

A STYLISTIC READING OF SELECTED PAST WEST AFRICAN SENIOR SCHOOL  
CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION COMPREHENSION PASSAGES (2011-2020)

<sup>1</sup> EMMANUEL JOLAOLU ADEGBENRO, <sup>2</sup>ABOSEDE GRACE MAYADENU

<sup>1</sup> *Department of English, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria,  
adegebenro.emmanuel@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng, +2348067383440, Corresponding Author*

<sup>2</sup> *Department of English, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Nigeria,  
Abosedegrace.mayadenu@oouagoiwoye.edu.ng, +234 8036770456*

The study considered a stylistic reading of selected past West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) comprehension passages to unravel the linguistic peculiarity of the texts to guide students preparing for such examinations. Ten comprehension passages from 2011 to 2020 were sampled using both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The two approaches became relevant for finding the statistics of the occurrence of linguistic variables and for textual explication. The study relied on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic theoretical framework. The findings showed that four linguistic elements were pervading and hold significant implications for candidates studying WASSCE: sentence types, grammatical names, figurative expressions, and replacing words/phrases with alternative words/phrases as used within context. Regarding sentence types, WASSCE passages deliberately featured simpler sentences (51.8%) to make the passages accessible to the students. However, other types of sentences were sparingly but randomly engaged to provide room for varying sentence types in comprehension passages. It was also found that questions on grammatical names featured a preponderance of clauses (80%) than phrases (20%). The adverbial clause tops the list of most featured grammatical names by 60% to underscore the utility purposes of the grammatical item in structures. In addition, metaphors and similes were the most persistent literary devices, with the former accounting for 60%. Lastly, on substituting words for other words within a context, adjectives were the most frequently featured (37 %). The study concluded that the pedagogical significance of stylistics in understanding examination texts cannot be overemphasised. Therefore, it is suggested that stylistics be incorporated into reading comprehension instruction to enhance learners' interpretive and analytical skills.

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#### Introduction

The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), administered by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), includes comprehension passages as a significant component of English Language papers. WAEC underscores the importance of these passages in evaluating students' readiness for higher education and their overall language proficiency. The examination framework is designed to test a range of skills, including comprehension, vocabulary, and critical analysis, which are crucial for academic and professional success (Onuka & Akinyemi 2012:35).

Despite the importance of comprehension passages for assessing students' reading and critical thinking skills, there is a lack of in-depth stylistic analysis of these passages used by WASSCE and similar examinations to explore their linguistic characteristics in order to adequately equip the candidates. The gap created by a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic features employed in these passages in relation to students' ability to effectively engage with and interpret the texts has implications for education. Therefore, there is a need to conduct a stylistic analysis of selected past WASSCE comprehension

passages to uncover the underlying patterns to enhance both educators' and students' insights into the texts, thereby facilitating more effective reading comprehension strategies in the examination context. This study aims to identify the stylistic devices used by WASSCE in selected comprehension passages, explore how these stylistic devices contribute to the overall purpose of the passages, and examine the effectiveness of the stylistic choices made by writers in conveying their messages.

By analysing the stylistic elements used in past WASSCE comprehension passages, students can improve their understanding of texts. It can also help readers grasp intended and embedded meanings more effectively. Studying stylistic analysis used in the passages will encourage students to think critically about the choices made by writers in conveying their messages. Furthermore, understanding the styles employed in these comprehension passages will be of tremendous benefit to the students preparing for WASSCE and similar examinations. By familiarizing themselves with common stylistic devices and structures found in comprehension passages, students can approach examination questions with greater confidence and proficiency.

The educational benefits of stylistic analysis in language teaching have been well-documented. Widdowson (1975: 63) advocates for the inclusion of stylistic analysis in the language curriculum, arguing that it helps students appreciate the richness of language and develop critical thinking skills. Jeffries and McIntyre (2010:250) have also shown that stylistic analysis can significantly enhance students' interpretive abilities and their overall engagement with texts. Moreover, Short (1996:98) has considered the benefits of stylistics in developing students' writing skills, arguing that its understanding will enhance effective writing on the part of the students thereby

improving their writing by consciously employing similar technique. In the same vein, Adegbite (2005:50) highlights how stylistic analysis can be used to teach examination strategies. Crystal (2003:45) and Carter (2012:87) emphasize the importance of stylistic analysis in understanding language use in educational contexts. While Crystal (2003) highlights how stylistic features such as register, tone, and rhetorical devices can affect comprehension and interpretation, Carter (2012) discusses the pedagogical implications of stylistics, advocating for its inclusion in language education to enhance students' analytical skills and language awareness.

However, there remains a gap in the stylistic interrogation of WASSCE past comprehension passages to underpin the examination body's peculiarity. This research therefore considers a stylistic analysis of selected past WASSCE comprehension passages between 2011 and 2020 to identify recurrent linguistic trends for helping students in subsequent WASSCE and similar examinations.

### **Literature Review**

The concept 'style' from which 'stylistics' stemmed from is an amorphous terminology. Its meaning depends on different factors dictated by individuals, situations, periods, and forms. This is the reason Leech and Short (2007) describe style as "the way in which language is used in a given context, by a given person, for a given purpose" (p. 11). Widdowson (1975:3) defines stylistics as "the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation". From the definitions offered by the two scholars, it becomes obvious that what the former refers to as 'language' is what the later means by 'linguistic orientation'. Lawal (1997) supports this argument by describing style as an aspect of language that deals with choices of diction, phrases, sentences, and

linguistic materials that are consistent and harmonious with the subject matter.

The above background has definitely situated the discipline of stylistics within linguistics. It can be described as a scientific study which focuses on the analysis and interpretation of texts through the linguistic resources inherent in the texts. Adepoju (2016) asserts that stylistics delves into linguistics – the scientific study of language – and abstract linguistics techniques appropriate for the description and explication of the text. According to Crystal (2003:460), “stylistics is a branch of linguistics which studies the features of situationally distinctive uses of language”. Although stylistics can have both linguistic and literary applications, the tools of operations have actually identified their emphases. Adepoju (2016) claims that while linguistic stylistics works with tools such as grammar, syntactic and phonological components of language, literary stylistics operates on values and aesthetics. Leech and Short (2007) assert that stylistics involves the study of styles used in literary and non-literary texts, focusing on the linguistic choices made by the author and their effects on the reader.

Leech & Short (1981) have tried to categorize the scope of stylistics into four, and these are the lexical, grammatical, figures of speech, context and cohesion. Isidore (2010) in trying to determine the ambits of each category postulates that the lexical categories will include noun, adjective, verbs and adverbs. This aspect combines two elements together, lexis and meaning otherwise known as lexico-semantics. Lyons (1971:45) buttresses that this level deals with the meaning of words and phrases, including how words are chosen and combined to convey specific meanings. The lexico-semantic level in linguistic analysis focuses on the meanings of words and phrases, examining how they are selected and combined to convey specific ideas. It includes exploring semantic relationships between words, their denotations, and connotations, which influence

the overall interpretation of a text or discourse. This level is crucial in understanding how language constructs meaning through lexical choices and semantic nuances.

The grammatical categories include general types of grammatical contractions such as phrases and clauses and their types. Chomsky (1957:76) opines that this level involves the study of sentence structure and grammar, including how sentences are formed and how different syntactic structures impact meaning and readability. The syntactic level, as explained by Chomsky, examines sentence structure and grammar, focusing on how sentences are constructed. It explores how different syntactic arrangements influence the meaning and readability of text. This level is essential for understanding the rules and patterns that govern sentence formation in a language. Variations in sentence structure, including length, complexity, and grammatical patterns, can affect the rhythm and emphasis of a text (Leech, 1969:45). For example, short, terse sentences may create a sense of urgency or tension, while long, flowing sentences can evoke a more contemplative or descriptive mood. Stylistic analysis looks at how these structural choices contribute to the overall stylistic effect of a piece of writing or speech.

Figures of speech examine all figures of grammatical and lexical constructions, phonological schemes and tropes. Stylistics analyzes the use of figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification to convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of words (Simpson, 2004:67). It refers to the use of words or expressions with a meaning that is different from the literal interpretation. Examples include metaphors, similes, personification, and hyperbole. These devices add layers of meaning and imagery to a text, making it more vivid and engaging for the reader or listener. Stylistic analysis examines how figurative language enhances the aesthetic appeal and communicative

effectiveness of language, allowing for varied interpretations and emotional responses.

Context and Cohesion consider ways in which one part of a text is linked to another (cohesion) and whether the writer addresses the reader directly or through the words or thought of some other character. Other area which is of significant linguistic consideration in stylistics is the graphological. Halliday & Hassan (1976:36) affirm that this level pertains to the visual presentation of text, including aspects such as typography, layout, and use of visuals like graphs or diagrams. For instance, in literary analysis, it might involve examining how a text's layout influences its meaning or impact on the reader. It explores how these visual aspects contribute to the overall meaning and reader's perception of the text.

However, for the purpose of this research, effort shall be concentrated on four aspects of stylistic features in the selected past WASSCE comprehension passages. These aspects are the sentence patterns, grammatical names of clauses/phrases, figurative expressions and lexical classes. By so doing, it is expected that the outcome will be of tremendous importance to the students preparing for WASSCE, and the teachers preparing them.

Comprehension passages are integral components of language examinations, designed to assess students' ability to understand and interpret written texts. According to Grabe (2009:15), reading comprehension is a multifaceted process that involves decoding, inferencing, and critical thinking. These passages test students' proficiency in understanding the literal and implied meanings, identifying the main ideas, and analyzing the text structure and language use. The purpose of comprehension passages in examinations like WASSCE is to evaluate students' reading skills, which are crucial for academic success and lifelong learning. They aim to measure various cognitive skills, including the ability to summarize, draw

inferences, and evaluate arguments (Snow 2002:23). Moreover, comprehension passages can help educators gauge the effectiveness of language instruction and curriculum design. Effective comprehension passages possess certain characteristics that enhance students' ability to comprehensively test their reading skills. According to Kintsch (1998:45), a well-crafted comprehension passage should be coherent, engaging, and appropriate for its intended audience. The text should present a clear and logical flow of ideas, facilitating readers' understanding and retention of information.

Additionally, comprehension passages should be varied in genre and content to expose students to different writing styles and subject matter. Duke (2000) emphasised the importance of including both narrative and expository texts in comprehension assessments, as they develop different reading skills and strategies (p. 68). This variety also helps create a more balanced and equitable assessment, catering to diverse student interests and backgrounds. A stylistic analysis of comprehension passages involves examining various linguistic elements that contribute to a text's meaning and effect.

The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) comprehension passage is designed to test students' understanding and interpretation of written texts. The comprehension passages in WASSCE were carefully selected to reflect a wide range of linguistic and stylistic features. These passages often include excerpts from literature, articles, essays, and informational texts. Each passage was followed by a series of questions designed to test different aspects of comprehension, such as identifying main ideas, understanding vocabulary in context, making inferences, and analysing the author's purpose and tone. WASSCE comprehension passages were designed to assess various levels of reading comprehension skills. This involves basic comprehension of the text, where



students are required to identify the main ideas and supporting details explicitly stated in the passage (Anderson & Pearson 1984:25). Students must make inferences based on the provided information. This means interpreting meanings that are not directly stated but are implied within the text (Kintsch 1998:10).

Students are encouraged to analyse, evaluate, and critique the text. This involves distinguishing facts from opinions, recognising biases, and assessing the validity of arguments presented in the passage (Ennis 1993:179). Comprehension passages also test students' understanding and use of language. This includes determining the meaning of unfamiliar words and phrases based on the context in which they appear, which is a crucial skill. This requires students to use the surrounding text to infer meaning (Nagy & Scott 2000:73). Students are often asked to identify words with similar or opposite meanings, which helps enhance their vocabulary (Miller & Gildea 1987:98).

Identifying and understanding metaphors, similes, personification, and other figures of speech enriches students' interpretation of the text (Lakoff & Johnson 1980:2). Students must discern the author's tone (e.g. sarcastic, serious, humorous) and the mood of the passage (e.g. somber, joyful), which adds depth to their comprehension (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis 2007:67). Applying themes or ideas from the passage to real-world situations or personal experiences makes learning more relevant and meaningful (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan 2002:57). Comparing and contrasting passages with other texts or contexts enhances critical thinking and comprehension (Smith 1989:23). Skimming and scanning techniques help students quickly grasp their main ideas and important details (Grabe & Stoller 2002:9). Prioritising questions based on difficulty and the time required to answer them is essential for maximising exam performance (Paris et al., 1991:2).

Adegbite and Olajide (2007) conducted research on WASSCE comprehension passages, and they confirmed that these texts are chosen to represent a variety of themes and styles, challenging students to apply their reading skills in different contexts (p. 101). A stylistic analysis of these passages can reveal insights into the linguistic choices made by the authors and how these choices affect comprehension and interpretation. The present study is an attempt to espouse the stylistic strategies inherent in selected WASSCE comprehension passages to expose the students to a deeper understanding of the passages. Drawing upon the foundational theories of stylistics explained above, this study employs a mixed-methods approach to dissect the linguistic intricacies of WASSCE comprehension passages.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Theoretical Framework adopted in this study is Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which views language as a social semiotic system. It emphasises the functional aspects of language by considering how linguistic choices serve different purposes in communication. Halliday (1978) posits that language functions in three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Ideational metafunction relates to the representation of reality, interpersonal to social interactions, and textual to the organisation of discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004:29).

Ideational metafunction is concerned with the expression of content and the representation of experience. It involves the use of transitivity structures which include processes (verbs), participants (nouns), and circumstances (adverbials). For example, in comprehension passages, the choice of processes can reveal the writer's perspective and thematic focus of the text (Eggins, 2004:206). The interpersonal meta-function deals with social roles and relationships enacted through language. This involves mood and modality, which encompass the speaker's

attitude, certainty, and commitment. Analysing these features in comprehension passages can provide insights into the writer's stance and intended reader response (Thompson, 2014:54). Textual metafunction relates to the organisation of information within a text. It includes thematic structures, information flow, and cohesion. Understanding these elements in comprehension passages can help identify how the text guides the reader's interpretation and engagement (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004:64).

### Research Methodology

Ten WASSCE comprehension passages were purposively selected from past English-language questions from 2011 to 2020. The passages which reflected diversity in terms of thematic preoccupations, styles, and communicative intentions were sourced from a collection of past WASSCE question papers, section one for those years. In the past, until 2013, the WAEC would set two comprehension passages as questions 6 and 7. Therefore, in each of 2011, 2012, and 2013, only one comprehension passage was selected: questions 7, 6, and 6, respectively. However, from 2014 to 2020, only one comprehension passage was selected each year. After the passages had been thoroughly read, four major linguistic choices; sentence types, word classes, grammatical names and figurative expressions, which were deployed by the writers of the passages, and used as questions, were noted. These linguistic elements constitute the data used in this study. The identified stylistic resources were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively using Halliday's (1979) Systemic Functional Grammar. The quantitative approach was used to determine the frequency of different linguistic choices through frequency tables and charts, whereas the qualitative method interrogated textual explication. The findings were interpreted in line with the resourcefulness of stylistics in enhancing comprehension.

### Data Analysis

#### *Sentence Types*

The structure of the different sentences contained in a passage cannot be underestimated in determining the readability and comprehensibility of the comprehension passage. It is expected that a passage dominated by complex and hypotactic structures will prove somewhat inaccessible to students more than the one with simpler and clearer structures. Sentence structure refers to the way sentences are constructed, in terms of their components and relationships. It also refers to the way sentences are organised and constructed, using words and phrases to convey meaning. This involves the arrangement of elements within a sentence and how these elements function together to create coherent and grammatically correct statements. Sentences can be classified into two categories. These are the functional and structural sentence types. Functional types of sentences are determined by the use of which sentence can be put. This can be declarative, imperative, or interrogative. Meanwhile, structural types depend on the clause compositions of the sentence. This can be simple when it contains one main clause and complex when it contains at least one dependent and one independent clause. It can also be compound when a sentence comprises at least two main clauses. A sentence can be called a multiple sentence if there are three or more main clauses. Likewise, a sentence can be compound complex when it contains at least two main clauses and two or more dependent clauses. In the selected past WASSCE comprehension passages, sentence structures were of various types. The Pie Chart shown below illustrates the frequency of the sentence types in the selected WASSCE comprehension passages. This implication of the distribution is later on explained.

**Table 1: Frequency of Sentence Structure in the Selected Passages**

Passages	Simple	Compound	Complex	Compound-complex	Multiple	Total
2011	20	1	5	-	-	26
2012	19	3	7	1	-	30
2013	16	6	7	1	-	30
2014	10	3	4	-	-	21
2015	24	4	4	-	2	34
2016	12	15	4	1	1	33
2017	7	3	9	-	1	20
2018	15	7	3	-	2	27
2019	18	1	5	1	3	28
2020	7	9	5	-	1	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>51.8%</b>	<b>19.7%</b>	<b>22.9%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>100%</b>

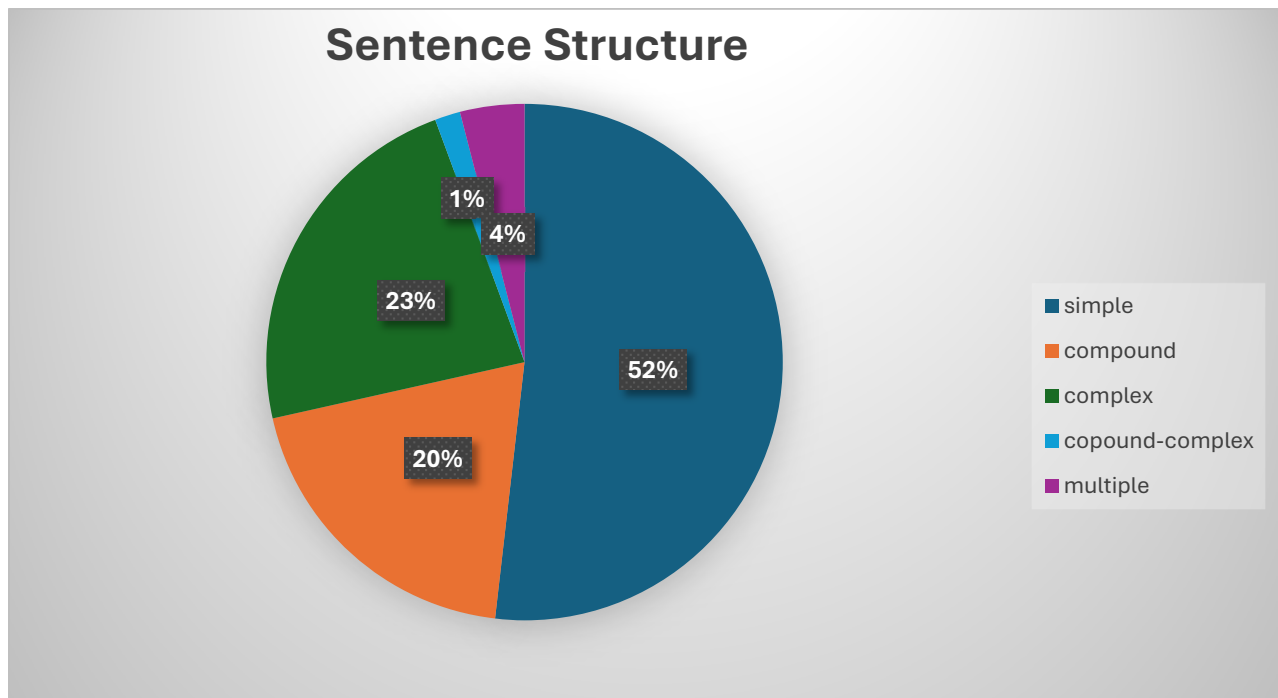
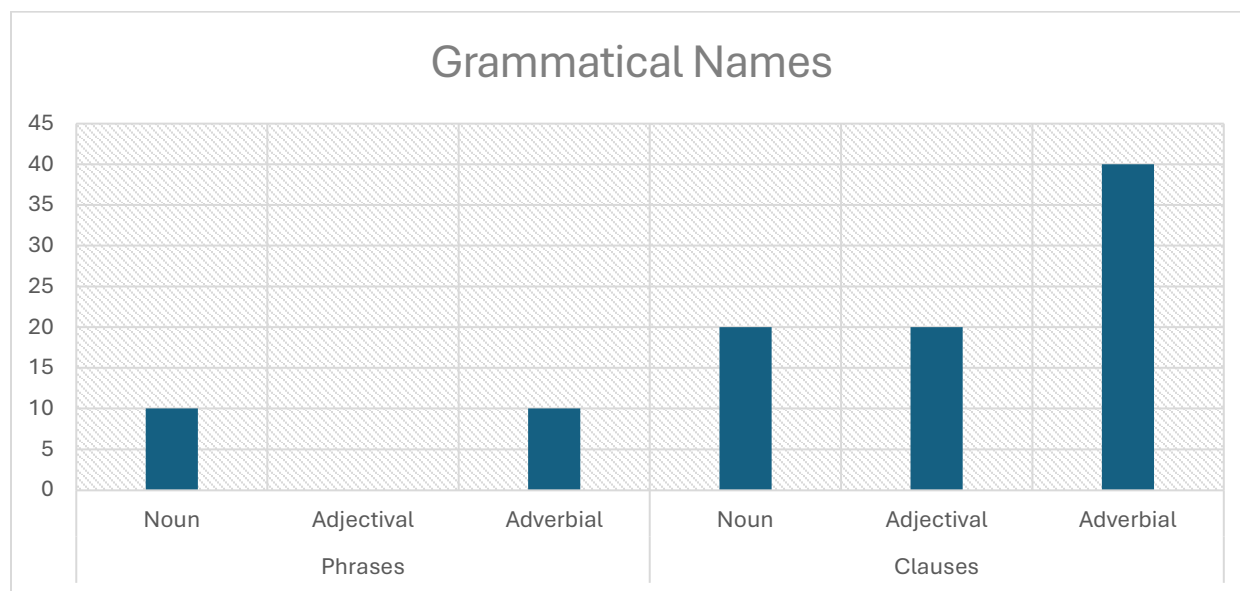
**Fig. 1: Frequency of Sentence Structure in the Selected Passages**

Fig. 1 above summarises the frequencies of the structural types of sentences in the comprehension passage from 2011 to 2020. Out of an aggregate number of 249 sentences, 129 (51.8%) were simple sentences, while 49 (19.7

%) were compound sentences. The number of complex sentences was 57 (22.9 %). Compound complex sentences were 4, which translates to 1.6%, while multiple sentences were 10, accounting for 4% of the total.

**Table 2 Showing Frequencies of Questions on Grammatical Names**

Grammatical Names		Years	Number of Times	%	Total
Phrases	Noun	2016	1	10%	20%
	Adjective	-	-	0%	
	Adverbial	2015	1	10%	
Clauses	Noun	2013, 2019	2	20%	80%
	Adjective	2018, 2020	2	20%	
	Adverbial	2011, 2012, 2014, 2017	4	40%	
Total			10	100%	100%

**Fig. 2: Frequencies of Questions on Grammatical Names**

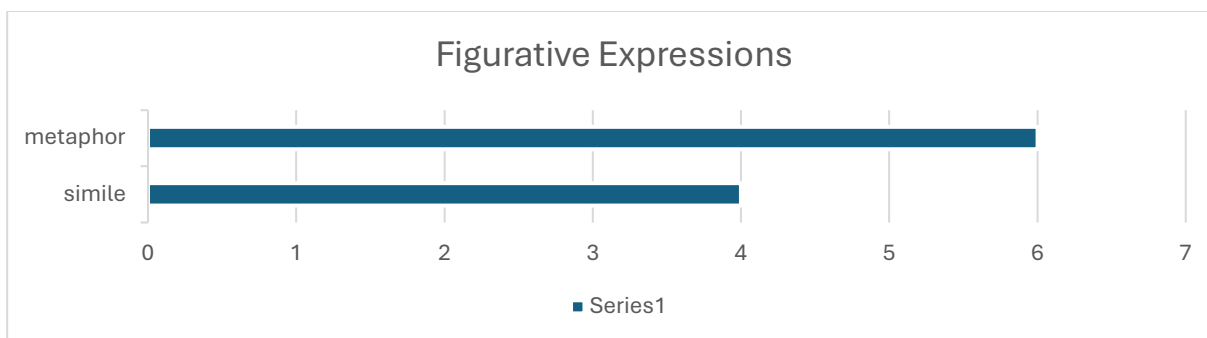
The above charts are a display of the statistics of the questions asked about grammatical names between 2011 and 2020 in the WASSCE comprehension passages. Out of 10 questions, only one question, appearing in 2016, is a noun phrase (10 %); no question has been asked about the adjectival phrase in any year (0 %); and one

question has been asked about the adverbial phrase (2015) (10 %). Likewise, two questions were asked on noun clauses (2013, 2019), taking 20%; two questions on adjectival clauses (2018 and 2020), taking 20%; and four questions on adverbial clauses (2011, 2012, 2014, and 2017), taking 40%.

**Table 3 Showing Frequencies of Questions on Figurative Expressions**

Figurative Expressions	Year	Number of Times	%
Simile	2015, 2016, 2019, 2020	4	40%
Metaphor	2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2018	6	60%
Total		10	100%





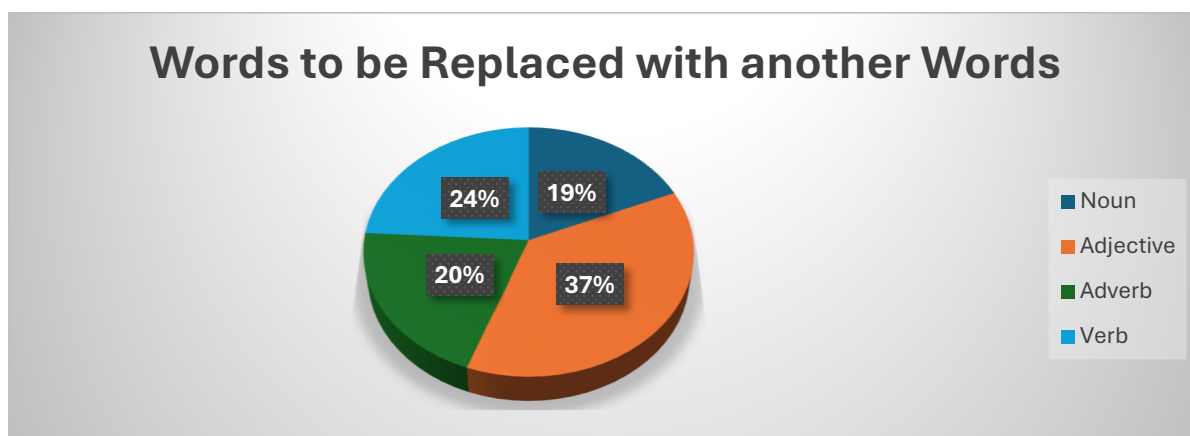
**Fig. 3: Frequencies of Questions on Figurative Expressions**

The above is a display of the statistics of questions asked on figures of speech over ten years. The finding reveals that out of several figurative expressions, only two, simile and

metaphor have frequent attraction year out of year. Questions on simile were asked four times (40%), as shown in the graph, whereas those on metaphors appeared six times (60%).

**Table 4: Showing Statistics of Words to be Replaced with another Words**

Year	Noun	Adjective	Adverb	Verb	Total
2011	-	3	2	-	5
2012	4	-	-	1	5
2013	-	-	3	2	5
2014	2	1	1	1	5
2015	1	4	-	-	5
2016	-	3	2	1	6
2017	-	1	-	4	5
2018	2	3	-	1	6
2019	1	1	1	3	6
2020	-	4	2	-	6
Total	10	20	11	13	54
%	18.5%	37%	20.4%	24.1%	100%



**Fig. 4: Statistics of Words to be Replaced with other Words**

The interpretation of the above illustrations on replacing words/phrases with other words/phrases indicates that there were 10 noun words translated to 18.5%, 20 adjectives (37%), 11 adverbs (20.4%), and 13 verbs (24.1%). Apart from adjectives which had a high percentage, others had relatively similar percentages.

### Discussion of Findings

On the statistics of sentence types displayed in Fig. 1, it becomes obvious that the passages set by WASSCE are of moderate sizes, ranging between 21 and 33 sentences. This is deliberate considering the short time frame of 50 minutes allotted to the treatment of the passage which includes reading, understanding, and answering some questions on the texts. Thus, students are expected to read quickly and comprehend what they read at the same time. As a result, the most preponderantly used type of sentence structure is the simple sentence. Considering the level of the students for which the passages are set, this is not only deliberate but also expected. Simple sentences offer a clear and direct way to convey information. Since they typically contain a single independent clause, it allows for easy comprehension on the part of the reader and an avenue for stating facts in a straightforward manner. This clarity is crucial in comprehension passages, where the primary goal is to ensure that the reader can grasp essential points without ambiguity. There are instances of simple sentences containing as low as three to five words long. Examples can be found in the following structures: "They moved to the city" (WAEC, 2011), "He immediately accepted" (WAEC, 2012), "I was amazed" (2014), "The crowd was massive" (WAEC, 2018), and "How wrong she was!" (WAEC, 2020).

A critical look at the simple sentences displayed in the extracted samples reveals a situation in which writers can emphasise key information without unnecessary elaboration.

This focus is particularly useful in WASSCE comprehension passages, where the emphasis is on conveying specific details or facts clearly and concisely for students to be able to respond to specific questions on the passage. By using simple sentences, writers can minimise the risk of ambiguity. Simple sentences reduce the chance of misinterpretation by presenting one idea at a time. In the context of examinations such as the WASSCE, comprehension passages often aim to test students' ability to understand and interpret straightforward information. Simple sentences align with this objective by ensuring that the focus remains on fundamental comprehension of the text rather than on the complexities of the sentence structure. Educational texts, especially those used in standardised tests, often prioritise clear communication over stylistic complexity. Simple sentences are preferred, as they align with the educational goal of assessing students' basic reading and understanding skills without introducing the additional challenge of parsing complex sentence structures.

Although there are instances of the use of complex, compound, and other types of sentences, the intention is not to create confusion which such sentence types can generate, but to allow for stylistic purposes of varying sentence types in the passages. Complex sentences were the second most used type in selected WASSCE comprehension passages (57 %). In most cases, sentences are used to introduce cause and effect or cause and reason. Examples can be found in the following excerpted structures: "When she discovered my absence, she gave a heart-rending cry which at last brought my father out" (WAEC, 2016); "As he dragged it to the surface, we screamed in sudden terror" (WAEC, 2017), "I only vaguely remember my mother because I was too young when she passed on" (WAEC, 2019). With these examples, it

becomes obvious that most of the complex sentences are those which introduce adverbial clauses of different kinds, with the main clause introducing the sentence, while the subordinate clause follows or vice versa. In the first and second examples, the adverbial clause of time has been placed in the initial position, while in the third example; two adverbial clauses of reason and time have been placed at the final position of the sentence systematically. This has been observed to be a varying style in the structure of the complex sentences used in the selected past WASSCE questions.

The compound sentences comprised 49% of the total aggregate number of sentence types. They are mostly deployed to provide double or alternative points using either a syndetic or asyndetic. A syndetic uses coordinating conjunctions (and, or and but) while an asyndetic coordinates clauses without a connective. Examples are: "Then, he endured all the jokes cheerfully and indeed referred to himself as 'Mr. Why Hurry'" (WAEC, 2014); "I had resisted vehemently; I even ran away to hibernate with my maternal grandmother" (WAEC, 2013), "This softened him but did not prevent him from giving my cousins the spanking of their lives" (WAEC, 2016). The three extracted examples were compound sentences, each having two main clauses. The first was coordinated by 'and', the second by semi-colon (;) which is functioning as an asyndetic, and the third by another coordinating conjunction 'but'. The sentences still appear simple if each clause that constitutes the structure is read independently.

Both multiple and compound-complex sentences have been sparingly used by WASSCE examiners, accounting for 4% and 1.6%, respectively. This is deliberate, considering the level of the students being examined and the purpose of the examination. For example, "Before we left

the classroom for recess, for games or for home, I dutifully kept the materials safe, and as soon as we returned, I produced them" (WAEC, 2013), "But this much I know: that governor is still around; and so is the driver" (WAEC, 2015). These two structures are examples of compound complex and multiple sentences extracted from the corpus. The first is a compound-complex sentence with two main clauses and two dependent clauses which are adverbial clauses of time, while the second is a multiple sentence with three independent clauses, all joined by colon and semi-colon which function asyndetically in the structure. By implication, compound-complex sentences and multiple sentences are used to present events in climactic or anticlimactic order, such that one piece of information successively follows another, depending on the priority given to the pieces of information.

The analysis on the grammatical names shows a preference for questions on clauses (80%) over phrases (20%), with more questions on adverbial clauses than other ones (See Table 1 and Fig. 1). This may be intentional, considering the stylistic importance of an adverbial clause and its function in relation to the verb in any structure. An adverbial clause can explain cause, time, manner, and place of action, among other functions. Usually, the type of adverbial clause is dictated by the word introducing the clause. For instance, "As we watched from the distance ..." (2011), "As soon as the chit-chat ended ..." (2012), "... while I was watching a 9 o'clock television network programme ..." (2014) and "As he dragged it to the surface ..." (2017). An examination of the four adverbial clauses shows consistency in the pattern. Apart from the fact that all clauses are adverbial clauses of time, the words introducing them are the same, as', at least in three places. Even the fourth one which is introduced with a different word 'while' has the connotation of

‘as’ because the two words can be used interchangeably.

As noted earlier, both noun clauses and adjectival clauses appeared twice each in ten years. This also has implications for any student preparation for an examination. Unlike other grammatical names, noun clauses have varied types and functions within their sentences. This dynamism can be related to the subject and verb, object and verb, complement and subject, complement and object, and complement and preposition, and sometimes, in opposition to the subject or object. Therefore, candidates must be conversant with varied structures and functions. However, the two noun clauses featured for the questions in the two years have the same pattern and function. Example: “...that my role was crucial” (2013), “...that I could take care of myself” (2019). Each of the clauses is introduced by ‘that’ and they function as object of the verb in their respective sentences. The adjectival clauses featured also have structural semblance, although with different relativizers, which ‘and’ and ‘who’ introducing them. For example: “...which went along with the hilarious drumming” (2018), “... who was also going to see her son” (2020). The candidates only need to familiarise themselves with the relative pronouns such as ‘who’, ‘which’, ‘whose’, ‘whom’, and ‘that’ which can be used to introduce an adjectival/relative clause.

The reason for the low percentage of questions regarding phrases can be explained stylistically. Students have the tendency of confusing phrases with clauses if they fail to master the structure properly. The students have the common erroneous idea that the clause is larger than the phrase by thinking only in terms of the length or number of words that make up the expression. While the examiners were aware of this misconception among the students, they deliberately asked questions on this aspect to give the candidate

a fair chance in the examination. However, students will need to have a good grasp of phrases and their different types to be able to answer any question on this aspect.

The analysis on figurative expressions (Table 3 and Fig. 3) reveals that only two figures of speech, simile and metaphor, were hammered. Although the two are figures of similarity, they have different ways of identifying them. Why simile compares between two entities using ‘as’ or ‘like’, metaphor makes a somewhat direct comparison. While simile is straightforward and easy to identify, metaphor is easily confused with other figurative expressions such as personification. Obviously, there are more questions on metaphors than on any other figurative expression in WASSCE. The implication is that as frequent as questions on these figurative expressions are, the candidates have not yet been able to master them well. However, the richness and resourcefulness of metaphors to embellish utterances, among all others, cannot be overemphasised.

The analysis in Table 4 and Fig. 4 illustrates the frequency of classes of words featured in the questions asking students to find alternative words/phrases to replace certain words/phrases from the passage. The number of words listed for this aspect varies between five (5) and six (6) every year. In the samples, fifty-four words were featured from 2011 to 2020, and out of this number, adjective has the highest number (37%). This intentionally was done to underscore the functional relevance of adjectives in enhancing clear and descriptive communication devoid of ambiguities. Therefore, the students are indirectly expected to master as many adjectives as they can. Another significant point noticed in the list of words featured is that all the words were content words. Content words include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which carry semantic meanings unlike other classes

of words that are function words. It therefore means that students must deliberately enlarge the scope of their vocabulary of lexical words and also master their meanings. The test requires that if a word is a noun, only a noun word is expected to be used to replace it, ditto if it is a verb or another class of word. This makes it important for the students to consciously learn how to replace words appropriately within given contexts in order to develop good communication skill.

### Conclusion

This study has underscored the relevance of stylistics in resolving problematic areas for both teachers and students in treating reading comprehension, by espousing the peculiar linguistic features of WASSCE comprehension passages purposively sampled from past questions between 2011 and 2020. The study has not only interrogated texts of the passages, but also the aspect of questions usually asked to determine implications for teaching and learning of nitty-gritty for mastering comprehension passages in WASSCE and similar examinations. It has demonstrated that the simple sentences were prevalent in WASSCE comprehension passages and this goes to recommend to educators that emphasis should be given to clarity and conciseness in comprehension texts. In addition, through statistical counting, which is one of the approaches of stylistics; different areas of concentration have been exposed for educators to take note of. Such areas of emphasis include simple sentence structure, adverbial clauses, simile and metaphorical use of language, and adjective as a class of word. This will go a long way in preparing students for different examinations on comprehension passages. It is recommended that stylistics be incorporated into the teaching of stylistics to identify areas of linguistic features that are prominent for questioning.

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