

A COMPARATIVE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF HUGHES'S THANK YOU, M'AM AND SANTIAGO'S SOMETHING COULD HAPPEN TO YOU*

Assist. Prof. Dr. Behbood MOHAMMADZADEH
Cyprus International University
behbudm@ciu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Stylistic analysis is one of the most vital features in understanding literary texts. It enhances readers' understanding and interpretation of literary pieces. Short states that "stylistic analysis is a method of linking linguistic form, *via* reader inference, to interpretation in a detailed way and thereby providing as much evidence as possible for and against particular interpretations of texts" (Short, 1996: 27). This study attempts to investigate how Langston Hughes and Esmeralda Santiago use their style of writing in their literary texts. The study applies the checklist of linguistics and stylistic categories introduced by Leech & Short to examine the stylistic differences and similarities between the two texts in terms of the use of adjectives and sentence complexity. In both texts, the former is a fictional short story, and the latter is a non-fictional text, the adjectives and sentence length will be counted and measures. The frequency of adjectives will be compared against the norm in the prose texts and sentences length will be compared against the norm in modern English language.

Keywords: Stylistic analysis; fictional and non-fictional texts; Frequency of adjectives; Sentence length.

INTRODUCTION

Stylistic analysis is one of the most vital features in understanding literary texts. It enhances and enriches readers' understanding and interpretation of literary pieces. Short maintains that "stylistic analysis is a method of linking linguistic form, *via* reader inference, to interpretation in a detailed way and thereby providing as much evidence as possible for and against particular interpretations of texts" (Short, 1996: 27). According to Leech and Short:

Every analysis of style, in our terms, is an attempt to find the artistic principles underlying a writer's choice of language. All writers, and for that matter, all texts, have individual qualities. Therefore the features which call themselves to our attention in one text will not necessarily be important in another text by the same or a different author. There is no infallible technique for selecting what is significant. We have to make ourselves newly aware, for each text, of the artistic effect of the whole, and the way linguistic details fit into this whole. (Leech & Short, 2006: 60).

Thus, considering the above mentioned discussions, the present study focuses on *Thank*

* *This paper was orally presented in the 14th International Stylistics, Language and Literature Symposium in 2014, Izmir.*

You, M'am written by Langston Hughes and *Something Could Happen to You* written by Esmeralda Santiago to examine their style of writing in their literary texts. The study applies the checklist developed by Leech & Short to look at the stylistic differences and similarities between the two texts in terms of the use of adjectives and sentence complexity. In both texts, the former is a fictional short story, and the latter is a non-fictional text, the adjectives and sentence length will be counted and measures. The frequency of adjectives will be compared against the norm in the prose texts and sentences length will be compared against the norm in modern English language.

Aim of the study

The study attempts to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- What kinds of lexical categories and sentence length does Langston Hughes use in *Thank You M'am*?
- 2- What kinds of lexical categories and sentence length does Esmeralda Santiago use in *Something Could Happen To You*?
- 3- What kinds of differences and similarities in terms of style are between Langston Hughes and Esmeralda Santiago?

Methodology

This study uses a stylistic approach to examine the similarities and differences between the writing styles of two short story writers. This is done by the computing the component parts such as the use of adjectives and sentence complexity in these two short stories. The study is mainly quantitative because it counts the number of adjectives and sentence length. In the analysis statistical results from *Thank You M'am* and *Something Could Happen to You* were compared against each other to show similarities and differences among them.

The frequency of adjectives are calculated into percentages and compared to the total number of words and then is compared against the norm of adjective use in imaginative prose, which is 7,8% of the total amount of words used, according to Hofland & Jonasson. The sentence length is calculated against the norm for modern English. Short (337) mentions that Ellegård (in 1978) produced a norm for modern English writing, where the average sentence length is said to have been 17.8 words per sentence. In order to show the length of the sentences in a clear way, they are depicted in diagrams.

Stylistic Analysis of *Thank You, M'am*

Leech and Short in their *Style in Fiction: A Linguistics Introduction to English Fictional Prose* give a checklist of linguistic and stylistic categories which are crucial in stylistic analysis. Finding answers to the subcategories of this checklist they claim:

will give a range of data which may be examined in relation to

the literary effect of each passage. We stress that the list serves a heuristic purpose: it enables us to collect data on a fairly systematic basis. It is not exhaustive, of course, but is rather a list of 'good bets': categories which, in our experience, are likely to yield stylistically relevant information. (Leech & Short, 2006: 61).

Lexical categories, grammatical categories, figures of speech, and cohesion and context are four general headings for the checklist. This study focuses just on lexical and grammatical categories to find out how choice of words involves various types of meaning in two short stories written by Hughes and Esmeralda Santiago.

Lexical categories in *Thank You M'am*

There are five subsections under the lexical categories including general, nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs. This research focus on just one subcategory since focusing on all categories is beyond the capacity of this paper. Therefore, the second item under the lexical categories, the adjectives item is chosen to analyze the number of adjectives and their kind in Hughes's *Thank You M'am*.

Adjectives in *Thank You M'am*

Number of words: 1348

Number of adjectives: 66

Percentage of adjectives: 4.89%

Adjectives are not very frequent in *Thank You M'am*, as listed above, 4.89% of the words are adjectives; compared with the norm which is 7.8%, according to Hofland & Jonasson. If *Thank You M'am*, would have followed the norm, it would have contained 105 adjectives. Thus, Hughes use adjectives less than the norms. He repeats adjectives a lot in his story, for example, *blue* (4 times), *large* (7 times) and *hungry* (3 times), *long* (4 times), *loose* (4 times), *open* (4 times), *suede* (3 times), *right* (2 times), and *weight* (2 times), which gives a total number of 33 words or 2.45% of the adjectives used.

Sentence complexity in *Thank You M'am*

Sentence Length

Number of words: 1348

Number of sentences: 107

Percentage of sentences: 7.93%

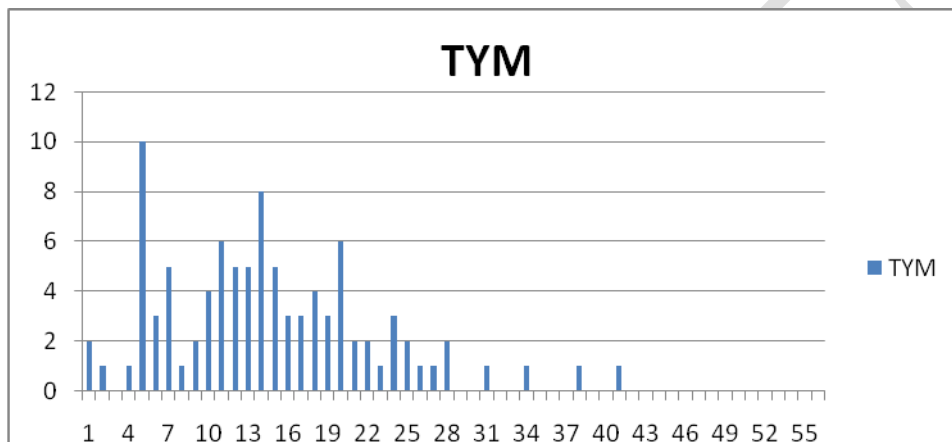
Average sentence length norm for modern English (according to Ellegård): 17.8 words.

Most common sentence length: 5 words used in 10 sentences (9.34% of all the sentences).

Shortest sentence: 1 word used in 1 sentence (0.93% of all the sentences).

Longest sentences: 41 words used in 1 sentence, 38 words used in 1 sentence, 34 words used in 1 sentence.

Diagram1: Diagram one shows the distribution of sentence length in *Thank You M'am*



In Diagram 1 the x-axis shows sentences with one to fifty five words, and the y-axis shows how many times each sentence length occurs. In the Diagram 1, it is clearly seen how the lengths of the sentences are spread out. It is notable that only 33 (30.84%) sentences of the total 107 are above the average norm (17.8), and that 74 (69.15%) sentences are under the norms, according to Ellegård the average is almost 18 words per sentence. Since there are many short dialogues in *Thank You M'am*, this affects the average sentence length; this can be seen by looking at the sentence length in the dialogue in the following examples:

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman.

She did not release him.

"I'm very sorry, lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty.

I got a great mind to wash your face for you.

Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening,"

said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

Hughes uses short sentences and mainly in these conversations uses African American dialect. There are 10 sentences with just five words in each sentence.

Stylistic Analysis of *Something Could Happen To You*

Adjectives in *Something Could Happen To You*

Number of words: 1376

Number of adjectives: 102

Percentage of adjectives: 7.41%

Adjectives are more frequent in *Something Could Happen To You*, as listed above, 7.41% of the words are adjectives; the number is very close which it is compared with the norm which is 7.8%, (Hofland & Jonasson). If *Something Could Happen To You*, would have followed the norm, it would have contained 105 adjectives. Thus, Santiago uses adjectives very close to the norms. She repeats adjectives a lot in his story, for example, *blue* (4 times), *large* (7 times) and *hungry* (3 times), *long* (4 times), *loose* (4 times), *open* (4 times), *suede* (3 times), *right* (2 times), and *weight* (2 times), which gives a total number of 33 words or 2.45% of the adjectives used.

Repetition of adjectives occur a few in *Something Could Happen to You*. Santiago uses adjectives related to physical issues such as small, black, hard and deep to describe the buildings and other aspects of the city.

Sentence Complexity in *Something Could Happen To You*

Number of words: 1376

Number of Sentences: 89

Percentage of Sentences: 6.46%

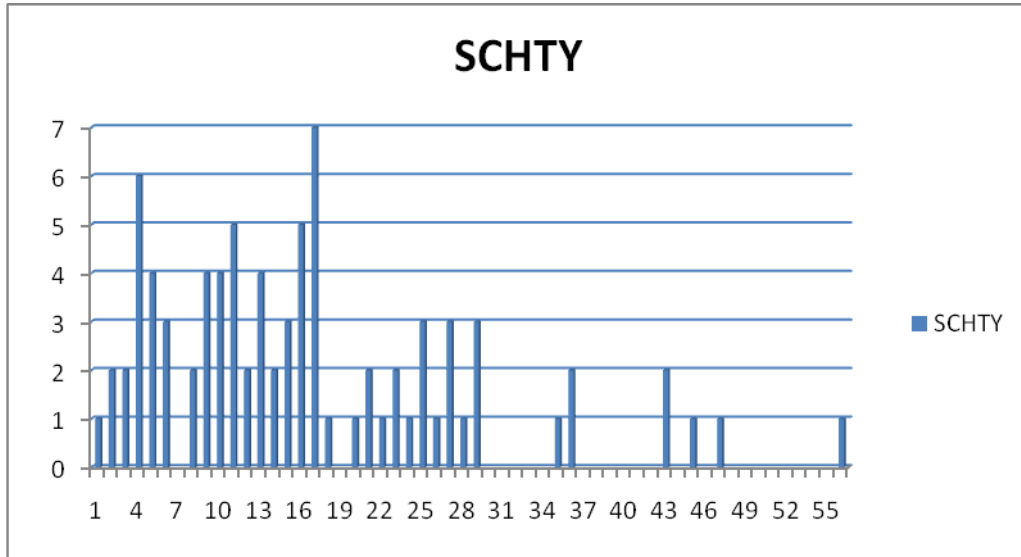
Average sentence length norm for modern English (according to Ellegård): 17.8 words.

Most common sentence length: 5 words are used in 17 sentences (13.48% of all the sentences).

Shortest sentence: 1 word in 1 sentences (1.12% of all the sentences).

Longest sentences: 56 words = 1 sentence, 47 words = 1 sentence, 45 words = 1 sentence.

Diagram 2: Diagram one shows the distribution of vocabularies in *Something Could Happen To You* by Esmeralda Santiago.



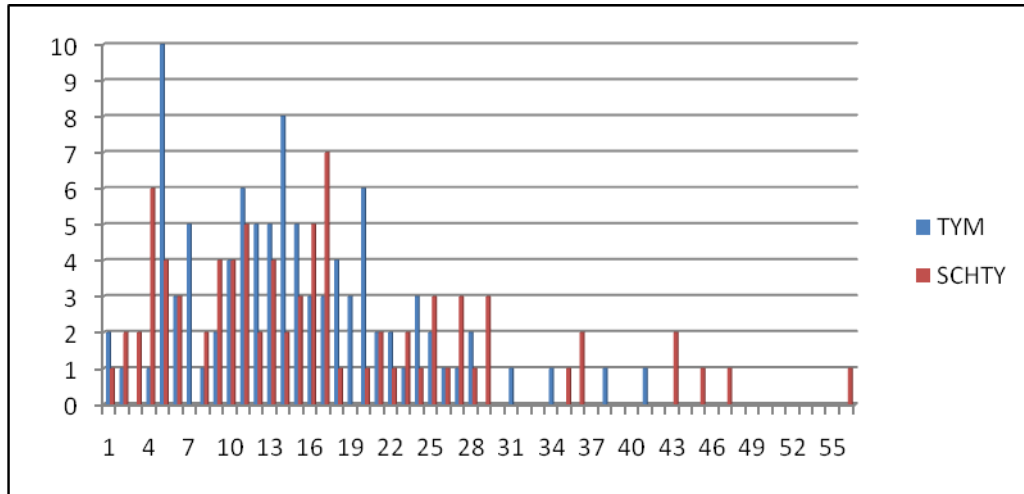
In Diagram 2 the x-axis shows sentences with one to 56 words, and the y-axis shows how many times each sentence length occurs. Notice that only 27 (30.33%) sentences of the 89 in total are above the average norm, 17.8, and that 62 (69.66%) sentences are between one and ten words long. Diagram 2 depicts that the number of short sentences exceeds the number of long sentences. Many of the short sentences contain the dialogue. But even the sentences not containing the dialogue, are often quite short.

Differences and Similarities between *Thank You M'am* and *Something Could Happen To You*.

Adjectives

In *Thank You M'am* 4.89% of all the words and in *Something Could Happen to You* 7.41% of all the words are adjectives, which are both low compared with the norm, which is 7.8%. However, the number of adjectives used by Esmeralda is more than Hughes; this is mainly because writers in creating a piece of non-fictional text use more adjectives to decorate their text. In *Thank You M'am* Hughes uses 14 adjectives to modify his two main characters, while in *Something Could Happen to You* Esmeralda uses 20 adjective to describe the city and the buildings in the city and geographical places.

Sentences Complexity



In Diagram 3, the x-axis depicts sentences with one to fifty five words, and the y-axis shows how many times each sentence length happens. There are 107 (7.93) sentences in *Thank You M'am* and 89 (6.46) sentences in *Something Could Happen to You*, for the ease of analysis approximately the same amount of sentences were calculated from *Something Could Happen to You*; since this short story is longer the *Thank You M'am*. The longest sentence in *Thank You M'am* has 47 word and shortest has one and sentences of the 89 in total are above the norm which is 17.8, and that 62 (69.66%) sentences are between one and ten words long.

Conclusion

The study attempted to examine the writing style of Langston Hughes and Esmerelda Santiago to find out what kinds of different stylistics categories they used to fabricate their stories. Therefore, the study focused on lexical categories and sentence complexity in their two short stories entitled *Thank You M'am* and *Something Could Happen to You*. It used a quantitative method appropriate for displaying the writers' use of adjectives and sentence length. The findings shows that adjectives are not very frequent in *Thank You M'am*, as listed above, 4.89% of the words are adjectives; compared with the norm which is 7.8%, according to Hofland & Jonasson. If *Thank You M'am*, would have followed the norm, it would have contained 105 adjectives. Thus, Hugues uses adjectives less than the norms. On the other hand, the percentage of adjectives in *Something Could Happen To You* is 7.41%, which is also low compared with the norm. Moreover, the number of adjectives used by Esmeralda is more than Hughes; this is mainly because the writer in creating a piece of non-fictional text uses more adjectives to decorate their text. Regarding the sentence length, the percentages of sentence length in both short stories is less than the norm. The average percent is 7.93% in *Thank You M'am* comparing to *Something Could Happen to You* which is 6.46%. According to Ellegård, the average of

sentence length in English language is 17.8 words. This depicts that both writers used shorter sentences comparing to the norms. This can be interpreted in two ways, firstly Hughes, as an African American writer, used many short dialogues to portray the dialects and may be the sufferings of the African Americans in American culture. The use of dialogues lessens the sentence length. Esmeralda's main reason in using short sentences is the necessity of describing the city and the buildings in the city and geographical places.

References

- Bex, T., Burke, M., & Stockwell, P. (Eds.) (2000). *Contextualized stylistics*. Amsterdam: Atlanta.
- Bradford, R. (1997). *Stylistics*. London: Routledge.
- Brown, E. K., & Miller, J. E. (1980). *Syntax: a linguistic introduction to sentence structure*. London: Hutchinson.
- Carter, R., & Simpson, P. (Eds.) (1989). *Language, discourse and literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Chapman, R. (1973). *Linguistics and Literature: An Introduction to Literary Stylistics*. Great Britain : Whitstable Litho Ltd.
- Cherry, K. (1995). *Writing the world*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Jeffries, L., & McIntyre, D. (2010). *Stylistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jindal, D. V., & Syal, P. (2007). *An introduction to linguistics: language, grammar and semantics*. (2nd ed.). New Delhi: Printice-Hall.
- Leech, G. N. (1969). *A linguistic guide to English poetry*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. N., & Short, M. (2007). *Style in fiction: a linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*. London: Longman.
- Leech, G. N. (1985). *Stylistics*. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse and literature*. (pp. 39-57). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
- Norgaard, N., Busse, B., & Montoro, R. (2010). *Key terms in stylistics*. London: Continuum.
- Short, M. (1994). *Exploring the language of poems, plays, and prose*. London: Longman.
- Simpson, P. (2004). *Stylistics: a resource book for students*. London: Routledge.
- Verdonk, P. (2002). *Stylistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wales, K. (1989). *A dictionary of stylistics*. London: Longman.
- Wing, C. (2007). *A Stylistic Approach to The God of Small Things written by Arundhati Roy*. A published MA thesis, Lingnan University.