

A SEMANTIC MAPPING APPROACH TO POETIC TEXTS

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Abstract

Semantic mapping has been recorded to be an effective strategy for text analysis, reading and vocabulary development. Its eclectic nature has resulted in its use in virtually every domain of human endeavour including data management and organisation. However, it is surprising that semantic mapping has not been given its rightful position in the analysis of poetic text. The present study is, therefore, a modest attempt to apply semantic mapping strategy in the analysis of poetic discourse. Accordingly, two poems were used for this purpose and it was found that semantic mapping can help the text analyst to see how words and issues discussed in a poetic text are connected.

Keywords: Semantic mapping, textual analysis, poetry

Introduction

Semantic mapping refers to the process of “connecting word meaning” through a visual representation of a core lexical item and other supporting items derived from the common core. As such, it is a strategy where concepts are graphically represented such that learners are allowed to conceptually explore their knowledge of a new word by mapping it with other related words or phrases that are similar in meaning with the new word. Semantic mapping uses information stored as categories in the memory and provides a reader with the opportunity to relate his or her previous knowledge to new words or concepts (Arua, 2003).

A semantic word map basically gives the reader of a text the room to conceptually explore his or her knowledge of a new word by mapping it with other related words or phrases similar in meaning to the new word. It involves the use of graphical display of word meaning in a way that offers the reader a visual representation of how words and concepts connect to a network of knowledge (Heimlich and Pittelman, 1986). To achieve this, graphic array of knowledge can be combined using circles, squares or triangles and other shapes while linking them to the key word. This view of semantic mapping lies squarely on its relevance as a vocabulary development strategy. Semantic mapping is useful in teaching vocabulary because it “provides the teacher with an assessment of the students’ prior knowledge or schema availability on the topic” (Debate, 2006:24).

Importance of Semantic Mapping to Textual Analysis

Semantic mapping can be a helpful reference for students to use in “clarifying confusing points during reading” (Jones, 2011:14). Students can create their own semantic maps as part of their reading or post-reading activity once they become familiar with how semantic mapping functions in textual analysis. There are two dimensions to semantic mapping which relate to reading. The first is known the visual dimension and the second is known as conceptual dimension (Yulia, Ngadiso and Rochsantiningasih, 2013). The visual dimension of semantic mapping relates to shapes and patterns used in developing the map such as circles, triangles, etc., while the conceptual dimension of semantic mapping deals with all verbal information that is encoded in the map either inside or between the forms which helps in clarifying the relationship that exists between the word or ideas being illustrated or explained through the map.

Again, when applied to literary works especially poetry, semantic mapping can be used to graphically arrange the major or minor ideas they related to the literary text (Sinatra, 1984). Thus, Svenconis

and Kerst (2004:34) observe that such maps help in “constructing visual displays of categories and their relationships”. This allows the reader to explore his or her “knowledge of a new word by creating a map using other related words or phrases similar in meaning to the new word” (Sari, 2013:21). It can be a useful tool in textual summary. According to Clark (2005) semantic mapping helps the reader to organise the information he or she knows about a subject into different categories by visually representing the subject while Heilmlich and Pittelman (1986:18) maintained that semantic mapping offers the reader “a visual representation of how words and concept are related through a network of organised knowledge”. Simply put, semantic mapping is “a graphic array of knowledge which contains nodes, drawn as circles, squares or triangles as a key word which is connected by lines or arrows to show how words and concepts are related through a network of paragraphs in comprehending a text” (Antonacci and O’Callaghan, 1991:26).

Semantic Mapping in Poetic Discourse

The effectiveness of using semantic mapping for general textual analysis has never been in doubt. However, its application in poetic discourse has been surprisingly low. This may be attributed to the fact that semantic mapping requires a lot of creative and innovative thinking as well as takes much time in constructing. However, like Antonacci and O’Callaghan (1991) rightly pointed out using semantic mapping in textual analysis will naturally help the reader to develop word knowledge; activate the reader’s prior knowledge and determine how much background knowledge is required in order for him or her to comprehend the text.

The effectiveness of applying semantic mapping strategy in textual analysis generally and poetic discourse in particular does not only depend on following the right procedure in constructing the map but also striking a balance between the writers purpose and the demands of embarking on a successful semantic mapping process. Thus, for the mapping process to be successful there must be a nexus between the active participation of the reader and his or her willingness to be fully involved in the world of the poem. In other words, only highly engaged readers can successfully use semantic mapping in the study of a poetic text. One of such highly engaged reader is Aboh (2009). The author maintains that semantic mapping helps to account for the coherence of a text in that it has the potential of showing the logical relationship that exists among lexical items within the text.

Aboh used a set of four purposively sampled poems to demonstrate how semantic mapping can be used to connect different sense relations that exist among lexical items project different ideologies within a poetic text. Aboh analysed the lexico-semantic features of the four poems using the semantic mapping strategy. He observed that ideological categories can be imbued in lexical items while the sense relations in a poetic text become clearer when they are presented in a schematic form which semantic mapping makes possible. Thus, he used the linguistic process of semantic mapping to identify and group the four dominant lexical and sense relations in the poems into synonyms, antonyms, collocations and hyponyms, arguing that the thematic preoccupation of the poems should be situated within the socio-political contexts of the texts.

From the foregoing it can be seen that semantic mapping is a highly eclectic strategy for the analysis of textual data. This becomes more pronounced in the analysis of poetic texts because it can be used to clarify both the linguistic and thematic concern of the poetic text as illustrated in Aboh’s work above. Again, semantic mapping has the potential of contributing to a deeper understanding of a word or concept in relation to other related words or concepts since it can work with any word, concept, phrase, event, character or even theme. Thus, semantic mapping can be applied in a number of contexts in order to achieve different purposes.

Types of Semantic Mapping

There are three main types of semantic mapping, viz: sequential semantic mapping; comparative (or contrastive) semantic mapping and thematic semantic mapping (Sinatra, Stahl-Gemake and Berg, 1984: 26). Sequential semantic mapping is also known as narrative semantic mapping. This type of semantic mapping arranges information in several parallel hierarchical strands. The comparative semantic mapping on the other hand is also known as contrastive semantic mapping. This type of semantic mapping shows how class, attributes and examples relate to one another. The third type of semantic mapping is thematic or descriptive semantic mapping. This type of semantic mapping displays elements and details about a person, place, things or simply a topic around a central theme. Again, Thuy (2013: 637) observes that semantic mapping can be

used in conjunction with other semantic elaboration techniques such as ordering, semantic feature analysis and pictorial schemata.

However, the present study will only draw illustrations from the thematic or descriptive semantic mapping format. This is because it is only the thematic or descriptive semantic mapping format which is relevant to the analysis of poetic text generally and the two poems selected for this study in particular. The first poem is written by Emmanuel Inedu and the second poem is written by Basil Ovu. The choice of the poems is informed by their thematic preoccupations as well as the simple stanzaic presentation which make them suitable for the kind of analysis envisaged in the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Semantic mapping has its theoretical basis from the social constructivist theory. Both the social constructivist and cognitive psychologist perspectives came from works of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner. According to this perspective, there is an urgent need for the active participation of readers especially in constructing their experiences from texts. According to Izuagba, Afurobi and Ifegbo (2016), semantic mapping belongs to one of the strategies developed by the constructivist theorists to address the gamut of cognitive activities that underlie textual analysis. Semantic mapping originally emanates from the social constructivists' emphasis on the need to organise learners in such a way that the teacher or more skilled members of the group would provide "a scaffold" that facilitates learning (Izuagba & Nwigwe, 2012:63). Like think-pair-share, peer tutoring, decision tree, etc., semantic mapping is part of cognitive and social constructivist model of organising knowledge as it encourages small group discussions, active reader involvement in a text, high level thinking as well as allows the reader to connect current thematic or reading content with previous knowledge. Again, it promotes deeper understanding of concepts since it enables its user to see concepts from different perspectives.

Justification for Semantic Mapping

The underlying philosophy behind the use of semantic mapping is the fact that it encourages collaborative interaction between the reader and the writer by providing the context where different viewpoints can be orchestrated from which the reader and the writer may form more articulated values or attitudes that enhance the overall analysis and evaluation of the poetic text. Moreover, a number of benefits can be derived from using semantic mapping as a tool for analysing poetic text. These include activation and tapping of the reader's prior knowledge; clarification of concepts; establishment of interrelationship between concepts; promotion of visual connection between concepts; encouragement of collaborative or cooperative reading experience and encouraging group discussion as one of the post reading activities.

Despite the above highlighted justifications for using semantic mapping in analysing poetic texts, it has been discovered that in reality many scholars are reluctant to use it. This is probably as a result of onerous demands that the use of semantic mapping makes on its user. For instance, designing a functional and successful semantic map is time not only time consuming but also mentally tasking. This difficulty involved in designing a workable semantic map might possibly explain why it is hardly applied in the largely content-and-examination oriented Nigerian ESL environment. However, if teachers could be more creative in their teaching, some of the perceived drawbacks against semantic mapping might be circumvented or minimised. This can be achieved by following simple but effective steps such as in identifying the concepts to teach; writing the concept on the board as a keyword; asking the students to think of words that are associated with or related to the keyword; getting the students to group and label the words as well as connecting them to the keyword; modelling the process of creating the semantic map with the keyword; getting the students to construct the semantic map on any designated topic they will be studying; asking the students to add new more words to the map as they discuss the meaning of the new words and where the words fit into the map, and finally having them to add other words to the map as they discuss how the map might be expanded or reorganised to reflect the new information learned.

In summary, the teacher is expected to monitor the progress of the students by examining their subsequent maps, providing appropriate-level reading passages and comprehension questions while

identifying the percentage of the students' correct responses as well as determining whether such students are making satisfactory progress in order to achieve the desired goals of the overall classroom instructions.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Two poems have been selected for analysis in this study, viz: "Too Many Whys" (written by Emmanuel Inedu) and "Unripe Skirt" (written by Basil Ovu). Both poems have a common or corporate thematic preoccupation in terms of their concern with the evils that go on in the world. However, while Inedu's poem represents an existential enquiry into the different causes of human sufferings Ovu's poem is a cry against the sufferings of an innocent young girl who has been subjected to repeated sexual abuse. Thus, the two poems are in agreement in that they both show that the majority of human woes emanate from moral weakness. In other words, both poems show that there is an inherent evil lurking in the heart of man where man in this context is used in a generic sense to refer to all human being; men and women; boys and girls; old and young; black and white; Christians and Moslems, etc.

"Too Many Whys" specifically addresses how wars, starvation, etc contribute to human suffering. The poem also contains some personalised inquiry into the poet's own condition where his individual problems represents only a micro part of the larger suffering found in the society. In this regard, the microcosm within the macrocosm of the turmoil that rocks the world is explored. However, the poem is not all woes as there is a glimmer of hope being that the poet seems to suggest that a living dog is much better than a dead lion. This is found in the last stanza where the poet asks (Lines 27-29):

One last one
Now, why am I not dead
When other are?

In summary, the poem represents an assemblage of different emotions laughter, despondency, wailings, lamentations, sheer amazement, naivety, nostalgia, hope, suggestions and an overwhelming interface between life and death. A semantic mapping of the entire poem is presented below:



Similarly, in “Unripe Skirt,” we are confronted with the problem of girl-child abuse. The poem shows that child marriage breeds child abuse, sexual violence and exploitation. In stanza 1, the persona asks the child molester what he wants from the poor girl if not to ravish her and steal her innocence (Lines 1-4):

What else do you want
From an **unripe** skirt
If not a **delicate** clit
To feed your passion

The highlighted lexical items have something to tell the reader about the unbalanced power structure between the child molester and his victim. First the use of “unripe” with “skirt” underscores the girl’s age and innocence. While it is only fruit that literally gets ripe, qualifying skirt with the word “unripe” shows that the girl is still very young and should rather be left to mature fully. This position is further reinforced by the use of “delicate clit”.

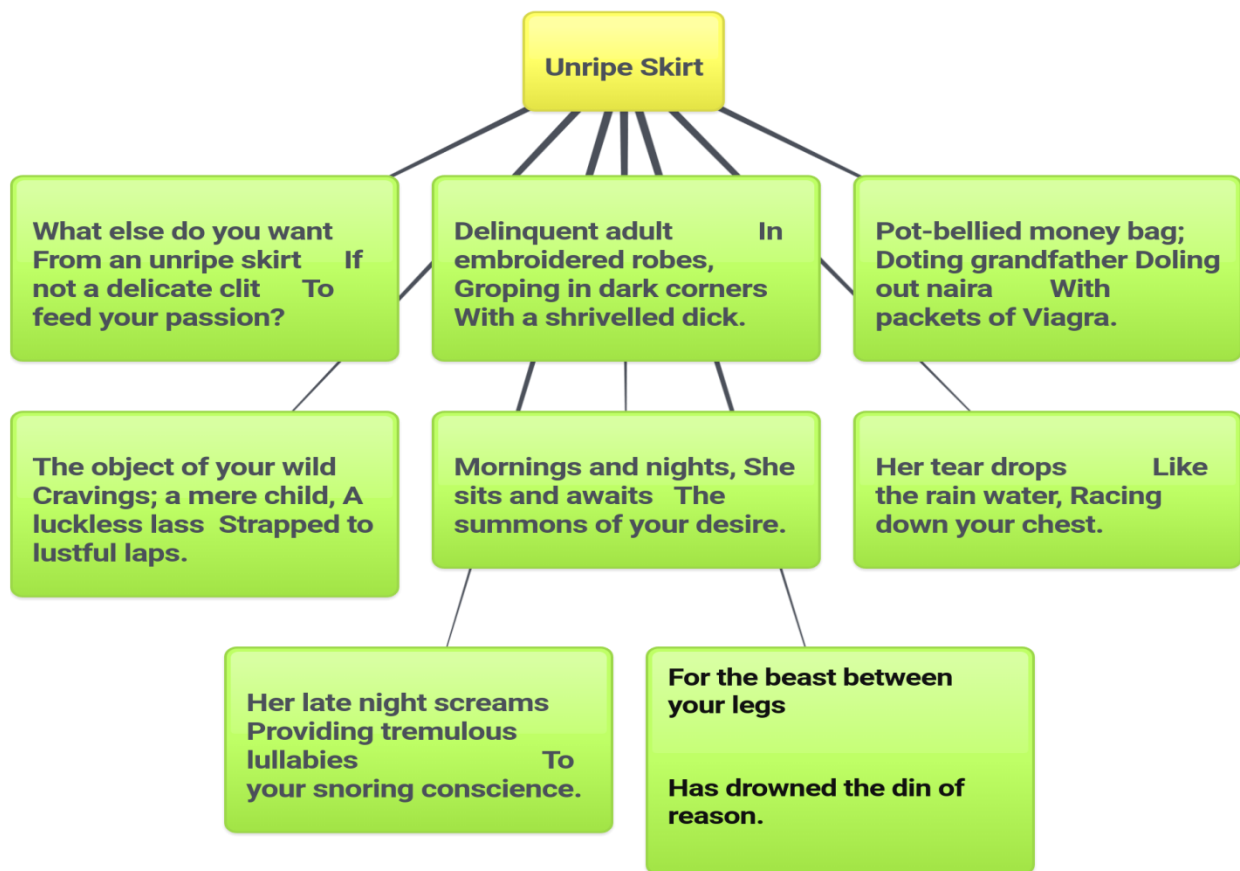
Even the choice of “skirt” instead of girl or any other word shows that the prominent thing that the molester sees in the girl is the sexual pleasure which he will derive from molesting her. This position is further reinforced by the use of “feed your passion”. Again, in stanza 2, the character of the child molester is succinctly captured as he is described as follows (Lines 5-8):

Delinquent adult
In embroidered robes
Groping in dark corners
With a **shrivelled** dick

The juxtaposition of “**delinquent**” and “**adult**” shows that although the man may have appeared physically mature, he is not mentally fit to be left with a child being that he lacks the mental discipline to control his thoughts and refrain from actions that even many youths would frown upon. Again, while he is rich physically, he is poor mentally and spiritually. This makes him not only morally debased but spiritually blind as he has been “*Groping in dark corners*” (Line 7). Even his instrument of evil trade is incapable of pleasuring a full grown woman as it has become “*a shrivelled dick*” (Line 8).

The above pattern of description is sustained even in stanza 3, where he is described as “Pot-bellied money bag” (Line 9), which shows that he is both physically and morally repulsive. Although he acts like a “Doting grandfather” (Line 10), his pretend philanthropy is full of motives because as he is always “Doling out naira/With packets of Viagra” (Lines 11 & 12). In stanza 4, the victim is described as “A luckless lass/Strapped to lustful laps” (Lines 15 & 16) who sits all mornings and nights to await “The summons” of her molester’s “desire” (stanza, Line 19) even as “Her tear drops/Like the rain water/Racing down” her molester’s “chest” (stanza 6, Lines 20, 21 & 22).

The sorry condition of the little girl is further reiterated in stanza 7 where the poet remarks that “Her late night screams” provide “tremulous lullabies” to her molester’s “snoring conscience” (Lines 23, 24 & 25). The poet concludes by stating that the child molester lacks both the brain and the conscience to act like a normal person because he is being controlled by his libido rather than his brain or heart. This is presented in the following lines: For the beast between your legs/Has drowned the din of reason (Lines 26 & 27). A semantic mapping of the entire poem is presented below:



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Conclusion

Both poems make some audacious statements about the human condition. However, while the first poem cries out against the suffering and violence perpetrated in the world and the evil that lurks in the hearts of man, the second poem cries out against sexual violence and child abuse through the help of some unusual use of adjectives. It is, therefore, recommended that further studies be carried out to ascertain the effects of emotive use of words in both poems on their readers.

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