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Defamiliarizing reality: AS IF and SEEM in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Introduction

A homodiegetic narrator of the novel, Azaro is an *àbíkú* – “a child who is supposed to have come back after death to the mother and born again” (Crowther 2002, 3). In the attempt of breaking this never-ending circle between life and death, he sets out to stay in the world of the living, for “it is terrible to forever remain in-between” (*The Famished Road*, 4)¹. In doing so, he accepts the irreconcilable duality of being both a child and a spirit, as he explains in the opening pages of the novel: “[w]e are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world”. Strangeness is therefore a key notion in the novel. Ontologically torn by this in-betweenness, Azaro belongs neither to the “real” physical world nor to the “also real” spiritual world (Guignery 2013, 80):

[...] because Azaro desires to stay in the real world while at the same time refusing to break links with that of his spirits companions, both real world and that of spirits are rendered problematically equivalent in his experience. (Quayson 1997, 122)

Azaro is indeed strange, in that he is foreign and thus estranged by other people: “In short, my spirit companions played havoc with my

¹ Okri, Ben. 1992 [1991]. *The Famished Road*. London: Vintage. All quotations refer to this edition. We shall henceforth refer to this novel by “FR”.

education. They made me strange to the other children, and so I didn't have many friends" (*Songs of Enchantment*, 5)².

This inherent strangeness determines the way he conceives reality. In Cognitive Grammar, "conceived reality" refers to "what a conceptualizer currently accepts as established knowledge" (Langacker 2008, 298). Because he often oscillates "between both worlds" (FR, 8), Azaro often unveils an uncanny reality that remains inaccessible to the reader. This perceptual asymmetry is evidenced by the expression "no one could see": "I felt on the edge of reality. Madame Koto's bar seemed like a strange fairyland in the real world, a fairyland that no one could see" (FR, 208). The very nature of reality is therefore defamiliarized insofar as, seen through the eyes of an *àbikú*, it becomes hybrid: "[w]henver he looks at reality, he does it through the eyes of a spirit as well as through those of a human being, so everything is both ordinary and transfigured, simultaneously" (Deandra 1994, 80).

As explained by Langacker (2008, 297), reality is indeed necessarily conceived by a speaker:

We are always striving to make sense of our experience and construct a coherent view of the world. [...] each of us develops a conception of reality, defined here as the history of what has occurred up through the present moment. (Langacker 2008, 297)

In Cognitive Grammar, the notion of *reality* "includes both events and stable situations that obtain at any period" and has several dimensions (Langacker 2008, 297):

Besides physical occurrences, it encompasses the social and mental phenomena that constitute so much of the world we experience and talk about. And because it encompasses the mental, reality has many levels and dimensions.

In line with this argument, the present study is concerned with the way clausal grounding in the novel captures Azaro's conception of reality. Clausal grounding "indicates the status of a profiled occurrence with respect to a reality conception" (Langacker 2008, 298) and is operated by a "tense-modal complex" that locates the grounded process in reality or

² Okri, Ben. 1994 [1993]. *Songs of Enchantment*. London: Vintage. All quotations refer to this edition. We shall henceforth refer to this novel by "SE".

unreality (2008, 298). In this respect, SEEM and AS-IF clauses reflect Azaro's effort to make sense of reality and thus convey his conception of reality. It is argued that SEEM and AS IF-clauses are key ingredients of the process of defamiliarization at work in *The Famished Road*. These grammatical patterns are indeed pivotal instruments of clausal grounding in the linguistic economy of the novel. Their recurring use creates a textual world in which reality, possibility and unreality are intermingled. For this hybrid reality to arise, Ben Okri's writing deconstructs the reality conceived by the reader by way of rigorous textual construction. But as explained by Langacker (2008, 297), "one thing we accept as real is the existence of other conceptualizers whose conceptions of reality differ from our own". In other words, the textual construction in *The Famished Road* is an invitation for the reader to accept Azaro's defamiliarized and hybrid reality as *also real*.

It will be shown that while the semantics of SEEM implies Azaro's incapacity to determine the ontological status of the percept, AS IF-clauses induce a comparison that locates the propositional content of the main clause in the realm of hypotheticality, thus creating a series of possible worlds. While conveying Azaro's effort to rationalize reality, SEEM and AS IF-constructions paradoxically defamiliarize it.

« Each reality can have its alternative possibilities »

The interplay between reality, possibility and unreality appears on a linguistic level. Clausal grounding in *The Famished Road* sheds light on the way the spirit-child conceives the reality around him. In this section, it is argued that the use of SEEM in the novel plays a part in the creation of a mind style, as defined by Semino (2002, 197):

The notion of 'mind style', on the other hand, is most apt to capture those aspects of world views that are primarily personal and cognitive in origin, and which are either peculiar to a particular individual, or common to people who have the same cognitive characteristics. These aspects include an individual's characteristic cognitive habits, abilities and limitations, and any beliefs and values that may arise from them. [...] These different aspects of world views are intimately related, of course, and they are all "cognitive" in the sense that they involve long-term memory and cognitive processes.

A textual world of possibilities

One must *see* the world in order to be able to *conceive* it, as evidenced by the verbal landscape of *The Famished Road*. A quantitative analysis of the pattern “I + lexical verb” was carried out³, showing that in the novel, the sequence “I saw” is the most frequent with a total 254 occurrences. The prevalence of this sequence seems to indicate that vision is Azaro’s principal mode of interaction with reality. In other words, the *àbikú*’s reality is first and foremost a series of *percepts*.

But his perception of reality is for the reader a defamiliarized one. Azaro is indeed the fictional incarnation of the poet described in Okri (1997, 5), the “alchemist”, who feels, explores and “remake[s] the world in words, from dreams” (1997, 3). This poetic apprehension of the world is materialized in the passage below:

(1) I followed her up to our street, towards Madame Koto’s bar. I hung in the shadows, and the shadows whispered at me. I hid behind clump of bushes, and I heard the leaves talking. [...] The Elysian women broke suddenly into song. Their celestial voices made me notice that there was full moon in the sky. There were no stars out and the sky itself was oceanic, serene in its immanence, and of the deepest blue. I came to the harmonic cluster of wild flowers. They seemed to contain their own light; and their colours – red and blue and white – had the soaring patterned illumination of medieval paintings. I was gazing into their mysterious beauty when a voice in my head said [...]. (SE, 84)

The verbs of perception “heard”, “gazing”, hint at Azaro’s synesthetic experience of the world, while the verb phrase “talking” in “the leaves talking” along with the noun phrases “the celestial voices” and “a voice” indicate the vividness of the sensory experience. But it is noteworthy that the rendering of those percepts blurs the boundary between reality and unreality. The hypallagical use of the verbs “talking” and “whispered” gives human properties to the inanimate entities “leaves” and “shadows”. The “voices” heard by Azaro are etherealized by the attributive adjectival phrase “Elysian” (“Elysian women”) and the Latin root of the adjective “celestial” (i.e. *heavenly*) reinforces their otherworldly dimension. Although it takes place in the physical world, the experience is resolutely spiritual, mythological (“Elysian”) and religious (“celestial”).

³ All the quantitative analyses exposed in this article have been carried out with the textometry software TXM: <http://textometrie.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?rubrique96&lang=en>.

This experience is unmistakably visual. The picturesqueness of the description is highlighted by the metaphor “the sky was oceanic”. The adjective “oceanic” poetically associates the sky to the ocean to refer to the blue colour of the sky. Yet, the meaning of this adjective is multi-faceted: it functions as a predicative adjective that denotes the depths of the sea to metaphorically refer to the immensity of the sky. And this metaphorical association between two different elements (the sea and the sky) is evidence that nature, and therefore reality itself, is defamiliarized. The hypallagical use of the adjective “serene” endows the sky with a human quality, which echoes the description of the “leaves talking”.

A defamiliarization of reality is also at play in the association of the semantically conflicting adjectives “harmonic”/ “wild” in the NP “the harmonic cluster of wild flowers”, giving this scene a sense of artistic order. The perception verb used to describe Azaro’s visual experience (“gazing”) is significantly followed by the goal preposition “into”, as if Azaro wanted to *penetrate* reality rather than merely *contemplating* it.

Azaro’s percepts are indeed often characterized by their ontological instability. His apprehension of reality is frequently unstable (“When I was sure I wasn’t imagining the mist [...]”, FR, 55). In this perspective, the prevalence of the verb phrase “saw” preceded by the pronoun “I” is worth commenting upon. As explained by Radden & Dirven (2007, 245), “perception and cognition involve no external causation and a higher degree of control by the experiencer than emotion, which is further reinforced by the frequent use of *can* in its ability with verbs of perception”. But it turns out that that the sequence “I could see” is absent from the novel, which may be construed as the linguistic evidence that Azaro has no control over his own perceptions. Azaro *sees* and does not *look* because the polymorphic nature of reality imposes itself on him. In the aforementioned passage, the prepositional object “at me” in “the shadows whispered at me” subtly indicates that Azaro is a victim of his perception rather than an intentional experiencer. But as the voice of a stone explains, “The less you look, the more you see” (SE, 85): as if losing control over one’s perceptions were necessary to have full access to the invisibility of things.

Seeing and Seeming

Perceptual instability is linguistically encoded by the recurring use of the verb *seem*. The verb *seem* denotes Azaro’s effort to achieve

“epistemic control” (Langacker 2017, 15), that is to obtain “knowledge of the world” and its use indicates that the experiencer cannot assert the reality of the state of affairs he is perceiving. We are here concerned with evidentiality, defined “as pertaining to the source of information, the evidence on which a statement is based, its perceptual basis, reliability of knowledge, or the speaker’s attitude towards the validity of information” (Langacker 2017, 18). It is noteworthy that these grammatical patterns appear in the novel with almost the same frequency as “I saw” (241 occurrences). This parallelism is relevant in that Azaro is the focalizer of the trilogy, and what *seems to be* is inevitably related to the way he perceives the world.

As explained by Usonienė & Šinkunienė (2013, 283), *seem* “has always been regarded as a (semi)copular verb which can be used in a broad range of patterns”. In the novel, this verb can be preceded by surface subjects and followed by a TO-complement clause (2) (3). Another pattern is *seem* preceded by the pronoun “it” in IT-extrapositions, and followed by an AS IF-clause (4). Finally, *seem* appears in interpolated clauses (4).

(2) When I was very young I had a clear memory of my life stretching to other lives. There were distinctions. Sometimes **I seemed** to be living several lives at once. (7)

(3) I tried not to sleep that night and tried not to move either, for even in the darkness **all the statues seemed** to be alive. **The images seemed** to breathe, to be watching my every movement, to be listening to my thought. (13)

(4) **It seemed** as if the whole world **was** there. (15)

(5) Then I realized that more people were pouring in from the doorway, materialising, **it seemed**, from the night air. (134)

In Chapter 7 (book 2), the seemingly never-ending outpour of customers in the bar points to Azaro's loss of control over his perception. In (5), the use of “it seemed” questions the truthfulness of what Azaro sees: he only weakly asserts the materialisation he is witnessing – or that he thinks he is witnessing – thereby modalizing reality. The position of “it seemed” in the whole clause is, in this respect, quite meaningful: it functions as an interpolated clause that expresses Azaro’s assessment of the reality he perceives. As such, it can be suppressed, since its presence is not necessary for the whole clause to remain grammatically correct: “Then I

realized that more people were pouring in from the doorway, materializing from the night air”. Later in chapter 10 (FR, 162), Azaro goes off to find his mother at the marketplace. Once he has arrived, reality becomes blurred and the figure of his mother suddenly omnipresent. He sees her in every person (“their faces were like Mum’s in her suffering and their voices”). The unreality of this perception is suggested by the verb phrases “many voices that **could have been** Mum’s”/ “many faces that **could have been** hers”, in which the combination of modal “could” and “have been” conveys an unreal meaning. The anaphoric repetition of the verb phrase “I saw” is then another sign of this hallucinatory perception:

(6) [...] I began to see Mum everywhere. I saw her writhing **in** the basin of eels. I saw her **amongst** the turtles **in** the plastic buckets. I saw her **among** the amulets of the seller of charms. I saw her all over the market [...] I felt her everywhere [...]. (FR, 162)

The frenetic movement of Azaro’s eyes is conveyed by the series of symmetrically disposed locative prepositions (“in”/ “amongst”/ “in”/ “among”) and the paratactic syntax of the paragraph.

The use of evidentiality to express the conceptualizer’s epistemic uncertainty vis-à-vis the nature of reality is a stylistic feature of Okri’s writing. The same technique is used in *Astonishing the Gods*, as illustrated by the passage below:

(7) The buildings, all **apparently** empty, loomed everywhere. They attracted the lights, they gave off an air of grandeur and majesty, and yet they **seemed to** hang in midspace. They **appeared to** rest on nothing, suspended. Even the great churches, with their golden domes and their moody spires, **seemed to be made** of an ethereal substance. The buildings, in their perfection, **looked like** some kind of dream-created illusion. He was puzzled by the monumentality of things and their **apparent** lightness. (AG, 8-9)

For the reader, reality loses its ontological foundations. The invisible protagonist of *Astonishing the Gods* only perceives a deconstructed reality: a reality that *seems to be* and that is, in this respect, only the *image of itself*. Again such a foregrounding of appearance is worth commenting on, as the deconstruction of reality here rests on a finely elaborated stylistic construction. Language itself seems to be taking a subservient role in the portrayal of this *seeming* reality, as the text is held together by a series of verbs, adjectives and adverbs with an evidential shade of meaning: “apparently”, “seemed to”, “appeared to”, “seemed to

be”, “looked like apparent”. But paradoxically, although the conceptualizer of the passage is unable to describe with certainty the essence of the reality he is witnessing, he does assert with certainty that what he is seeing is indeed a *seeming* reality. In other words, the ontological instability itself is asserted, even though SEEM only weakly asserts. This asserted instability transpires in the choice not to use IT-extrapositions: “**they** seemed to hang in midspace”, “[**t**]hey appeared to rest on nothing”, “**the great churches**, with their golden domes and their moody spires, seemed to be made of an ethereal substance”. There is a stylistic difference between those constructions and the choice of a dummy “it” as a subject of IT-extrapositions. The construction “it seemed that they hanged in midspace” provides a more indirect experience of this *seeming* reality, as if some reflective distance were taken to make sense of the percept. The use of an IT-extrapolation would indeed convey the “speaker’s attitude towards the validity of information” (Langacker 2017, 18), and therefore a reflexive distance, while the use of “they” as a subject of “seemed” implies that the ontological instability is asserted, based on an immediate “perceptual basis” (Langacker 2017, 18). Okri’s writing thus offers a more immediate portrayal of this ontological instability.

Because SEEM only weakly asserts, its recurrence in the novel indicates that ontological in-betweenness and epistemic uncertainty are intrinsic components of Azaro’s conceived reality. Strangeness is ingrained, as it were, in his mode of experience:

(8) And when the spaces in the street began to expand, as if sunlight were being released from the objects, transfiguring the area into an expanse of sacred field, **I realised with a shock that it was the strangeness which was so familiar** (18)

Making sense of reality

In this section, it will be shown that the prevalence of AS IF/ AS THOUGH-clauses hints at the impossibility for Azaro to describe his “conceived reality” (Langacker 2008). His version of reality would be unspeakable, were it not for his resort to comparisons: “the door shook and the banging became so wild and erratic **it seemed as if the wind and thunder wanted to be let in**”.

Alternative reality

With 304 occurrences, AS IF is the most frequent subordinating conjunction in the novel. Semantically akin to the latter, AS THOUGH occurs thirty-one times, which, combined with AS IF, amounts to a total of 335 occurrences. It thus appears that these two subordinating conjunctions are foregrounded in the novel. Comparing the use of AS IF/ AS THOUGH with other subordinating conjunctions allows one to have a clearer sense of this foregrounding: the conjunction EVEN IF is only used seven times, while IF is used 80 times.

Huddleston and Pullum (2002, 1151) explain that AS IF and AS THOUGH induce an analogy between two states of affairs, while implying the unreality of their resemblance. As such, those conjunctions can introduce a clause whose head verb expresses “irreality”, that is a process that is “not accepted by C [the conceptualizer] as real” (Langacker 2008, 302). Special attention will be thus paid to constructions involving AS IF followed either by V-ED or *irrealis*-WERE (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, 149) or by an *Irrealis*-Past Perfect.

(9) And when the spaces in the street began to expand, **as if sunlight were being released from the objects**, transfiguring the area into an expanse of sacred field, I realised with a shock that it was the strangeness which was so familiar” (FR,18)

(10) We passed a tree that had been felled. Red liquid dripped from its stump **as if the tree had been a murdered giant whose blood wouldn't stop flowing**. (FR,16)

The recurring use of AS IF/THOUGH-clauses reflect Azaro's effort to make sense of reality in exposing its complexity to the reader. The example below is telling evidence of Azaro's distorted perception and interpretation of reality.

(11) The crowd jostled me, blocking my way as though they were deliberately trying to prevent my escape, while not seeming to do so. (FR,134)

The logical contradiction is here implied by both manner adjuncts (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, 151) “as though they were [...]”/ “while not seeming to do so” casts light on the discrepancy between the apparent objectivity of the percept (“they jostled him”) and the impossibility to comprehend it (“while not seeming to do so”). The *as though*-clause

introduces a comparison between the way the crowd impedes Azaro's progression and the way they would be acting if they were indeed deliberately trying to retain him in the bar. Here the negative polarity of SEEM ("not seeming") deconstructs the appearances of the percept (*the crowd doesn't actually seem to be trying to prevent my escape*).

In this perspective, AS IF/AS THOUGH-clauses hint at an attempt to make sense of reality. But because reality is as "strange" as the *àbikú*, as unstable and ineffable, comparison is a necessary device to describe it:

(12) A cat cried out as if it had been thrown on to a fire. (FR, 11)

(13) When I saw her next she was wearing the white beads round her neck. She came to the fire and threw some ingredients into the cauldron. The soup made a curious hiss, almost of protestation. It bubbled turbulently within the cauldron. Then it foamed and spilled over, nearly putting out the fire; Madame Koto said to the soup:

'Be quiet!'

The fire blazed. And to my astonishment the soup became calm, **as if it had never been boiling.** (FR, 102)

Paradoxically, Azaro's attempt to interpret his perceptions defamiliarizes the reality conceived by the reader. It is worth noting that the verb phrases "cried out" and "made a curious hiss", as well as the adjective "calm" are all associated to non-human entities. Although reference is made to the soup by way of impersonal "it", the soup seems to be driven by a will of its own, thus becoming an agent – "it bubbled [...] it foamed and spilled over" – or more specifically, an addressee to whom it is possible to give orders.

Modal fuzziness

As explained by Langacker (1991, 548), the linguistic operation of grounding "is prerequisite to the formation of a nominal or a finite clause". This operation is carried out whenever the speaker utters an "epistemic predication", that is, a "predication that locates a thing or process with respect to the ground in fundamental 'epistemic' domains pertaining to reality and speaker/hearer knowledge" (1991, 548). Every final clause is therefore grounded.

AS IF/AS THOUGH play an interesting part in the clausal grounding at work in the novel. It has been seen earlier that these

conjunctions presuppose an unreal resemblance between the relation expressed by the content of two propositions. But because the whole novel is written in the past tense, AS IF/AS THOUGH-clauses may well be grammatically construed as the mere result of a backshift, in which case example (12) below would derive from *A cat is crying as if it has been thrown on to a fire*:

(12) A cat cried out as if it had been thrown on to a fire. (FR, 11)

Construed as such, indeed, example (12) expresses an open possibility (Huddleston & Pullum 2002, 1152), thus raising doubts as to the epistemic domain in which the process profiled by THROW is located – unreality or possibility. Clausal grounding is here characterized by a modal indeterminacy (possibility or unreality?), echoing the idea that for Azaro, “each reality can have its alternative possibilities” (Okri 1997, 40). In other words, it is unclear whether Azaro places his percept into a “potential reality” – that is, the “paths that are especially likely to be followed” (Langacker 2008, 306) or to have been followed, in the case of a past reality (*the cat may have been thrown on to a fire*) – or into the realm of irreality.

For the spirit-child, to make sense of the world is to create a possible world. It is noteworthy that the anaphoric use of AS IF-clauses is another stylistic feature of *Astonishing the gods*:

(14) One moment in was in the middle of the shimmering chessboard square, and the next moment he found himself wandering over streets of polished glass, wandering through alleys paved **as if with stained-glass windows**. Light poured upwards from below **as if the island’s relationship with the moon and sky had become inverted**. (AG, 8)

Here the subordinating clause “as if with stained-glass window” presupposes the possibility that the alleys might be made of stained-glass windows. What is expressed here is not so much the unreality of a resemblance as the attempt to make sense and interpret the percept. But in doing so, the invisible protagonist is creating possible worlds in his own reality: he is indeed wandering through alleys that *might have been paved with stained-glass windows*. Because “there are no longer any frontiers between the imagination and the world” (Okri 1997, 43), the percept can only be described by way of hypotheses. These hypotheses can also be detected in AS-IF-clauses with head verbs that occur in the modal preterite (15) or with past perfect aspect (16).

(15) In the early hours of the morning, before dawn had broken, and when night was beginning to change mood, there were urgent knocks on the door. The door shook and the banging became so wild and erratic it **seemed as if the wind and thunder wanted** to be let in. (27)

(16) A crack sounded, like a tree splitting, and I saw the owl falling, **as though it had been shot in the mid-air of a dream**. It landed on the earth and struggled, wings flapping feebly.

Depending of the grammatical pattern at play, Azaro shows a different reflective attitude. In (15), the perceptive and interpretative processes are concomitant: <the door – shake; the banging – become so wild and erratic> occurs simultaneously with Azaro's effort to make sense of it, "as if the wind wanted to be let in". It is worth noting the nominalized form "the banging", erasing the subject of the original verb *bang*, as if to reinforce the mystery of Azaro's percept. In (16), however, the possibility of <it – had been shot> is anterior to Azaro's seeing the owl. But although those examples both contain a modal tense or aspect, the respective presuppositions of the AS IF/ AS THOUGH-clauses cannot be said to be resolutely unreal. That the owl was shot in the mid-air of a dream is hypothetical. Again, for the reader the ontological foundations of reality are deconstructed by a refined semantic construction, that mixes unreality and possibility.

Conclusion

AS IF-clauses and SEEM thus defamiliarize reality, for they shed light on its strangeness, its ineffable complexity. But unlike the reader, Azaro considers that possible worlds are actually intrinsic to reality and not abstract alternative worlds: "I have heard it said that there are two shadow worlds to every reality. I have also heard it said that every possibility is a reality existing simultaneously with the real" (*Infinite Riches*, 222). To get over this sense of defamiliarization, the reader of *The Famished Road* is thus forced to adopt Azaro's mode of experience:

If the text of *The Famished Road* sometimes provokes confusion in the reader's mind when it is difficult to clearly identify which creatures and events are real and which are supernatural, it also seems to invite the reader to acknowledge the existence of several dimensions of reality. (Guignery 2013, 114)

In this perspective, AS IF and SEEM are linguistic invitations to recreate reality. Through the medium of Azaro, the writer and the reader work hand in hand the creation of a new world:

The writer, functioning in magical medium, an abstract medium, does one half of the work, but the reader does the other. The reader's mind becomes the screen, the place, the era. To a large extent, readers create the world from words, they invent the reality they need. Reading, therefore, is a co-production between the writer and reader. (Okri 1997, 33)

But such a task can only be performed if reality is defamiliarized and deconstructed: "the best way to recognize reality and artistically relate to it is to depart from it" (Yai 1993, 113).

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