal performance of the legislature (p. 378); the linguistic irony of Habamero'sperformative language is central to that satirical hilarity.

The announcement: "Approved?" followed by "All. Approved!" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 30) reduces the entire deliberative apparatus of parliamentary democracy to a two-word exchange. The interrogative "Approved?" is a verbal process elliptically structured, eliding the Sayer, the full proposition, and all deliberative context. The response "All. Approved!" is equally compressed.No Actor, no Goal, no deliberation, just the performed outcome of a predetermined decision. The syntactic compression itself is satirical: the very brevity of the exchange enacts the absence of genuine deliberation. What should be a verbal process of complex parliamentary discourse has been reduced to its hollow performative shell.

The Rhetorical Syntax of Moral Conscience

If, the corrupt characters' speech is dominated by material acquisitions, relational status claims, and parodied verbal performances, the speech of the morally virtuous characters, particularly Mr. Omeaku and Dr. Parkers is syntactically very different. Their utterances are characterised by rhetorical questions, imperative clauses, and carefully structured parallel syntax. These choices do not merely reflect different personalities. They enact different relationships to power, knowledge, and ethical commitment.

Mr. Omeaku's denunciation of the corrupt parliamentarians is the play's most explosively direct moment of moral confrontation. His declaration: "So this is what you people are doing? This is the nation's parliament at work. Do you know what you people are? You are vultures! This is a parliament of vultures. Eating my nation to death, leaving nothing for the masses to quench their thirst" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 31) repays close syntactic analysis.

Do you know what you people are?

Clause Type	Function	Process
Interrogative	Rhetorical challenge	Mental (Senser: you)

You are vultures!

Clause Type	Function	Process
Declarative	Identification/Accusation	Relational (identifying)

This is a parliament of vultures.

Clause Type	Function	Process
Declarative	Institutional indictment	Relational (identifying)

Eating my nation to death...

Clause Type	Function	Process
Non-finite clause	Elaboration of action	Material (Actor: you)

leaving nothing for the masses..

Clause Type	Function	Process
Non-finite clause	Consequence	Material (Actor: you)

The opening rhetorical question, “Do you know what you people are?” is a mental process clause in interrogative mood. Its rhetorical function is not to elicit information (Habamero and his faction certainly know what they are doing) but to perform a challenge and to position the speaker as the one who possesses moral knowledge. The mental process “know” assigns the Senser role to the corrupt parliamentarians and challenges their consciousness: in a play that is partly about the normalisation of corruption, this challenge to moral awareness is itself a political act.

The two identifying relational process clauses that follow, “You are vultures” and “This is a parliament of vultures” are among the most syntactically significant in the entire play, for they supply the text’s own title and governing metaphor. In SFG, identifying relational processes equate two entities: Carrier and Attribute or Token and Value (Halliday&Matthiessen, 2014, p. 263). Here, “you” (the corrupt parliamentarians) is equated with “vultures”, and “this parliament” is equated

with "a parliament of vultures". These are not merely metaphorical embellishments; they are syntactic identifications that ontologically redefine the corrupt politicians. The parliament ceases to be a legitimate democratic institution and is redefined as a site of predation. Aniago (2017) notes the aesthetic significance of Nwabueze's word arrangement in constructing the governing political metaphor of the play (p. 68); the syntactic analysis reveals exactly how that metaphor is enacted grammatically.

The two non-finite participial clauses that close the speech, "Eating my nation to death" and "leaving nothing for the masses to quench their thirst" are both material process clauses with the corrupt parliamentarians as implicit Actors and the nation and the masses as Goals. Their non-finite form (participial '-ing' clauses) allows them to function as elaborations of the identifying relational clauses that precede them: they specify what the vultures do. The syntactic parallelism of the two participial clauses, both beginning with a transitive participle followed by a Goal and a circumstantial element creates a rhythmic intensity that heightens the emotional force of the indictment. The rhetorical accumulation of structures, from the mental interrogative to the identifying relational clauses to the parallel material participial clauses, is itself a satirical strategy: syntax becomes the instrument of condemnation.

Dr. Parkers' speech patterns further exemplify the play's syntactic construction of moral virtue. His utterances frequently employ the interpersonal resources of modality, "ought," "should," "must" which Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) identify as expressions of obligation and inclination within the interpersonal metafunction (p. 147). These modal expressions construe Dr. Parkers as a subject oriented towards duty and ethical obligation, in sharp contrast to the acquisitive "will" and "shall" that dominate the corrupt characters' expressions of future intention. The syntactic contrast between obligation-modality (Dr. Parkers) and volitional-modality (the corrupt parliamentarians) is a grammatical encoding of the play's moral landscape.

Foregrounding, Syntactic Inversion, and Satirical Distance

Foregrounding, as Leech and Short (2007) define it, involves the exploitation of linguistic deviation and parallelism to create aesthetic and rhetorical significance (p. 27). In the play, Nwabueze employs foregrounding strategically to produce

satirical distance. The audience is made to notice the language as language, to become aware of the gap between what it says and what it does. Three principal foregrounding strategies are identifiable: thematic fronting, syntactic parallelism, and ironic lexical register.

Thematic fronting, in SFG, refers to placing in the Theme position (the initial position of the clause) an element that would not normally appear there (Halliday&Matthiessen, 2014, p. 89). In the play's parliamentary scenes, Nwabueze repeatedly fronts circumstantial elements, particularly place and manner adjuncts in Habamero's formal announcements: "In this august assembly", "In the interest of the nation" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 24). These fronted circumstantial elements mimic the rhetorical register of genuine parliamentary oratory. Their satirical function depends on their contrast with the content of what follows: the solemn institutional frame ("in this august assembly") is ironically juxtaposed with the corrupt purpose the clause actually serves. The thematic fronting thus creates a satirical gap between the formal and the actual, between the institutional register and the criminal act.

Syntactic parallelism is deployed most powerfully in the play's moments of moral confrontation. Mr. Omeaku's speech contains several instances of parallel clause structures that accumulate satirical force: "You people are condoning evil in this parliament. You people are elected to pilot the affairs of our land, not to destroy families" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 40). The repeated Subject Verb Complement structure, anchored by the same Subject "You people", creates a syntactic insistence that formally enacts the accusation being made. The parallel structure forces the audience to hear each clause as an intensification of the previous one: the anaphoric repetition of "You people" is both a rhetorical device and a grammatical choice, since in SFG terms the repeated nominal group "You people" is reassigned the role of Actor in each successive clause, reinforcing the corrupt parliamentarians' agency in the wrongs being enumerated.

The ironic lexical register of the play constitutes a third foregrounding strategy. The corrupt parliamentarians' use of formal institutional language, "honorable", "august assembly", "in the national interest" alongside their transparently corrupt acts creates a sustained irony that is both lexical and syntactic. Okonkwo (2023) observes that Nwabueze presents the play's political realities in such a way that people's consciousness would be awakened for corrections to be made

(p. 24). This awakening is achieved, linguistically, through the sustained irony of register: the formal syntax of democratic legitimacy is placed in the mouths of those who are systematically undermining democracy. The audience is forced to hear the gap between register and reality, between the syntactic performance of legitimacy and the material practice of corruption. As Anyachonkeya (2011) notes, Nwabueze deploys language purposefully to dramatise corruption and hypocrisy (p. 127); the transitivity analysis reveals exactly how this purposeful deployment operates at the level of grammar.

Nwabueze also employs syntactic inversion for satirical effect. Madam Omeaku's declaration "I married your father when my eyes were not yet open" (Nwabueze, 2000, p. 8) contains a subordinate temporal clause in which the circumstantial element "when my eyes were not yet open" operates metaphorically to denote political ignorance. The syntax of the sentence places the material process "I married" in the main clause, with the now-regretted act as the Goal, while the temporal circumstance retrospectively reframes the act as one performed in ignorance. The structural choice to embed the moral evaluation in a subordinate temporal clause rather than a main clause attenuates its force as statement while simultaneously making it available for satirical reading: the audience understands that what Madam Omeaku is confessing, even as she dismisses it, is the corruption of her values by political power.

Discussion

The transitivity analysis conducted in this study reveals that this play is a linguistically sophisticated work in which syntactic choices are systematically aligned with the play's political and moral vision. The dominance of material processes in the corrupt characters' speech constructs them as predatory agents whose relationship to the world is one of continuous taking and acting-upon. The relational processes in their speech construct their self-appropriated status as the only legitimate form of identity. The verbal processes they deploy mimic and corrupt the performative language of democratic institutions. By contrast, the morally virtuous characters employ mental and verbal processes oriented towards reflection, obligation, and resistance, and deploy the rhetorical resources of interrogative and imperative mood to challenge and confront.

These findings are consistent with the broader pattern identified by Halliday (1994, p. 101) in which the clause is a means by which speakers and writers

construe their ideological orientation to the world: the grammar of experience is always also a grammar of power.

In the play, Nwabueze's grammar construes two fundamentally opposed orientations.They are predatory materialism of the corrupt politicians and the moral consciousness of those who resist them. The syntactic distinction between these orientations is not merely a stylistic feature of the play but is integral to its social critique.Anyachonkeya's (2011) observation that Nwabueze deploys language purposefully to expose the activities of corrupt politicians (p. 127) is confirmed by the analysis: the purposefulness is syntactic, not merely thematic. The critical literature on the play has largely read it for its content, its satirical portrait of corruption, its characterisation of political predation, its revolutionary resolution while the syntactic mechanisms that produce these meanings have remained largely unexplored. This study has demonstrated that a transitivity analysis not only deepens the reading of those themes but reveals dimensions of meaning that would not be visible at the level of plot or characterisation alone.

The application of Halliday's SFG to Nigerian dramatic texts is itself a methodological contribution of this study. The existing scholarship on the play has employed sociological, Marxist, and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, all productive but all operating at the level of social and political analysis rather than linguistic analysis. The SFG framework, with its systematic attention to the grammar of experience, provides a complementary and in some ways more precise instrument for reading the play's critical vision, because it grounds that vision in the specific syntactic choices that constitute the dramatic text.

Implications

The findings of this study carry significant theoretical implications for the intersection of Systemic Functional Linguistics, stylistics, and postcolonial literary criticism. By demonstrating that the transitivity system of Halliday's SFG constitutes a precise and productive framework for the analysis of political satire in dramatic literature, the study extends the theoretical reach of SFG beyond its predominant application in educational discourse analysis, media studies, and non-literary text analysis. It establishes that the ideational metafunction, and specifically the transitivity system's categorisation of process types and participant roles, provides a theoretically grounded basis for reading literary

characterisation, ideological construction, and satirical effect as grammatical phenomena rather than merely rhetorical or thematic ones. The study's demonstration that material processes construct predatory agency, relational processes encode appropriated authority, and verbal processes enact the satirical subversion of institutional legitimacy offers a theoretically coherent account of the grammar ideology relationship in literary discourse. This contributes to the theoretical conversation initiated by Halliday's (1994) claim that grammar is never innocent, that every syntactic choice is a choice about how to construe the world, by extending that claim into the domain of dramatic satire and showing how a playwright's grammatical choices constitute an ideological position, not merely a stylistic one. The integration of foregrounding theory from the Prague School tradition with SFG's transitivity framework also demonstrates the theoretical productivity of cross-paradigm approaches in literary linguistics, providing a model for future studies that seek to account for both the grammatical and the aesthetic dimensions of literary language.

Methodologically, the study challenges and enriches the prevailing approaches to the analysis of Nigerian dramatic literature by demonstrating that close grammatical analysis at the clause level is not merely a supplementary technique but can constitute the primary interpretive instrument. The qualitative, text-driven analytical design adopted in this study, grounded in purposive sampling of politically salient scenes and systematic transitivity coding, provides a replicable methodological framework for the analysis of other texts in the Nigerian political drama tradition, from Wole Soyinka to Nwabueze's contemporaries. The study's demonstration that syntactic patterns, the distribution of process types, the assignment of participant roles, the deployment of foregrounding strategies, carry interpretive weight equivalent to plot, character, and theme has implications for the teaching and analysis of African dramatic literature at all levels. It suggests that literary educators and critics who restrict their analytical attention to content, theme, and social context are working with an unnecessarily limited interpretive toolkit. The systematic integration of grammatical analysis into the reading of literary drama opens new avenues for research into how specific syntactic choices produce specific ideological and satirical effects, and the methodology developed in this study can be adapted to any dramatic text where the relationship between language and power is a significant dimension of meaning.

Beyond the theoretical and methodological domains, this study has significant sociocultural and political implications, particularly within the Nigerian context. By providing a rigorous linguistic account of how the language of political corruption is constructed in Nwabueze's play, how it grammatically enacts predatory agency, appropriates institutional authority, and corrupts democratic performativity, the study offers resources for a more critical and linguistically informed engagement with political discourse in contemporary Nigeria. The finding that the corrupt parliamentarians' speech is characterised by material processes of domination and acquisition, relational processes of status appropriation, and verbal processes that mimic while subverting democratic legitimacy constitutes a grammar of political corruption that has clear resonances beyond the dramatic text. Political language in real-world Nigerian legislative contexts frequently employs identical syntactic strategies: the performance of institutional authority through formal register, the encoding of predatory acquisition through first-person material process constructions, and the deployment of passive constructions to distribute agency obliquely. The play's satirical power resides precisely in its grammatical faithfulness to the syntactic texture of actual political discourse. By making the grammar of political corruption visible, the study contributes to the broader project of critical language awareness: equipping citizens, scholars, and cultural critics with the analytical tools to recognise and resist the linguistic mechanisms through which power is appropriated and abused. In this sense, the study extends the social function that Nwabueze himself intended for the play, the awakening of political consciousness, into the domain of linguistic analysis, offering a grammar of critique to accompany the dramatist's grammar of condemnation.

Conclusion

This study has applied Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, specifically the Transitivity System of the Ideational Metafunction, to the satirical language of EmekaNwabueze's*A Parliament of Vultures*. The analysis has demonstrated that the play's political critique is not merely thematic but is encoded in its grammar.The process types, participant roles, mood choices, and foregrounding strategies that constitute the play's dialogue are themselves the substance of the satire. Material processes in the corrupt characters' speech enact their predatory agency; relational processes construct their appropriated status; verbal processes mimic and corrupt the performative language of democratic institutions. The

morally virtuous characters' use of interrogative structures, imperative mood, modal expressions of obligation, and syntactic parallelism enacts their resistance and their moral consciousness.The study has also demonstrated the interpretive productivity of applying SFG to Nigerian literary drama. The transitivity framework provides a precise and systematic instrument for reading how dramatic language construes ideology, and its application to the play reveals dimensions of the play's meaning that have not been accessible to sociological or thematic analysis alone. Future research might extend this framework to a fuller corpus of Nigerian political drama, tracing patterns of linguistic political critique across the tradition from Wole Soyinka to Nwabueze's contemporaries. Certainly, what the analysis confirms is Halliday's foundational insight: that grammar is never innocent. Every syntactic choice is a choice about how to construe the world, and in the hands of a playwright as politically committed as EmekaNwabueze, those choices are the most precise instruments of social critique at his disposal. This play is not only a play about political corruption. It is a sustained syntactic indictment of the corruption it depicts at the level of its grammar.

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