

A Linguistic-stylistic Analysis of Selected Aspects of Minutes of Meeting

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Abstract—Linguistic-stylistics explores the use of language, and how it (language) affects the building of a text to create effective meaning. Language is about meaning, as such, speakers and writers are often conscious of their language choice to create meaning in every given social context. The present study is a linguistic stylistic analysis of parliamentary type of minutes of meetings selected from two Faculties in Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. The study adopts the theory of Systemic Functional Linguistic [SFL] to analyze tense, mood and sentence types in the selected minutes of meetings. The study reports that a minute of meeting, being a report of speech activities is normally in the past tense, and the mood is predominantly declarative, and sentences are selected to reflect a narrative piece.

Index Terms—linguistic-stylistics, language choice, social-context, tense, mood, sentence types

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is crucial in human interactions because it is the means by which humans communicate ideas, feelings, observations and other experiences of life, (Yule 2004, Lyons 2004). As scholars have always maintained, language has the dual features of form and meaning; and whether in the written or spoken form, communication is believed not to have taken place when the hearer is unable to elicit meaning from the message passed across. To ensure that meaning is effectively elicited, a speaker or a writer is normally conscious of his/her language choice. In this respect linguistic elements are consciously selected to faithfully reflect the context and situation under which communication has occurred, (Owolabi 2014).

Meetings form a part of human activities where people gather to express ideas, and feelings, make observations and give reports through the use of language. It is a forum to discuss, review and take decisions or receive information, (Ariyo 1998). Invariably, the speech activities in a meeting are recorded for ease of reference; the written record, which is technically referred to as a minute of meeting constitute an official document or text that can always be referred to, or consulted as a reminder of what transpired in a meeting. Language choice is important in the composition of a text because it helps “to place a text where it rightly belongs in specialization and make text characteristic of its field” (Owolabi 2014, p. 36). To this end, a text is often analyzed to identify linguistic features and linguistic elements that are used in the composition of such a text, and in the process gain a good insight into the style of a writer or a speaker, or the general style of a given genre.

So much has been written on format, types and purpose/functions of minutes of meetings, (Ariyo 1998, Starton 2004, and Wolfe 2006). However not much has been said on the linguistic style that characterizes this type of genre. The present study is therefore a contribution to the available literature on the nature of minutes of meetings; and specifically, to the examination of the linguistic features that are used to reflect the special nature of this type of genre, and the characteristics of its field. The study looks specifically on parliamentary type of meeting as described in Wolfe (2006). The implication of this study is that minutes of meetings can be studied from a linguistic perspective just like other genres such as editorials, newspaper reports, sermons, advertisements and any other.

II. LINGUISTIC STYLISTICS

Style refers to how a writer or speaker makes his/her choice of language to express him/herself in a text to create intended meaning and effect. It is, according to Murtaza and Qasmi (2013, p. 2) “a writer’s individual mode of expression, way of putting his/her conceptions in words.” A writer or a speaker selects from an array of possible grammatical options to create a text to achieve a purpose. Ononye (2016) contends that “the choice perspective is anchored on the simple notion that a language user (consciously or unconsciously) chooses from the linguistic possibilities in his/her repertoire, the most appropriate items that will suit his/her message, medium, situation and purpose” (p. 349). Scholars are unanimous on the view that style is about how a speaker or a writer selects elements of language, such as words, clauses and sentence to construct a text [written or oral] so as to create effective meaning in a given social context or situation, (Fakuade 1998, Owolabi 2014, Orebe 2020).

Stylistics, a word derived from the word style is a field of study that systematically studies a text so as to explain the language of the text, and how a writer or speaker has made his/her language choices to create meaning, (Niazi and Gautan 2010). The importance of style and stylistics is underscored in Finch (2000) when he claims that “every time we

use language, we necessarily adopt a style of some sort: we make a selection from a range of syntactic and lexical possibilities according to purpose of the communication” (p. 189) The major task of stylistics is to study a text and bring out those linguistic features that mark out a writer or a speaker as unique in his/her own way, and also draws attention to those linguistic features that separate a genre as a unique discipline different from other disciplines. Stylistic analysis may be carried out at the literary level or at the linguistic level. Literary stylistics investigates literary/stylistic devices employed by a writer or speaker to create a text. Such literary stylistic devices include the use of figurative expressions that include repetition, simile, metaphor, parallelism, lexical matching, personification and many other literary stylistic devices, (Ogunjimi 1994, Balogun 2014). Linguistic-stylistics, which is the primary focus of this study is that “branch of linguistic that applies the methodologies of linguistic to analyze concept of style in texts”, (Finch 2000, p. 206). Its major focus is the examination of language structures and patterns in a text. In this respect, it is possible to look at different levels of grammar - phonology, morphology or syntax. In the present study, the focus is on some aspects of syntactic structures and patterns that include tense, mood, and sentence types.

III. MINUTES OF MEETING

Minute of meeting, as already mentioned above, is a “record of what is said and decided at meetings of organizations, committees, societies and clubs. They contain discussion, resolution passed and decision reached “, (Ariyo 1998, p. 98). Proceedings of meetings are invariably written down to serve as source of information or reminder about the speech activities of a group, that is, speech activities that relate strictly to issues raised at meetings. Starton (2014) states that “minutes provide useful references on the history of a committee’s businesses, reducing the possibility of disagreement over what exactly was discussed and decided, when and by whom” (p.128) Minutes are more or less pseudo-historical or pro-history documents, (Orebe 2020).

Wolfe (2006) identifies three types of minutes, they are “information dump” transcription minute which, he claims, is more or less a verbatim reproduction of the conversation that occurred at the meeting. The scholar hinted that the transcription minutes type “are organized chronologically with little formatting and have no clear rhetorical purpose”, (p. 335). The second type of minutes of meeting identified by the scholar is the action oriented one, which he claims is common among “project teams in most workplace settings. The major feature of this type of minutes of meeting is that they are “organized around future task” and they normally contain “list of action items that can be used as a team checklist of tasks to be completed. The rhetorical focus is on regulating feature actions” Wolfe (2006, p.335). The third type identified by the scholar is the parliamentary style minute which, according to him, “is the norm in many governmental and academic settings.” According to this scholar, “these minutes follow Robert Rules of Order. They are organized chronologically and foreground motions, votes, and individual positions on issues. The rhetorical focus is on maintaining an accurate record of individual action during the meeting”, (p. 335).

The minutes of meetings selected for this study fall into the category of parliamentary style minutes. Universities are known for good organization and good record keeping. Different meetings come up regularly to discuss important issues that relate to the smooth running of the system, and equally document activities and decisions on important matters. Faculty Board meeting is held regularly in the Ekiti State University, and minutes at such meetings are normally detail and well composed to serve as historical records of resolutions and decisions of the Faculty Board.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Eight minutes of minutes were selected for study, one from each of the eight faculties in the Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. However two were eventually selected for presentation in this study. The two were selected included one from the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences (Text A), and one from the Faculty of Education (Text B). They were minutes of crucial meetings that were well attended in 2018. Minutes of meetings from the University system were selected because minutes of meeting that falls within what Wolfe (200) described as parliamentary style of minutes are expected from Universities which is regarded as a center of academic excellence. Sentences in each text were identified and listed, and tense, mood and sentence types were analyzed.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts the assumptions and orientation of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which focuses on the relevance of social context and function of language in communication, (Halliday 1994, Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). The theory considers language as a resource of meaning, it assumes that language is basically a social activity which takes place within a social context to satisfy specific goals. The theory takes cognizance of both the context and functional aspects of language. The concept of meaning takes a foremost position in the theory, and therefore, the theory assumes that for meaning to be properly and adequately analyzed, the context and the desired goal of a text should be rigorously scrutinized, (Halliday and Hassan 1989, Armstrong and Ferguson 2011). This position is captured in O’Donnell (2011) when he claims that “systemic functional linguistics is more closely aligned with sociology: it explains how language is used in social contexts to achieve particular goal...it does not address how language is processed or represented within the human brain, but rather looks at the discourses we produce and the context of the production of the text” (p. 2). The theory affirms the position of Malinowsky as reported in Martin (1994) that “you

cannot understand the meaning of what someone says or writes unless you know something about the context in which it is said” (p.14). Context in this regard refers to the totality of the environment that surrounds the use of language in a text. Moley (1985) describes context as “all the sociological factors which constitute the background and circumstances of the text” (p. 8) The important point to note here is that context in relation to sociological factors may be linguistic, social or psychological,

SFL identifies three meta-functions: the ideational meta-function, the interpersonal meta-function, and the textual meta-function. Adeyanju and Olaniyan (2016) affirms that meta-function is that “part of the system of a language- the particular sentence and lexico-grammatical resources- that has developed to perform the function the function in question” (p. 184) By this, the authors mean that a writer or speaker sets out to perform specific activity with language, he/she has a set goal. The meta-function allows the writer or speaker to achieve the set goal. The interpersonal meta-function, which is directly related to this study, reflects how social relationship is expressed through grammatical choices made by a speaker or writer. Choice of grammatical element, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) “is also a proposition or proposal whereby we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitudes towards whatever we are talking about” (p. 30). Interpersonal meta-function which is the focus of this study, is targeted at analyzing tense, mood and sentence types falls within the interpersonal meta-function.

VI. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

A. Tense

Tense is that term in grammar that indicates the time of an action in a sentence. Verb is the grammatical element that reflects tense, particularly the finite verb; the tense in English may be present or past, (Thorne 2008). In the texts under study, eighty-five (85) sentences were elicited in Text A, while one hundred and sixty seven (167) were found in Text B. Each sentence contained at least one finite verb; while a simple sentence manifests one finite verb, a compound sentence manifests more than one. In all, Text A contained one hundred and eight (108) finite verbs, Text B had two hundred and twenty-nine (229). Some of the verbs are illustrated below.

Text A: **commenced, led, stated, welcomed, appreciated, informed, reported, thanked, enjoined, gave, condemned, advised, seconded, made resolved, held, briefed, added, was moved, conducted, directed.**

Text B: **welcomed, considered, seconded, ascribed, wished, prayed, was, introduced, requested, decided, pleaded, congratulated, used, rejoiced, expressed, announced, frowned, sought, objected, moved.**

A general observation reveals that all the infinite verbs in the texts are in the past form, i.e. verb + ed for regular verbs, e.g. **commenced, stated, added**, and the appropriate forms for the irregular ones, e.g. **took, gave, sought**. Consider the following sentences form the texts.

Text A

Sentence 5: He **reported** that the result of the accreditation **was** very successful.

Sentence 31: The Chairman **reported** that the university congregation **was held** last week and election also **took** place

Sentence 51: The request was **considered** and **recommended** for the approval of Senate.

Sentence 65: He **suggested** that a production calendar for the fish production should be worked out and **submitted** to the Dean’s office as soon as possible.

TEXT B

Sentence 8: He **ascribed** the success of his administration to the support and corporation he **received** from members.

Sentence 51: The Board **considered** the need to have a forum for interaction between the Faculty leadership and the leaders of the Faculty Student Union

Sentence 98: The Dean **reminded** all HODs that the first semester results **were** long overdue; he therefore **directed** that all results should be ready within two weeks.

Sentence 122: The Faculty Board **requested** for a confidential report on the student’s conduct from the Head of Department.

B. Mood

Mood is a proposition of systemic functional linguistics, and it mediates between grammar and semantics. It is the form of the verb that shows the mode or manner in which a thought is expressed. Skevis (2014) states that “mood is an indication of the speaker’s attitude to what he/she is talking about, whether the event is considered as a fact (indicative) or non-fact (subjunctive)”, (p. 46). Aljmer (2016) also affirms that, “mood has to do with the principles behind the choice of the indicative and the imperative, and between declarative and interrogative.” (p. 4). Rodney (1998) argues that the verb is the most important grammatical element in the analysis of mood because it is characteristically used in making factual assertions”, (p.80). Alo (1985), asserts that mood system in language “may be used to approve or disapprove, to express doubt, to ask questions or give answers, to greet, instruct, or to command others, to include others within a group or exclude others from it” (p.55) The scholar then concludes that “these various uses or functions of the sentence correspond to grammatical categories which we call declarative (statement), imperative (command and requests) and exclamatory (exclamation)” (p. 55)

It was reported earlier that there were eighty-five sentences in text A and one hundred and sixty seven in texts B, making a total of two hundred and fifty two sentences (252). Analysis of the sentences reveals that they are declarative sentences. The study shows that neither imperative nor interrogative sentence occurs in the two texts. The example, of sentences presented earlier under tense in section 4.1 reflects the declarative sentences found in the texts. Consider the following three examples taken from the ones earlier presented in section 5.1 under tense:

1. He reported that the result of the accreditation was successful
2. He suggested that a production calendar for the fish production should be worked out and submitted to the Dean’s office as soon as possible.
3. He ascribed the success of his administration to the support and cooperation he received from members.
4. The Faculty Board requested for a confidential report on the student’s conduct from the Head of Department.

The examples presented above are all in the declarative form. They are statements reporting speech activities, stating what was said at a meeting. All the sentences in the texts studied are all in the declarative form.

C. Sentence Types

Sentence reflects a complete thought; it gives a complete idea or statement the speaker wishes to pass across (Thorne 2008, Anderson 2014). A sentence, made up of one clause has the structure of: **Subject+ Predicate+ Compliment+ Adjuncts** (SPCA) in its full form; a reduced form may consist of **Subject+ Predicate**. While a sentence in its simple form may consist of one clause, more complex ones may consist of two or more clauses. Some others may consist of two or more clauses joined by conjunctions.

The study reveals that different sentences based on structure were used in writing the minutes of meetings under study. They are simple sentences (SimpS), complex sentences (ComplS), compound sentences (CompS) and compound-complex sentences (Comp-CmplS). While each of the sentence types mentioned above was found in the text studied, the regularity of their usage differ substantially as shown in the table below.

	Simp S	Compl S	Comp S	Comp-compl S	
Text A	9	31	27	18	85
Text B	17	67	49	34	167
Total	26 = 10.3%	98=39.9%	76 =30.2%	52 = 20.6%	252

In simple percentage according to the table, the texts consisted of 10.3% simple sentences, 38.9% of complex sentences, 30.2% of compound sentences and 20.6% of compound-complex sentences. Complex sentences and compound sentences make the highest percentage of the sentences. The two accounted for 69.1%. See below one example each of the sentence types found in the texts.

D. Simple Sentence

Text A

Sentence 19: **The Chairman gave a summary of the resolution as the meeting progressed.**

Text B

Sentence 47: **The Editor presented a copy of the latest edition of the journal to the Board.**

E. Complex Sentence

Text A

Sentence 34: **A member suggested that honorarium for staff serving in the committee should be abolished.**

Text B

Sentence 31: **The Chairman reported that all the faculty’s recommendations to Senate were approved at the last Senate meeting.**

F. Compound Sentence

Text A

Sentence 52: **The requests were considered and recommended for the approval of Senate.**

Text B

Sentence 3: **The agenda was considered and adopted accordingly.**

G. Compound-complex Sentence

Text A

Sentence 10: **He reported that he conducted the team round, and what they saw on ground was very impressive to them.**

Text B

Sentence 153: **The Chairman said that the observation was right but wondered why academic culture would be so denigrated.**

Each of the simple sentences represented by the two examples illustrated above contains only one clause. They have the usual clause structure of SPCA as shown below:

S P C A

1. The Chairman// gave // a summary of the resolution// as the meeting progressed.
2. The Editor// presented// a copy of the latest edition of the journal// to the Board.

Each of the sentences consists of just a clause as it could be observed that there are no linking elements or introducers in their structures.

The other types of sentences – complex, compound and compound-complex – have more than a clause. Complex sentences were used extensively in the texts that were studied. Each of the complex sentences illustrated in the examples above, contains of a main clause and a subordinate clause that are linked by the use of the introducer **that**.

Main Clause: The Chairman reported.

Subordinate Clause: All the Faculty's recommendations were approved...

By using the introducer **that**, the writer of the text was able to combine the two sentences, one as the major clause, and the other as the subordinate clause.

Complex sentences were equally extensively used in the texts. Sentences of this type contain more than one clause that carry equal weight, or that are independent of one another. The independent clauses are joined by co-ordinate conjunctions such as **and**, **or**, **but**, **also** and other conjunctions. Consider the first example under the examples of compound sentences illustrated above.

- 1: The requests were considered
2. The requests were recommended for the approval of senate.

The two independent sentences were joined using **and** as the co-ordinating conjunction. It is observed that in the derived compound form, the subject and the be-verb of the second sentences were elided through the principle of ellipsis.

Compound –complex sentences were also used fairly extensively in the texts. As could be seen in the examples presented above, there is more than a clause in compound-complex structures. The second example under the examples of compound-complex sentences contains two complex sentences joined by the conjunction **but**. The complex sentences are shown below.

1. The Chairman reported that the observation was right.
2. The Chairman wondered why academic culture would be so denigrated.

Just as it was observed when looking at the compound sentences, the subject of the second sentence was also elided.

Apart from the sentence types described above, the study revealed both active and passive voices. The active voice, according to Thorne (2008) “expresses the action of the verb, directly linking it to the person or things carrying out the action” (p. 11). The scholar further stated that the passive voice “changes the focus of the sentence by reordering the elements” (p. 11). The reordering brings the subject to the end of the sentence, and the object moved to the beginning of the sentence to give it to the prominence. Examples of both active voice and passive voice are presented below.

H. Active Voice

Text A

Sentence 38: A member requested the dean to make available to HODs the comprehensive report of the accreditation exercise.

Text B

Sentence 141: The Board agreed that a seminar could be organized for both the academic and non-academic staff of the faculty to address ethics of the job and schedule of duties.

I. Passive Voice

Text A

Sentence 39: It was also suggested that the faculty should make a move to acquire the large expanse of land at Ifaki for mechanized farming.

Text B

Sentence 121: The Dean was implore by the board to communicate its decision to the university Management.

Looking at the examples above, those sentences illustrated under active voice are made up of the usual pattern of a clause whereby a structure has the pattern earlier mentioned above:

Subject + Verb + Compliment + Adjunct (SPCA)

Take for instance the example taken from Text A which is analyzed below.

S p C A

A member// requested // the Dean// to make available to HODs...

There is no evidence of re-ordering as the sentence is structured in the usual pattern of a clause or sentence: SPCA. The subject of the clause comes first, and it is followed immediately by the verb. The verb is also followed by the complement, and then the adjunct.

The situation is different with those examples under passive voice. The examples show that a re-ordering occurred. The subject of the active voice is moved to occur after the verb (optionally) as the passive agent (by + agent). Take for instance the passive sentence taken from Text B:

The **Board** implored **the Dean** to communicate its decision to the University Management.

To derive a passive form, the complement of the verb, **Dean**, is moved to the position of the subject, then followed by the introduction of the be-verb (**was**) and the passive agent (**by the Board**) to read:

The Dean was implored by the Board to communicate its decision to the University Management.

The writers of the minutes of meetings under review used both the active and passive voice in elaborate form, however, active voice appeared to have been used more than the passive voice.

VII. DISCUSSION

It was reported in section 5.1 that past tense was consistently used in the texts under study. We recall here that minutes of meetings are (official) records of speech activities that were already concluded, and, that being the case, the writers used past tense in writing the texts in order to be meaningful. The use of present tense or future tense would have affected the grammatical quality of the texts, and would have defeated the functional purpose of the texts as records of concluded activities. The use of the past tense satisfies the function of a minute of meeting as pro-historical document that could be relied upon to guide future activities.

In respect of the mood, declarative mood was used exclusively in the texts. The sentences in the texts make assertions about concluded activities, and being assertions, they are statements that report events. The writers had no opportunity of inserting his/her opinions and views that might have appeared in interrogative or imperative forms. Even in cases where participants at the meeting asked direct questions, they were reported in declarative forms. For instance, sentence 79 in the text B showed that an interrogative sentence was reported in the form of a declarative sentence. Consider sentence 79 in text B which is illustrated below.

Sentence 79: The HOD of the department of Islamic and Arabic studies asked the Dean when the language laboratory would be upgraded to accommodate Arabic language Studies.

The reported speech above implies that in its direct form a question was actually asked. However, it has to be transformed into an indirect speech to satisfy the choice of language in a minute of meeting.

The structures of the sentences as revealed in section 5.3 were of different grammatical types: simple, complex, compound and compound-complex. However, as revealed, both complex and compound sentences appeared to have been used more than the simple and compound-complex types. Anderson (2014) reports that complex and compound sentences function to combine similar ideas, compare and contrast ideas, and remove repetition. In the texts studied, the writers, in line with what Anderson (2014) reported chose the complex and compound to achieve a prose-like or narrative writing that would allow readers to easily follow the logical sequence of events at the meeting, the decisions reached and activities assigned to participants (present or absent).

It was also found in the analysis that active voice was used more than passive voice. It was observed that passive voice was used to make reference to items mentioned on the agenda, e.g.

1 The opening prayer was said by...

2 The motion for the adoption of the minutes was moved by...

It was also used to give attention or prominence to some important points in the texts. A writer invariably gives prominence to issues that are considered to be of importance in a text by employing foregrounding as a stylistic device. Dada and Bamgboye (2014) contend that "foregrounding is the deliberate construction in a writing that brings about specialty or prominence" (p. 192). The scholars go further to say that "it is the use of techniques or devices of language in a way to bring out some features and their significance so as to draw attention to them" (p. 192)

The two texts that were studied employ the use of both active and passive voice. It is expected that some issues or points would normally be regarded as important, and deserving attention. To achieve bringing such issues to prominence, the writer, as shown in these texts, would need to employ stylistic strategies. In the present study, the stylistic device employed to achieve foregrounding is the use of passive voice.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper reports some of the linguistic-stylistic devices used in the composition of a minute of meeting. The paper reflects that past tense and declarative sentences are prominent in a minute of meeting. It is also revealed that whereas all types of sentence structures are found in composing a minute of meeting, complex and compound sentences appear more than both the simple and compound-complex sentences. In the same vein, the rate of using simple sentence is equally lower than the compound complex. One very important point this work draws attention to is that like other genres that have the preoccupation of reporting events, such as newspaper reports and narrative text such as novels or fiction works, a minute of meeting shares some grammatical structures with these genres. For instance, the use of past tense and both complex and compound sentences is predominant in such genres. Since these genres draws from a common pool of linguistic reservoir, the emergence of similarities cannot be removed.

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