Linguistic Cohesion in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Les Yeux Baissés*

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Abstract

This article examines the use of cohesive devices in Les yeux baissés written by Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Francophone Moroccan writer, with a view to foregrounding how different cohesive strategies help to unveil the writer's thematic preoccupation and project the socio-cultural and political anomies within his society. Selected passages from the novel are analysed to illustrate the types, patterns and functions of cohesion in the novel. The study identifies reference and conjunction as the two main structural and semantic devices which knit the linguistic elements in the novel together and which help to bring out its thematic and aesthetic qualities. The article therefore concludes that the cohesive elements deployed in the novel project the literary and linguistic ingenuity of the author to picturesquely capture the experiences of the characters vis-à-vis the socio-political situation within their immediate environment.

Keywords: *Francophone Maghrebian Literature, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Linguistic-stylistics, Applied Linguistics*

Introduction

Cohesion is a concept concerned with how ideas are tied up to form a united and whole text. Lexical cohesion refers to the "cohesive effect achieved by the selection of vocabulary" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:274). The two basic categories of lexical cohesion are reiteration and collocation. Reiteration pertains to the repetition of a lexical item either directly or through the use of a synonym or a generally related word whereas collocation has to do with lexical items that are likely to be found together within the same text. Collocation occurs when a pair of words is not necessarily dependent upon the same semantic relationship but rather they tend to occur within the same lexical environment (ibid: 286). The closer lexical items are to each other between sentences, the stronger the cohesive effect.

Several critical studies have been carried out on the import of linguistic devices, particularly cohesion, in Anglophone African literary discourse. For example, Oha (2003), in his syntactic analysis of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, investigated how cohesive devices were used to link linguistic elements together at both lexical and

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syntactic levels. He observed that this stylistic maneuvering impacted aptly on the message of the novel. Also, using selected novels by Ben Okri, Kamalu (2010) demonstrated how cohesion, among other linguistic devices, could be used to elucidate the ideology that is encoded in literary texts. He identified lexical cohesion, collocation and *synaesthetic* metaphors as lexico-semantic strategies deployed by Okri in his texts to encode implicit meanings and information about the social disjuncture in his society. Opanachi's (1998) analysis of Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* was an absolute concentration on the effects of linguistic cohesion on the text. His work identified the structural and semantic devices which knit the linguistic elements of the novel together and which help to bring out its theme, message and aesthetic qualities. However, much attention has not been given to Francophone African novels in this respect. In a bid to fill this gap, this paper examines the use of cohesive devices deployed by Tahar Ben Jelloun, a Francophone Moroccan postcolonial writer, with a view to arguing for the applicability of the *Hallidayan* theory of cohesion to francophone African novels on the one hand and to foregrounding how different cohesive elements are engaged to unveil the writer's thematic preoccupation in order to project the socio-cultural and political anomies within his society on the other.

Tahar Ben Jelloun is a salient Maghrebian writer whose literary discourse has had a great impact on the Maghreb. He remains an essential figure of Maghrebian francophone fiction and an author whose works have over the years remapped its topography (Moukhlis, 2006). Many of his works have been translated into more than fifty world languages. His thematic preoccupation has always been about the portrayal and criticism of the socio-political situation of the postcolonial Moroccan society. Since he received the most prestigious French literary prize, *Le Prix Goncourt* in 1987, his literary engagement, which spans over thirty years, has been receiving a lot of critical attention within and outside the African continent (Jarod 1998; Mahta, 1994; Moukhlis, 2006; Nangia, 2003; Ouzgane, 1997; Ronen, 2001). Many of these studies have approached his texts from the perspectives of social/literary criticism. These approaches appear narrow because they tend to focus only on the thematic structure of the texts with little or no recourse to the linguistic structure, without which the implicit message may not be understood. This paper, therefore, attempts an exploration of the literary and linguistic dimensions of Thar Ben Jelloun's narrative text, *Les yeux baissés*, to

demonstrate that both literary and linguistic analyses are not mutually exclusive.

Synopsis of the Text

Les yeux baissés (1991) is an account of a young Maghrebian girl, Fathma, which chronicles how she leaves her village to live with her father, an immigrant, in Paris. The narrative focuses on the growing self-awareness of the first-person narrator as she moves from one socio-cultural space to another and from one identity to another. The early chapters of the novel focus on Fathma's relationship with her village and its historical and socio-economic life. Fathma lives with her abusive aunt in a remote Moroccan village. The early memories of her village register in her a painful absence of her father and are metaphorically linked to the character of the aunt who is a signifier of dehumanisation, cruelty and even murder. The narrative paints a vivid picture of the postcolonial situation. Apart from its thematic richness, the novel is permeated with a blend of linguistic felicities that undoubtedly offer the novel its aesthetic essence. This is demonstrated in the way lexemes are deployed and sentences are constructed by the author to convey the messages and recover meaning in the text.

Analysis and Discussion

Tahar Ben Jelloun's deployment of cohesive devices, which is both stylistic and ideological, plays a crucial role in the foregrounding of the thematic preoccupation of his text. The plot of the novel is so scattered and incoherent, apparently to demonstrate the mood of the novel, yet the messages that the novel conveys are so clear and unambiguous that its reading is both thought-provoking and fascinating. This is made possible by various cohesive devices employed in the novel.

It is, however, imperative to point out that our analysis and discussion may not cover the entire plot of the narrative because a well-guided analysis is carried out, which is informed by what Jonathan Culler asserts in the quote below:

> To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for (quoted in Adegoju, 2010:55).

Corroborating the view above, Ching et al. (1980:7) argue that: "... literary texts themselves must at some point represent a primal source for our understanding of literature. The texts themselves must show us what to look for through their own devices of foregrounding and pointing..." Using these basic approaches to literary criticism, we identify and examine the cohesive devices used in the text under study to foreground the literary-cum-linguistic ingenuity of the author so as to picturesquely capture the experiences of the characters vis-à-vis the socio-political situation in the text. In doing this, two types of cohesive relations, namely reference and conjunction developed, among others, by Halliday and Hasan (1976), are identified and analysed.

Reference

One major cohesive device deployed in the novel is reference. Reference is used to retrieve presupposed information in a text and must be identifiable for it to be considered as cohesion (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). It indicates how a character, an idea or an object is introduced and one keeps track of it throughout a text (Eggins, 2004). Reference relies more on personal pronouns, articles and demonstrative pronouns because it operates at the level of semantics as a cohesive tie. As observed by Halliday and Hasan (1976), there are three general features of referencing, i.e. homophoric referencing, which refers to shared information through the context of culture; exophoric referencing, which refers to the information from the immediate context of situation; and endophoric referencing, which refers to the information that can be "retrieved" from within the text. It is this endophoric reference that underpins the focus of cohesion theory, which we have applied in this paper. Endophoric reference can be divided into three areas: anaphoric, cataphoric and esphoric. Anaphoric referencing refers to any reference that "points backward" to previously mentioned information in the text. Cataphoric referencing refers to any reference that "points forward" to the information that will be presented later in a given text. Esphoric referencing refers to any reference within the same nominal group or phrase that follows the presupposed item. For cohesion purposes, anaphoric referencing is the most relevant to this study since "it provides a link with a preceding portion of the text" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976:51).

Halliday and Hasan (1976:37–39) identify three types of cohesive references: personal, demonstrative and comparative. Personal reference keeps track of information through a speech situation using

pronouns like 'he', 'him', 'she' and 'her', and possessive determiners like 'mine', 'yours', 'his', 'hers', and so on. Demonstrative reference keeps track of information through location using proximity references such as 'this', 'these', 'that', 'those', 'here', 'there', 'then' and 'the'. Comparative reference keeps track of identity and similarity through indirect references using adjectives like 'same', 'equal', 'similar', 'different', 'else', 'better' and 'more', and adverbs like 'so', 'such', 'similarly', 'otherwise', 'so' and 'equally'.

There is ample use of reference in the novel. For example, on pages 26–27 of the novel, the sentiment of disillusionment expressed by Fathma is presented in an unambiguous and united description of her village using a reference tie:

> **Notre village** devait être une erreur. Loin de tout, **il** n'était accessible qu'à dos de mulet. Les hommes étaient tous partis soit en ville, soit à l'étranger. Il n'**y** avait que des femmes, des enfants et quelques vieillards. C'était un **village** que la vie effleurait à peine…. Nous n'avons ni électricité ni route; quant à l'eau, cela dépendait des pluies. Alors, l'hôpital, l'école, le gaz butane, le papier, les crayons de couleur, c'était **le bout du monde**, **l'autre côté de la nuit**, **l'inaccessible** (*Les Yeux Baissés*, 26–27).

> **Our village** must have been an error. Far from all, **it** was only accessible on a mule's back. Men have all left to either city or abroad. **There** were only women, children and few old people left behind. It was a **village** which nature hardly smiled at… We had neither electricity nor road; as for water, that depended on rainfall. So, for hospital, school, cooking gas, paper, coloured crayon; **that** was **the end of the world**, **the other side of the night**, **the inaccessible**.[1]

In a gloomy way, Fathma describes her village as a land that fails to meet her expectation of an ideal place of abode. These cohesive ties help to tidy up a seemingly uncoordinated description by this young girl. The main lexical item, 'village' is tracked throughout her discourse by the different referent pronouns such as 'il [it]' (personal reference), 'y' [there], 'c (e) [that]' (demonstrative references), which are aspects of reiteration, and certain lexical phrases that act as nominal groups; these are 'le bout du monde [the end of the world]'

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[1] All the translations in this paper are by the author.

'l'autre côté de la nuit [the other side of the night]' and 'l'inaccessible [the inaccessible]'. All these refer to the village, which is reiterated twice in the above excerpt to sustain a cohesive effect. The three lexical phrases are aspects of collocation as they do not have a direct link with the focal word, 'village', nor are they synonyms of the word but occur within the same lexical environment as the village. They are what Halliday and Hasan (1976:33) call situational references. They do not only help to achieve a cohesive effect but also serve as indices for the speaker's disillusionment with her village. For her, the village is synonymous with 'the end of the world', 'the inaccessible' and 'the other side of the night', hence they all come under the same super-ordinate term sharing the same referential meaning, which paints a gloomy picture of the speaker's society. The village that should serve as home to the girl (Fathma) is now being referred to as an 'error', with synonyms like 'the other side of the night' and 'the inaccessible'; all these negate what an ideal society is supposed to be like. Fathma, through the above passage, serves as authorial agent for conveying Tahar Ben Jelloun's view about his disenchanted society. Based on the postcolonial realities, the majority of Africans see their respective immediate societies as places that have suffered socio-political neglect, and therefore lack basic social facilities such as stable electricity, good roads and potable water. This is why many young Africans often prefer migrating to Europe and America for a better life, in spite of the uncertainties that await them over there, to staying behind and face the hellish realities of their respective countries.

Another example of cohesion is identified in the unidentified/mysterious narrator's condolence to Fathma's father after the death of his son, which is documented on page 51 of the novel. The condolence is also sustained by cohesive elements referred to in this study as synonyms and near-synonyms because without them the message would have been lost and the emotion created would not have been so deep and weighty. According to Kamalu (2010:68), synonyms and near-synonyms are used to avoid monotonous use of certain items in the same linguistic or lexical environment. The condolence goes thus:

> **Quitte ce village**, **emmène** ta femme et ta fille loin, très loin d'un œil torve, qui, a force de se poser sur vous, finira par perpétuer le malheur. … **Pars** d'**ici**, **change** d'horizon, **change** de terre. Tu seras à l'abri d'un mal habitant une femme qui t'est proche. **Pars**, **fais** d'autres enfants <u>et</u> **ne**

> reviens jamais à ce village du malheur… . N'emporte rien
> de ce village, pas même la poignée de terre que tu as prise à
> l'instant. C'est un lieu maudit. Tous les hommes l'ont
> abandonné. N'y restent que les vieilles personnes et une
> folle qui sera étranglée par la vipère dont elle tire le venin.
> Ne crache pas en partant. Ne dis rien, abandonne les objets,
> vends les bêtes si tu peux et prends le chemin de l'exil.

> Quit this village; take along your wife and daughter, far,
> very far from a wicked eye, which has the power to impose
> itself on you, will end up perpetrating calamity. … Get out
> of here, change space, change land. You will be sheltered
> from an evil inhabiting a woman close to you. Leave, make
> other children <u>and</u> never return to this village of
> calamity…. Do not carry anything away from the village,
> not even the handful of the soil which you took this
> moment. It is a cursed place. All the men have abandoned
> it. The only people who are still there are the old people and
> a madwoman who will be strangled by the viper, whose
> venom she draws. Do not make trouble while leaving. Do
> not say anything, abandon the objects, sell the beasts if you
> can and take the way of exile.

The background to this passage is a situation of conflict in the family
of the interlocutor which culminates in the loss of his only son. The
remote cause of this conflict was the strong patriarchal structure of
the family, wherein the interlocutor's sister was abandoned because of
her inability to conceive. She was, therefore, frustrated and decided to
vent her anger on her brother's family. This excerpt was a consolation
from an unseen character-narrator to a sorrowful man who had just
lost his son. Because the excerpt is laden with lots of verbs in the
imperative mood, namely 'quit', 'take along', 'get out', 'change', 'leave',
'never return' and 'do not carry', one wonders if it is actually a
condolence or an order/persuasion. It truly represents its context of
situation, a situation of sorrow and confusion. Here, the unseen
character employs imperatives throughout the speech to create a
cohesive effect which helps to unite the text. The verb 'quit' is used to
introduce us to the narration and to reiterate the speaker's position.
The speaker uses other verbs like 'take along', 'get out', 'change' and
'leave' as near-synonyms of 'quit'. All these verbs express the same
message, that is to say, 'leave', 'go away'. The verbs 'do not carry',
'abandon', 'sell', 'do not say' and 'do not make' are all near-synonyms in
this context as they all serve as markers of finality and, if obeyed, they

would help the interlocutor to forget everything about his village and have no reason to return.

This quitting, as ordered by the speaker, must be permanent and without any recourse to coming back. This is stylistically communicated by this authorial agent. The discourse that starts in the affirmative-imperative mood with such verbs as 'quit', 'take along', 'get out', 'change' and 'leave' serving as pointers suddenly switches to the negative-imperative mood having 'never return', 'do not carry', 'abandon', 'sell', 'do not say' and 'do not make' as markers probably to warn him that any attempt to return may have a more negative and grave effect on the interlocutor and his entire family. The conjunction 'et' [and] in the passage helps to achieve the switch and to divide the text into two distinct units, wherein the first and the second parts start with 'quitte ce village [quit this village]' - affirmative-imperative, and 'ne reviens jamais' [never return] – negative-imperative.

Also, the same village mentioned in the first example above is being referred to again here with more specificity through the use of demonstrative pronoun 'ce' [this] this time. As a way of reiterating his point, the speaker repeats the nominal group 'ce village' [this village] twice and the demonstrative reference 'ce'. Referent adverbs like 'ici' [here] and 'y'[there] are also mentioned in the text. All these refer to the same entity, 'this village', which is the head-word/theme in the passage. This also reiterates the fact that the village is the main concern of the unknown speaker who considers leaving it as the only way out of the predicament being faced by its inhabitants. For both Fathma and this unseen character, the socio-cultural anomaly in this village leaves them in a precarious situation and creates an ambiguous notion.

There is also ample use of cohesive reference to describe the feeling of the frustrated and angry aunt, Slima, who hitherto had felt she had the monopoly of cruelty until little but courageous Fathma dealt with her. She rages thus:

> **Ma vengeance** vous surprendra comme l'éclair, comme la foudre**…** **Elle** apportera la douleur, l'étouffement, les larmes et la mort**… Ma haine** ne se fatiguera jamais**…** Je sais l'alimenter, l'aiguiser et **la** rendre patiente. **La haine** est ma meilleure compagne. Je l'ai bue dans le lait de ma mère (41).

> **My revenge** will come upon you like lightening, like thunderbolt**...** **She** will bring sorrow, suffocation, tears and death**...** **My hatred** will never be tired**...** I know how to nourish **her**, stimulate **her** and make **her** patient. **Hatred** is my best companion. I drank **it** in my mother's breast-milk.

Here is amalgamation of different types of cohesion and metaphor; there are personal references, substitution and reiteration and personification.

The third-person personal pronoun subject 'elle' and object 'la'/'l" refer to both 'Ma vengeance [my vengeance]' and 'Ma haine [my hatred]' which are in this case synonyms. To really emphasise that the aunt is an epitome of wickedness and dehumanisation, the speaker repeats the abstract noun 'hatred' twice; hatred is both personalised and personified. Hatred metaphorically possesses certain distinct attributes of human beings like tiresomeness, hunger and patience. It is personalised by the aunt through the use of the possessive adjective 'my' to boast that she has the monopoly of violence, something that contradicts the ideal context of situation and context of culture, i.e. the family, which is most cherished in Africa. It is also personified as a friend and, later, presented as a natural most nourishing food for infants – breast-milk.

All these adjectives reiterate the fact that she enjoys violence, which the narrator describes as an art on page 43 of the novel. This indeed negates motherhood and creates ambiguity about the ideal family setting in the narrator-protagonist's mind. There is also a cinematographic effect in the above context, which is made possible with the use of ellipsis. Also, a cohesive device takes the reader into the realm of the state of mind of the speaker. Ellipsis, which could be defined as omission or suppression of parts of words or sentences, serves two purposes here. It is repeated thrice in the text and captures the disposition and gesticulation of Slima, who could be described as frustrated as she appeared to be weeping due to the humiliation she suffered at the hands of Fathma. Obviously a crying person cannot and will not speak fluently, hence the frequent use of ellipsis (…) to punctuate her howling. Its other purpose can be taken to be deliberate in that the woman might decide not to speak/pour out her mind and keep to herself the scheme that she would adopt in carrying out her threat because she is known to be an expert in the art of wickedness.

The threat was eventually carried out when she allegedly killed Fathma's younger brother later in the novel.

Conjunction

Another cohesive device used by the author in some linguistic contexts in the text is conjunction and this has a stylistic effect on his work. Conjunction, as described by Bloor and Bloor (1995:98), acts as a "cohesive tie between clauses or sections of text in such a way as to demonstrate a meaningful pattern between them." For Halliday and Hasan (1976:226), conjunctive elements are cohesive not in themselves but indirectly, by virtue of their specific meanings; they are not primarily devices for reaching out into the preceding or following text but they express certain meanings which presuppose the presence of other components in the discourse. They identify four types of conjunctions, namely additive, adversative, causal and temporal conjunctions. Additive conjunction coordinates structures and is signaled through 'and', 'also', 'too', 'furthermore', 'additionally', and the like.

Additive conjunction may also negate the presupposed item and is signaled by 'nor', 'and ... not', 'not … either' and 'neither'. Adversative conjunctions indicate something that is contrary to expectation and are signaled by 'yet', 'though', 'only', 'but', 'in fact' and 'rather'. Causal conjunction expresses result, reason and purpose and is signaled by 'so', 'then', 'for', 'because', 'for this reason', 'as a result' and 'in this respect'. The last conjunctive category is temporal conjuction which signals sequence or time. Some temporal conjunctive signals are 'then', 'next', 'after that', 'next day', 'until then', 'at the same time' and 'at this point' (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

A good and intelligent use of conjunctions is discovered in a certain scene in the novel where, while on a voyage of discovery, the protagonist, Fathma, with her friend, Halifa, is able to discover her 'femininity' and, for the first time, she has a true feeling of her sexuality as a girl right inside her adopted home.

> J'ouvris ma robe. Elle s'approcha **et** posa l'index sur chaque bout de sein **puis** le porta à ses lèvres. Je devais en faire de même. Ses bouts de seins étaient plus visibles, plus gros que les miens. Je les touchai **et** les trouvai très doux. J'eus envie de les caresser, **puis** rougis de honte (34).

> I opened my gown. She moved closer **and** placed her
> forefinger on each nipple **then** carried it into her lips. I had
> to do the same for her. Her nipples were more visible,
> bigger than mine. I touched them **and** found them very soft.
> I felt like caressing them, **then** reddened with shame.

This description is dramatic in the sense that it is presented in a cinematographic manner. The effect is made possible by the conjunctions that tie the description together. The simple sentences, which on their own create a stylistic effect, are clustered in a compound sentence with each of the conjunctions playing one stylistic role or the other. For example, the actions' effect is made thus: "//She moved closer// **and** //placed her forefinger on each nipple// **then** //carried it to her lips//."[2] The conjunctions (and) and (then) perform a cohesive role that helps to tie the actions "moved closer$_1$ *and* placed$_2$ … *then* carried$_3$" together. This is significant in that readers are kept in suspense until the last action is performed.

Of all the conjunctive categories in the above, we find the last one, 'then', more symbolic and ideological. One would have expected the use of the adversative conjunction 'but' to be more appropriate here instead of the temporal, 'then', which the author chooses to use. It means that what happens to the character in question after the 'feeling to caress' is not contrary to expectation as the adversative conjunction would have suggested, but her 'feeling of shame' is coming from the cultural bias of her society, which prevents girls from 'rightly' discovering sexuality. The temporal conjunctive tie as used here suggests to us that no sooner does the character remember and come in contact with the reality of her culture (though not mentioned but implicit in the text) vis-à-vis her action than she becomes ashamed and *"[je] partis en courant, bouleversée par ce contact qui éveilla en moi une sensation étrange, bonne et toute nouvelle"* (34) [[I] left running and upset by this contact that awoke in [me] a strange, good and very new sensation]. This proves that Tahar Ben Jelloun has really set out to subvert patriarchy and deconstruct its descriptions through his use of language. He stylistically exposes and undermines the structure that keeps young girls (represented by the two young girls in the novel) in the subaltern and denies them the joy of discovering and expressing their feminine identity.

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[2] The verbs produce actions which I indicate as actions 1, 2 and 3 that the conjunctions (and & then) help to tie together. The actions are systematic and reveal the naivety of the speaker.

Conclusion

As a linguistic theory that extends beyond the sentence, cohesion is useful not only in the linguistic-stylistic analysis of Anglophone novels but Francophone novels as well. This has been proven in our analysis of *Les yeux baissés*. We have demonstrated that cohesion as a theory operates mostly at the semantic level because it involves the flow of meaning between linguistic items that are structurally linked together and those that are not. What has undoubtedly emerged in this paper is that cohesive devices have been deployed in the novel to knit its linguistic units together and these have consequently achieved cohesion between and within sentences. This paper has shown that the linguistic elements of the novel are not haphazardly put together although this may seem to be the case on the surface. Instead, they are constructed according to a certain cohesive logic of the language of the novel. The cohesive repertoire is part of the author's linguistic dexterity which has impacted on the novel, since competence in a particular language is also seen in how one links up its units in a discourse according to or in violation of the rules of such language. Finally, it is clear that Tahar Ben Jelloun's linguistic strategies, which include deployment of cohesive devices in the novel help to project him as a writer who combines linguistic form and meaning to create some effect on his readers.

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