



Lexical Cohesion and Literariness in Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet"

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Abstract

This paper unearths the contribution of lexical cohesion to the textuality and overall meaning of Malcolm X's speech 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. Drawing on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) and Hoey's (1991) theory of cohesion, specifically lexical cohesion, whose main thrust is the role of lexical items in not only contributing to meaning but also serving as cohesive ties, the paper discusses how Malcolm employs words in serving a dual role of contributing to meaning by serving as cohesive ties and their literary use for an aesthetic touch to his 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. Discussions show that Malcolm X employs both simple and complex lexical structures to achieve cohesion in 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. The same lexical structures espouse the literary device of repetition, for emphasis and rhythm. Malcolm, therefore, combines linguistic and literary phenomena by his employment of lexical items in not only conveying meaning or passing information to his audience but also doing that with artistic beauty.

Keywords: Lexical Cohesion, Textuality, Repetition, Literariness, Malcolm X, and 'The Ballot or the Bullet'

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Introduction

Studies such as Ben Khalifa (2017) and Salahshoor, Baggali and Behin (2013) have shown that the employment of literary and linguistic analysis of texts has gained ground in discourse analysis. Moreover, historical speeches such as Malcolm X's 'The Ballot or the Bullet' have been given a lot of attention in recent years among discourse analysts. This paper seeks to unearth how the repetitive use of lexical items contribute to the textuality and overall meaning of Malcolm X's 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. Besides, the paper discusses how repetition serves a dual purpose of lexical cohesion and at the same time a literary device and its contribution to the literariness in 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. The paper is segmented into the following subheadings: Literature Review, Research Questions, Methodology, Discussion, and Conclusion.

Literature Review

Many scholars like Bloor and Bloor (1995), Brown and Yule (1983), Fairclough (1995), Grundy (2000), Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), Levinson (1983), Osisanwo (2003), Quirk and Greenbaum (1990), and Verschueren (1999) have identified what sets a text apart from randomly selected sentences; that is, what binds a text together. Of all these works, it is Halliday and Hasan's (1976) work, which sets out the notion of cohesion in a clear, systematic, and detailed manner.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) define the concept of cohesion as 'a semantic one; it refers to relations of meaning that exists within a text'. They further explain that:

Cohesion occurs when the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be effectively decoded except by recourse to it. When this happens, a relation of cohesion is set up, and the two elements, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text. (p. 4)

The above quote implies that cohesion is the network of grammatical and lexical ties which link up various parts of a text. These ties organize and create a text by requiring the reader to interpret words and expressions in relation to the surrounding sentences and paragraphs. Cohesion is therefore a surface or physical relation as well as semantic relations that connects the actual words or expressions that we can see, hear, or pinpoint from a text.

Cohesion does to a text what glue does to the shoes we wear and what a seam does to the clothes we wear. It can be defined as the links that hold a text together and give it meaning. In order to understand the importance of cohesion, we must first know and understand what a text actually is. Halliday and Hasan (1976) define a text as

...not just a string of sentences. It is not simply a large grammatical unit, something of the same kind as a sentence, but deferring from it in size – a

sort of a super sentence, a semantic unit. A text best is thought of as not a grammatical unit at all, but rather as a unit of a different kind: a semantic unit. The unity that it has is a unity of meaning in context, a texture that expresses the fact that it relates as a whole to the environments in which it is placed. (p. 293)

According to this definition, a text is ‘something of the same kind as a sentence’ or a ‘supersentence’. Halliday and Hasan (1976) call a text a ‘supersentence’, implying that although a text may comprise a number of sentences, these sentences can be understood and interpreted as though they were one sentence or one ‘semantic unit’. In light of the foregoing, an excerpt from a novel, a paragraph, a speech and so on are all types of texts.

Lexical Cohesion

One major type of cohesive element identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976) is lexical cohesion. Halliday (2004) in his book *Introduction to Functional Grammar* differentiates between the other types of cohesive devices and lexical cohesion. He writes:

However, cohesion also operates within the lexical zone of lexicogrammar. Here a speaker or writer creates cohesion in discourse through the choice of lexical items. Cohesion takes advantage of the patterns inherent in the organization of lexis. Lexis is organized into a network of lexical relations such as the ‘kind of’ relations obtaining between ‘fish’ and ‘salmon’. (p. 570)

Lexical cohesion, as we can tell from Halliday’s words, depends on the choice of lexical items. Lexical cohesion is basically created by repetition (reiteration) of the same lexeme, or superordinates (general nouns), or other lexemes sharing the majority of semantic features, also called hyponyms. Lexical cohesion can also form relational patterns in a text in a way that links sentences to create coherence thereby, sometimes, overlapping with other cohesive features.

Halliday (2004) further illustrates lexical cohesion by the relationship between ‘fish’ and ‘salmon’. We see that ‘fish’ is a superordinate term that encompasses a subordinate one – ‘salmon’. This example, clearly, is a lexical not a grammatical one. Like reference, substitution, ellipsis, and conjunctions, there are different types of lexical cohesion.

Bloor and Bloor (1995), Fairclough (1995) and Halliday (1985) identify the repetition of an item as the most direct form of lexical cohesion. Bloor and Bloor (1995) submit that:

Lexical cohesion refers to the cohesive effect of the use of lexical items in discourse where the choice of an item relates to the choices that have gone before. One important type of lexical cohesion, probably the one with the strongest cohesive force, is repetition (or reiteration) of the same item. (p. 99)

Repetition, as we can see above, is the reiteration of the same lexical item in a discourse or a text. Repetition, as a lexical cohesive device, is broad and has many branches. The succeeding paragraphs discuss these types of repetition.

Before we discuss the various kinds of repetition, here is an example given by Halliday (2004, p. 570) to illustrate repetition.

1. *Algy met a bear. The bear was bulky.*

Example 1 illustrates what lexical repetition is. It is clear that the lexical item 'bear' is repeated. This simple repetition binds the two sentences and ideas together into one unified text. It must be noted that 'bear' could be replaced with the pronoun 'it'. This, however, will be a different type of cohesive device – reference or substitution.

Another form of repetition is synonymy. That is, lexical cohesion can result from the choice of a lexical item that is in some sense synonymous with a preceding one. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 645) provide an example:

2. *He was startled by a noise from behind him. It was the sound of trotting horses. The sound of the cavalry grew rapidly nearer.*

We can see that in the example above, *sound* replaces *noise* in the second sentence. The second sentence does not only avoid the repetition of noise, but also perform a lexical function of cohesion. *Calvary* also replaces *horses* and serves the same lexical purpose of cohesion.

It is, however, important for us to know that complete synonymy in this regard is very rare, even if it exists. Cann (1993) notes the following:

The relation of synonymy is defined where two lexemes have the same sense and extensions and so may be defined as mutually hyponymous. Total synonymy is rare but partial synonymy occurs relatively frequently where two lexemes have almost the same sense and almost the same extension. (p. 21)

We can deduce from the above that synonyms do not have exactly the same meaning but have the same sense and extension. Moreover, Cann (1993) asserts that total synonymy is rare. Other authorities like Cruse (1986), Kearns (2000), Kempson (1977), Lyons (1995, 1997) and Sekyi-Baidoo (2002) all agree that absolute synonymy is a rarity.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 572) reveal a very important point with regard to the repetition of lexical items in lexical cohesion. They submit that 'in order for a lexical item to be recognized as repeated, it needs not to be in the same morphological shape.' Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) suggest that we do not necessarily look forward to seeing what is repeated to look exactly as what comes before. They gave examples as *dine*, *dining*, *diner* and *dinner* as referring to one item. Thus, repeated lexical items can have various morphological shapes but still share the property of repetition and a cohesive device.

Synonymy, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), comes with reference synonyms of the same or some higher level of generality, synonyms in the narrower sense, and superordinates. The other type of synonymy identified by Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) is the one without necessary identity of reference. The following examples clarify these points:

3. *Two hundred soldiers joined the peace-keeping force. The battalion is one of the best the country has ever produced.*

4. *Children are said to be strange, but Emil is the strangest of all.*

In Example 3, we see that the second appearance of ‘soldiers’ assumes a new form – ‘battalion’. ‘Battalion’ and ‘soldiers’ have a general-specific relationship; while ‘soldiers’ is the general or superordinate term, ‘battalion’ is the subordinate or specific term. ‘Battalion’ as a synonym has a reference point – ‘soldiers’. This reference to a preceding item binds the text together. In Example 4, we see the link between ‘children’ and ‘Emil’. ‘Emil’ does not necessarily refer to children. However, as far as this statement is about children, ‘Emil’ must be the child of reference in this regard.

Verschueren (1999) also identified another way lexical cohesion is realized: the juxtaposition of linguistic items. This placement of linguistic items side by side is the separation of related items by commas, parenthesis, or dashes. Below are some examples:

5. *Mr. Kufuor, the President, is known by many as a gentleman.*

6. *Football – the game of passion – is the most celebrated sport in the world.*

7. *Pollination (the transfer of pollen from one plant to another) is a common term in botany.*

In Example 5, the noun phrase ‘the President’ is in apposition to ‘Kufuor’ and is separated from ‘Kufuor’ by two commas. ‘The president’, placed side by side ‘Kufuor’, is an example of what Verschueren (1999) terms ‘juxtaposition’. The cohesion lies in the fact that ‘the president’ is the same as ‘Kufuor’ and as a result binds the text together. In Example 6, ‘the game of passion’ is separated from ‘football’ by two dashes. However, since that noun phrase adds more information or explains what football is, these two pieces of information are joined together as one. In Example 7, ‘the transfer of pollen...’ explains what pollination is. This explanation binds the text together.

Verschueren (1999) also uncovers exemplification as one way of achieving lexical cohesion. He identifies some expressions like ‘for example’ and ‘for instance’ as some of the expressions that show exemplification and bind a text together. The following are examples:

8. *Many freedom fighters die early. An example is Martin Luther King Jr.*

9. *You may have questions which you wish to raise. For instance, who will oversee your work and how will feedback be given?*

In Example 8, ‘an example’ gives Martin Luther King as one of the freedom fighters who died young. This example connects with ‘freedom fighters’ and binds the two pieces of information together. The same link of cohesion appears in Example 9. The term of exemplification ‘for instance’ provides the question that the reader or listener anticipates.

An important work is worth mentioning relating to lexical reiteration is Hoey’s (1991) *Lexical Patterns in Text*. Hoey (1991) proposed that different forms of lexical repetition combine to organize a text. His study has provided evidence that instances of lexical cohesion mark points of links between sentences. The first link he considered is lexical repetition, classified under simple and complex. A simple repetition involves items that Hoey (1991, p. 55) defined as ‘formally identical’. These are items sharing the same form or the same morpheme with minimum alterations, such as those marking the third person singular and past. Complex repetition occurs ‘either when two lexical items share a lexical morpheme’, but have a different grammatical class or function. The following exemplify simple and complex repetitions:

10. *Drugs have powerful effects on people. Drugs must therefore be used with caution.*

11. *Communication builds up the bond between families. It is important to communicate our feelings to our close relations.*

Example 10 illustrates simple repetition. The word ‘drugs’ does not change its form or function in its second appearance. However, in Example 11, ‘communication’, a noun, becomes a verb in its second appearance. The same idea of communication is repeated but in a different form. That is an example of what Hoey (1991) calls a complex repetition.

According to Hoey (1991), the second category of repetition is synonymy. This involves the repetition of the idea represented by a lexical item, rather than its form. Instances of synonymy may be either simple or complex. A simple synonymy occurs when a lexical item may substitute for another in context without loss or gain in specificity and with no discernible change in meaning, while complex synonymy involves synonyms, which are not part of the same word class. Below are examples:

12. *Malcolm’s child is very intelligent. Who wouldn’t want to have a boy as clever as that?*

13. *Malcolm X was killed while delivering a speech. Such assassinations were common in the sixties.*

In example 12, ‘intelligent’ and ‘clever’ appear in the first and second sentences respectively. These words are both adjectives and both refer to ‘child’. Moreover, ‘child’ and ‘boy’ are also synonyms and both belong to the same word class – nouns. These adjectives and nouns in question achieve cohesion and are examples of simple synonyms. In Example 13, ‘killed’ is a verb while ‘assassinations’ is a noun. The same idea of killing is carried across in the word ‘assassinations’. However, the words belong to different word classes; ‘killed’ is a verb and ‘assassination’ a noun. This is an example of complex synonymy.

Another type of links identified by Hoey (1991) is that of superordinate and hyponymic repetition. These links occur when items are connected by a lexical relation of class membership. Superordinate repetition involves a general term which designates a class of which the earlier item is a member. Conversely, hyponymic repetition involves a specific item which is a member of, or included in, the class designated by the earlier item. These are examples:

14. *She gave Roger a pen and a pencil. Those gifts meant nothing to him for he had a lot of stationery.*

15. *Many animals have gone extinct. Notable among them is the mammoth.*

In Example 14, 'a pen and a pencil' points to the superordinate term 'stationery'. The term 'stationery' encompasses 'a pen and a pencil' and this serves the purpose of cohesion. In Example 15, 'mammoth' is included in the hyponymic term 'animals'. In other words, a mammoth is a type of animal. This idea of inclusion also serves a cohesive purpose.

Research Questions

This paper answers the following questions:

1. What types of lexical cohesion (repetition) does Malcolm X employ in his 'The Ballot or the Bullet'?
2. How is repetition employed as a literary device in 'The Ballot or the Bullet'?

Methodology

This paper is purely qualitative in that findings are not reduced to numerical bases. The employment of lexical cohesion as well as the literariness espoused in them is identified from Malcolm X's 'The Ballot or the Bullet' and discussed, making the paper altogether descriptive.

Discussion

The first part of this section answers the first question of this paper. In that light, this part discusses the repetition of lexical items (lexical cohesion) Malcolm X employs in 'The Ballot or the Bullet' and how they contribute to the textuality of the speech. The second part answers the second research question by focusing on the literariness espoused in the repetition of the lexical items in question.

Simple Repetition

One major employment of lexical cohesion in 'The Ballot or the Bullet' is that of simple repetition, that is, the repetition of single lexical items of the same or different word classes to create cohesive boundaries between preceding and succeeding words, group of words or thoughts. Below is an example:

Islam is my religion, but I believe my religion is my personal business. It governs my personal life, my personal morals. And my religious philosophy is personal between me and the God in whom I believe; just as the religious philosophy of these others is between them and the God in whom they believe. (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 3)

The foregoing is just one of the portions of 'The Ballot or the Bullet' that employs simple repetition of lexical items that serve the purpose of cohesion. We could see that the word 'religion' and its variant 'religious' appear three times just in the above portion of the speech. Then we see the repetitive use of 'believe', 'God', 'personal' and 'philosophy'. These lexical items form a mental cohesive chain within which the repeated lexical items are the links joining words and groups of words in which thoughts of the speech run. Malcolm X's effective use of words for the particular purpose of lexical cohesive ties contributed tremendously to the textuality of this speech. This style of simple repetition of lexical items for the effect of lexical cohesion permeates 'The Ballot or the Bullet' and gives the speech connections between words, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs, thereby making the entire speech a uniform whole.

Another example from the speech is as follows: 'So we're trapped, trapped, double-trapped, triple-trapped. Anywhere we go we find that we're trapped. And every kind of solution that someone comes up with is just another trap' (Malcolm X, 1964, p. 4).

The cohesive use of the repetition of the verb 'trap' and its variants here is remarkable. 'Trap' appears six times in just this short context. This simple repetition of lexical items contributes tremendously to the textuality of 'The Ballot and the Bullet'. Let us look at a final example of simple repetition in 'The Ballot or the Bullet':

The white man is too intelligent to let someone else come and gain control of the economy of his community. But you will let anyone come in and take control of the economy of your community, control the housing, control the education, control the jobs, control the businesses,... (Malcolm X, 1964, p.3)

From the above we see the cohesive employment of the lexical item 'control' which appears six times in just the above quote. By that, the idea of 'controlling' glides from its first use in the quote right to the last, forming a lexical cohesive tie. Other lexical items which play the same role as 'control' above are 'economy' and 'community'. No doubt, Malcolm X's use of lexical cohesion greatly gives his 'The Ballot or the Bullet' textuality. Malcolm also employs complex repetition as discussed in the following sub-heading.

Complex Repetition

For complex repetition of lexical items, we fall on the words of Hoey (1991) that complex repetition occurs either when two lexical items share a lexical morpheme

but have a different grammatical class or function. While simple repetition of lexical items encompasses words of the same grammatical class, complex repetition involves words of different grammatical classes such as espoused in ‘communicate’ and ‘communication’, where the former is a verb and the latter a noun. In the discussion below, the researcher includes phrases and clauses in which any complexity is demonstrated. Following is an example of complex repetition in Malcolm X’s (1964, p. 5) ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’: ‘An old woman can sit. An old man can sit. A chump can sit. A coward can sit. Anything can sit.’

Here, Malcolm does not rely on single lexical items in contributing to the textuality of his speech. He employs full blown grammatical clauses. In the foregoing quote, we see the similarity that runs through all the clauses – the repetitive use of the verb phrase ‘can sit’, preceded by a noun phrase. While complex repetitions such as we have seen perform the same function of lexical cohesion as we have seen above in the case of simple repetition, it is obvious that the two forms of repetition are distinct. It is noteworthy that the examples discussed in this paper are not the only ones in which lexical cohesion is employed in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’. The speech is full of other examples and since these examples are similar and would warrant the same discussion as seen in the case of the ones used in this paper, the researcher chooses to limit the discussion to a few examples.

Literariness in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’

The second research question seeks to unearth the figurative use of the repetition of the lexical items employed in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’. The most obvious literary device employed in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’ is repetition, a figure of speech that bears the same name with its linguistic counterpart. By repetition as a figure of speech in this paper, we are referring to a family of figures of speech where a key element is repetition, often with the focus of gaining attention or emphasizing importance. One of such repetition employed by Malcolm is alliteration, which is the repetition of a speech sound in a sequence of nearby words. The term is usually applied only to consonants. In this paper, however, the term ‘alliteration’ encompasses all repetitive use of any sound, consonant or vowel. The use of ‘control’ and ‘trapped’ as we have seen above are examples of alliteration in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’.

The significance of the employment of repetition as a dominant figure of speech much as it is the dominant lexical phenomenon in ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’ in itself spells another literary device – rhythm within the domain of repetition as a figure of speech. Repetition of the same lexical structure like that of the same musical note brings rhythm which appeals to the sense of hearing and serves as a memory aid. In that light, the repetition of key words or structures in Malcolm X’s ‘The Ballot or the Bullet’ serves a dual purpose of bringing the core ideas in his speech to the attention of his audience as well as helping them to recollect those ideas which would be possible by the memory aid espoused in those lexical structures employed.

Conclusion

This study shows the dual roles that lexical structures play in Malcolm X's 'The Ballot or the Bullet'. First, they play the role of lexical cohesive ties which contribute to the overall textuality of the speech. Malcolm X's choice of lexical items in 'The Ballot or the Bullet' reveals his broad knowledge of words, as each word or group of words is consciously chosen to serve the purpose of interconnectedness between preceding and succeeding lexical items, making 'The Ballot or the Bullet' a uniform whole. Second, in the same lexical items are espoused repetition as a figure of speech. In the repetition of lexical items, Malcolm X switches between simplicity and complexity, giving variation in rhythm and literary beauty to 'The Ballot or the Bullet', making it one of the greatest speeches in the history of man. All in all, the artistic blend of linguistic and literary phenomena in the 'The Ballot or the Bullet' makes it a masterpiece.

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