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Text Formation in the Poetry of Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai - A Systemic Functional Linguistics Comparative Study

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Abstract

Being an active field for the interplay of diverse linguistic processes such as condensation, displacement, substitution and ellipsis manifested through a wide variety of literary devices in the pursuit to expand the semantic possibilities of language and communicate the experiential and interpersonal meanings aesthetically, the language of poetry and the unique ways by which different linguistic elements in it are structured and sequenced has always been a matter of curiosity among the linguists (Levin 1963a, Baker 1967, Landon 1968, Jakobson 1968, Cable 1970, Cureton 1981, Muller 1981). Expanding the scope of this linguistic enquiry to the poetry of North-East India, the present paper by the use of SFL model of taxis explores the text construction strategies in the poems of two hitherto linguistically unexplored North-East Indian poets Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai in an endeavor to ascertain the most frequently used structures in the poems of these two poets, the tactic relations in the clause complexes in their poems, the use of embedding in their structures and the similarities or variations in the poetry of these two poets on account of the usage of taxis and embedding.

Keywords: SFL, Taxis, Embedding, Hypotaxis, Parataxis, North-East Indian Poetry

1. Introduction

Poetry is a primary form of literature that communicates human thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions, dreams, desires, aspirations, actions, reactions or reflections in a dramatic, descriptive or narrative form foregrounding the aesthetic elements in human language through the use of meter, rhythm, symbols, images, similes, metaphors, alliteration, ambiguity and such other figures of speech and thereby expanding the semantic possibilities of language, enhancing its communicative competence, magnifying its aesthetic appeal and widening its suggestibility. The frequent and abundant usage of a variety of linguistic processes, most commonly condensation, displacement, substitution and ellipsis, and the unique ways by which different linguistic devices are structured to generate the overall effect of a poem has always kept the syntax of poetry open for linguistic analysis and exploration through the use of diverse linguistic frameworks and methodologies. For instance, Levin (1963a) observes that the novelty of the language of poetry is

on account of its tendency to deviate from the structures lying within the generative capacity of grammar. Baker (1967) analyzes the structure and operation of sentences in the poetry of thirty English poets, fifteen from the second half of the 19th century and fifteen from the first half of the 19th century, and discovers that there has been a noticeable shift in the syntax in the poems written from 1870 to 1930 with dislocation and elaboration becoming less frequent with the passage of time and parenthetical interruption coming in vogue. Landon (1968) studies the unconventional word-order in English poetry. Jakobson (1968) analyses parallelism in poetic language using illustrations from a variety of Russian and Czech poems. Cable (1970) analyzes the hypotactic and paratactic structures in *Beowulf* and observes that the style in this old English poem is largely paratactic. Cureton (1981) studies the use of iconic syntax in e.e. cummings' poetry and finds that his use of iconic structure is indicative of medium being the message in his poems. Muller (1981) analyses the syntactic structures in popular English folk ballads and concludes that the sentence structure in English folk ballads is basically parataxis and that there are two types of parataxis in these ballads - paratactic syndetic and paratactic asyndetic. However, this listing of studies on the syntax of poetry is merely indicative and not in any way exhaustive. The present paper using Systemic Functional Linguistics as the theoretical model analyses the text construction strategies focusing on taxis and embedding in the poems of two hitherto linguistically unexplored North-East Indian poets —Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai. The paper specifically focuses on the following research questions:

1. What are the most frequently used structures in the poems of Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai- clause simplexes or clause complexes?
2. Which tactic relations (paratactic or hypotactic) are more frequent in clause complexes in the poems of these two poets?
3. What is the extent of the usage of embedding in the poems of these two poets?
4. What are the similarities or variations in the poetry of these two poets on account of the usage of taxis and embedding?

1.1 SFL Theory of Taxis

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the theoretical framework for the present study, has been widely 'recognized as a very useful descriptive and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic meaning-making resource' (Eggins 2004: 2). Foregrounding the synchronization of grammatical structure and grammatical meaning, it holds that the latter is realized by the former and is primary in any instance of language use (Halliday 1966a). The basic concern in the theory is 'to understand the quality of texts, what a text means, what it does, and why it is valued as it is' (Halliday 1994: xxix). The validity of this claim gets established by the application of SFL into a diverse range of fields such as description and analysis of media language (Iedema et al 1994, White 2002b, Feez et al 2008, Singh and Singh 2012), casual conversation (Eggins and Slade 1997), administrative language (Iedema 2003), language of poetry (Singh 2007), history (Martin and Wodak 2003), visual discourse (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001), grammar of sound (van Leeuwen 1999, Martinec 2000), child language development (Painter 1998), language education (Christie and Martin 1997, Christie 1999, 2002, Unsworth, 2000), and computational linguistics (Teich 1999).

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, language, at each level, is a set of systems with each system having multiple choices for the maker of a text. Halliday (1969: 3) specifies, "A system is a set of options with an entry condition: that is to say, a set of things of which one must be chosen, together with a statement of the conditions under which the choice is available." It is the situational and cultural contexts that condition the choice of a particular linguistic element within a particular language system, and even within a particular situational and cultural context, a language system offers varied choices. Halliday (1978: 192) further states, "With the notion of system we can represent language as a resource, in terms of the choices that are available, the interconnection of those choices, and the conditions affecting their access. We can then relate these choices to recognizable and significant social contexts, using socio-semantic networks." This multiplicity of choices is available not only within linguistic systems but also at the level of linguistic structures. These structural choices can operate at the very primary levels such as the positioning of the experiential elements in a particular way as in the following:

On the eve of Christmas following the recommendations of the experts, the Government of India issued a fresh advisory against Omicron.

The Government of India, following the recommendations of the experts, issued a fresh advisory against Omicron on the eve of Christmas.

Following the recommendations of the experts, the Government of India issued a fresh advisory against Omicron on the eve of Christmas.

Similarly, there is a wide system of structures available at the top level of the rank scale of language to make choices and determine the positioning of these structures for the construction of a text. For instance, the above text may be rewritten as:

The experts recommended issuing a fresh advisory against Omicron and the Government of India did so on the eve of Christmas.

The experts recommended issuing a fresh advisory against Omicron. This was done by the Government of India on the eve of Christmas.

The Government of India issued a fresh advisory against Omicron on the eve of Christmas after the experts recommended so.

A clause complex is at the top of the rank scale of language. In SFL a clause complex may comprise only one finite clause which being an independent clause can stand on its own and is termed as clause simplex in the theory or a combination of a finite and one or more finite or non-finite clauses which are inter-dependent and demarcated by a full-stop, a sign of question or exclamation. Specifically speaking, in a clause complex one or more clauses of the same or different types are connected to each other in equal or unequal relationships opted by the maker of a text. "The clause complex will be the only grammatical unit which we shall recognize above the clause. Hence there will be no need to bring in the term 'sentence' as a distinct grammatical

category. We can use it simply to refer to the orthographic unit that is contained between full stops. This will avoid ambiguity: a sentence is a constituent of writing, while a clause complex is a constituent of grammar" (Halliday 1994: 216). The three metafunctions of a language, viz. the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual are grammaticalized simultaneously in a clause complex through the transitivity system, mood system and thematic system respectively (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004:433). A clause-complex, wherein a "new element is related to the previous simply as the 'next' link in a series or chain" (Matthiessen et al. 2010: 235), is shaped by the system of Taxis.

The system of taxis signifies the degree of interdependency between linguistic structures. There are two types of interdependency between linguistic structures -parataxis and hypotaxis. Parataxis links two or more elements of equal status in a clause complex wherein one element initiates the text and the other expands or elaborates it. "Both the initiating and the continuing elements are free, in the sense that each could stand as a functioning whole. In principle, the paratactic relation is logically (i) symmetrical and (ii) transitive. This can be exemplified by the 'and' relation. (i) 'salt and pepper' implies 'pepper and salt', so the relationship is symmetrical; (ii) 'salt and pepper', 'pepper and mustard' together imply 'salt and mustard', so the relationship is transitive" (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 452). The binding of clauses in a parataxis relationship is exemplified by the following clause-complexes from the data:

1. |||Into the deep, into the sea green
 [[navigating on a heartbeat]],
 the lilies are shooting up like swordfish
 || and the woman is laughing, laughing. |||
Mamang Dai's *Floating Island*
2. |||The river sings
 || love floats!
 || love floats! |||
Mamang Dai's *No Dreams*
3. |||I burnt my truth with them,
 || and buried uneasy manhood with them. |||
Robin S. Ngangom's *Native Land*
4. |||Flights like theirs
 Do not have destinations,
 || And only once did they wish for wings. |||
Robin S. Ngangom's *Flight*

A clause-complex brought to birth by linking two or more unequal clauses, one being independent and the other or others dependent, signifies hypotaxis. The independent element, which is autonomous and generates a meaningful utterance without referring to any element outside itself, is finite, while the dependent element cannot stand on its own semantically. "The dominant element is free, but the dependent element is not. The hypotactic relation is logically (i) non-symmetrical and (ii) non-transitive.

For example, 'when': (i) 'I breathe when I sleep' does not imply 'I sleep when I breathe'; (ii) 'I fret when I have to drive slowly' and 'I have to drive slowly when it's been raining' together do not

imply 'I fret when it's been raining.' (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 452). The binding of clauses in a hypotaxis relationship is exemplified by the following clause-complexes from the data:

1. |||when the day is folded away
|| my heart clings to the life of water.|||
Mamang Dai's *Floating Island*
2. |||Perhaps the storm will blow it down
someday,
|| after it has halted the wind
a thousand times. |||
Mamang Dai's *Prayer Flags - 2*
3. |||it has leaders
|| who have disappeared
into their caricatures.|||
Robin S. Ngangom's *My Invented Land*
4. |||There are no more tears to shed
in this withered country
|| where they
kill pregnant women and children; |||
Robin S. Ngangom's *To Pacha*

1.2 Data and Methodology

The data for the research paper comprises twelve poems by two North-East Indian poets, Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai, taken from the web-resource www.poetryinternational.org. Out of these, six poems, viz "My Invented Land", "Native Land", "Poem from Joseph", "Flight", "To Pacha" and "Last Word" are by Robin S. Ngangom, a Manipuri poet based in Shillong. An equal number of poems viz *Floating Island*, *Prayer Flags-2*, *Gone*, *Remembrance*, *No Dreams* and *Small Towns and the River* come from Arunachal Pradesh based poetess Mamang Dai.

The methodology used for the analysis of the data has been as standardized in SFL. The analysis of taxis in a text begins with the demarcation of clause boundaries. "When we want to unravel the creator's design, the first step in a clause complex analysis is to define the clause boundaries and draw in the double lines." (Butt et. al. 2003:161) To demarcate the clause boundaries, three parallel lines (|||) are placed at the end of a clause complex as in the following texts from the data:

1. |||My homeland has no boundaries.|||
Robin S. Ngangom's *My Invented Land*
2. |||The birds of summer are nesting in her breast. |||
Mamang Dai's *Floating Island*

Clause boundaries within a clause-complex are marked by the use of two parallel lines (||) as in the following texts from the data:

1. |||I said:
|| "I am a poet of earth and space,
possibly water, but not fire. |||
Robin S. Ngangom's *Last Word*
2. |||There is nowhere to rest our feet even

||when I want to kneel and pray,
moved to tears by a rainbow sky.|||

Mamang Dai's *Gone*

The paratactic relations between or among the clauses in a clause complex have been signified by the use of Arabic numerals. The first clause in the clause complex is assigned the numerical '1', the second '2' and so on as in the following texts from the data:

1. |||its
nipples have long gone dry,
1
|| and leering
death walks your homeland. |||
2

Robin S. Ngangom's *To Pacha*

2. ||| So I said:
1
|| "I wanted my poems to exude a heady odour
2
|| but only the sweet taint of blood
or burning flesh emanates from my poem." |||
3

Robin S. Ngangom's *Last Word*

The clauses that are linked in a hypotactic relation in a clause complex are marked by the use of Greek letters. The independent clause, which is usually but not always the first clause in a clause complex (Gerot & Wignell 2000: 91), is assigned the letter 'α' and the dependent clauses are marked by the letters 'β', 'γ' and so on as in the following texts from the data:

1. |||The most vulnerable will sell bodies.
α
|| Because in spite of the land mines
They still shared limbs. |||
β

Robin S. Ngangom's *Flight*

2. |||Why did we think
α
||it was trivial
βα
||that it would rain every summer,
ββ
||that nights would be still with sleep
βγ
|| and that the green fern would uncurl
ceaselessly, by the roadside.|||
βδ

Mamang Dai's *Remembrance*

The paratactic or a hypotactic relations between or among clauses in a clause complex are usually not singular and often a clause in a clause complex stands in a paratactic relation with one clause which is in a hypotactic relation with the other or a clause pairs in a hypotactic relation with one clause which itself may stand in a paratactic or hypotactic relation with another clause. The following texts from the data signify this amalgamated relation between clauses in a clause complex:

1. |||The warning [[disguised as a message]]
came

1 α

|| before the village was up and about,

1 β

|| and when they left

2 β

|| they didn't carry pots or blankets
or even machetes. |||

2 α

Robin S. Ngangom's *Flight*

2. |||We dwell in the mountains

1

|| and do not know

2 α

|| what the world hears about us. |||

2 β

Mamang Dai's *Remembrance*

Further, the relation between a reporting clause and the clause which is quoted is paratactic as in the following texts:

1. |||Then they said:

1

|| "His poems are always falling from arrogant heights." |||

2

Robin S. Ngangom's *Last Word*

2. |||You only said:

1

|| "One's homeland is dear.

2

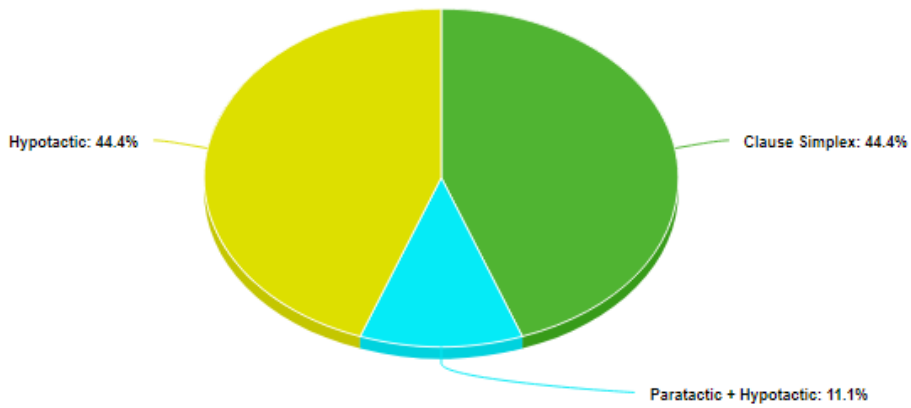
|| I have not seen all of this land.

3

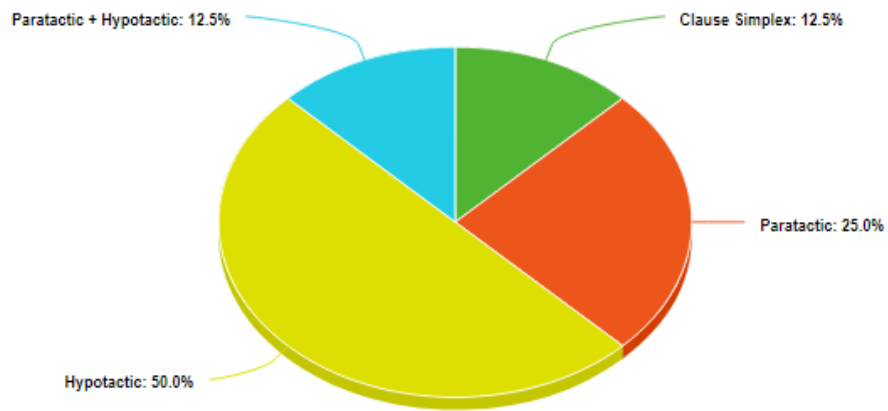
|| I have not
been able [[to tread the grass [[that grows there."]]]] |||

4

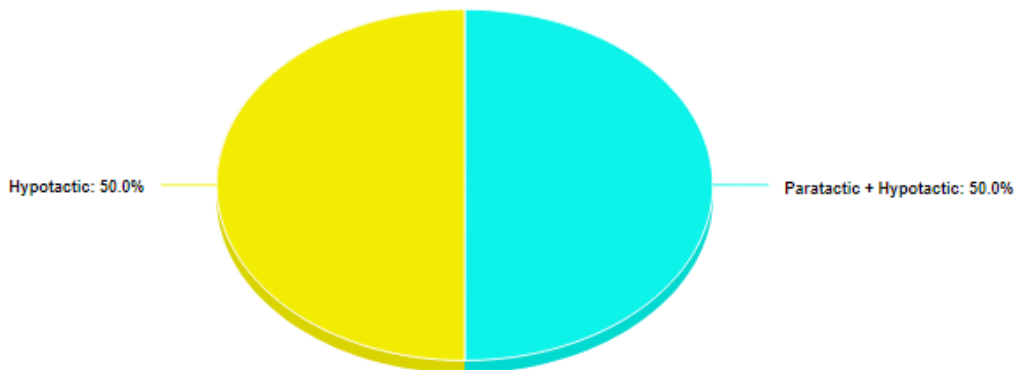
Robin S. Ngangom's *To Pacha*



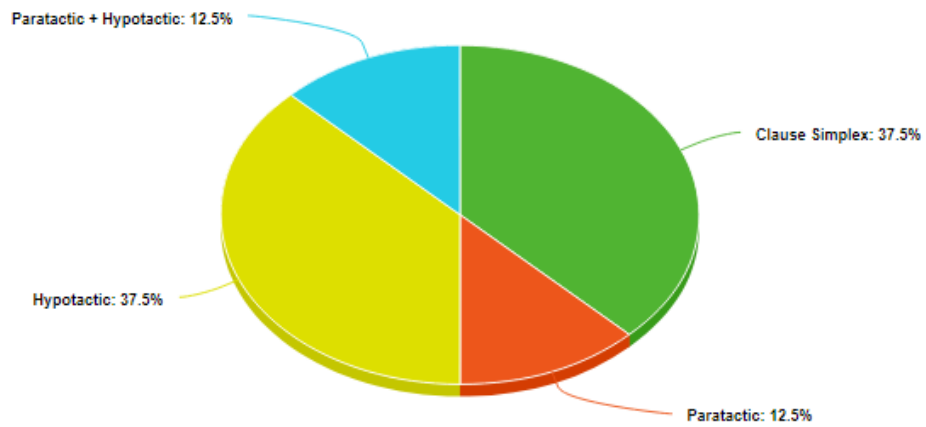
Pie Chart 1 – Robin S. Ngangom's *My Invented Land*



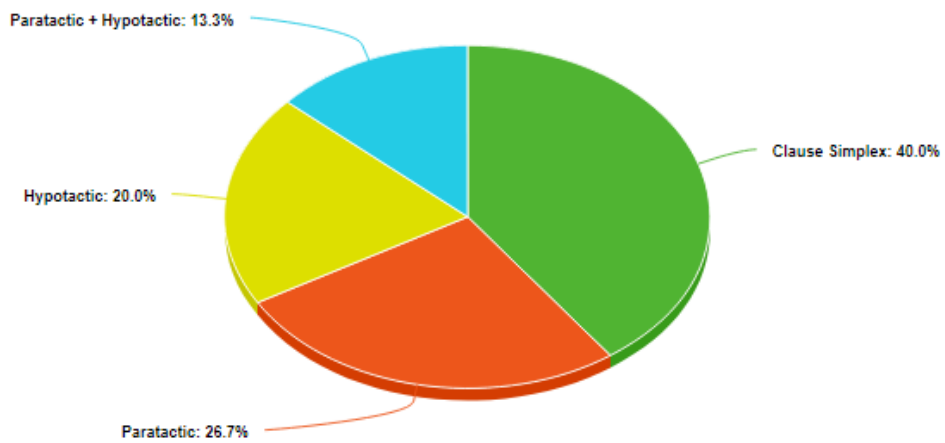
Pie Chart 2 – Robin S. Ngangom's *Native Land*



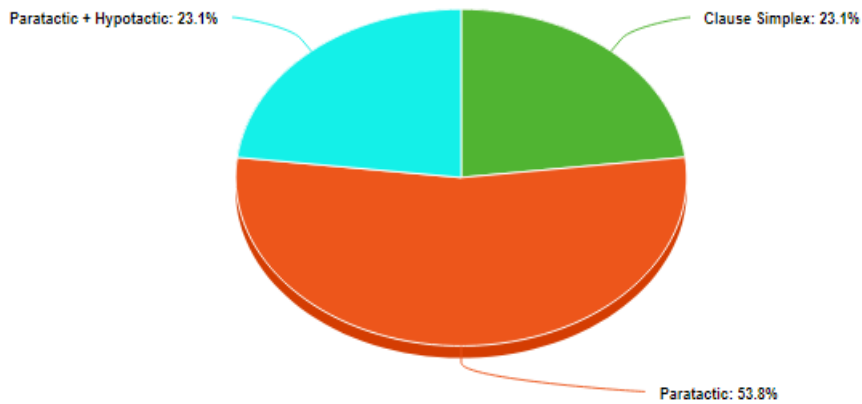
Pie Chart 3 – Robin S. Ngangom's *Poem from Joseph*



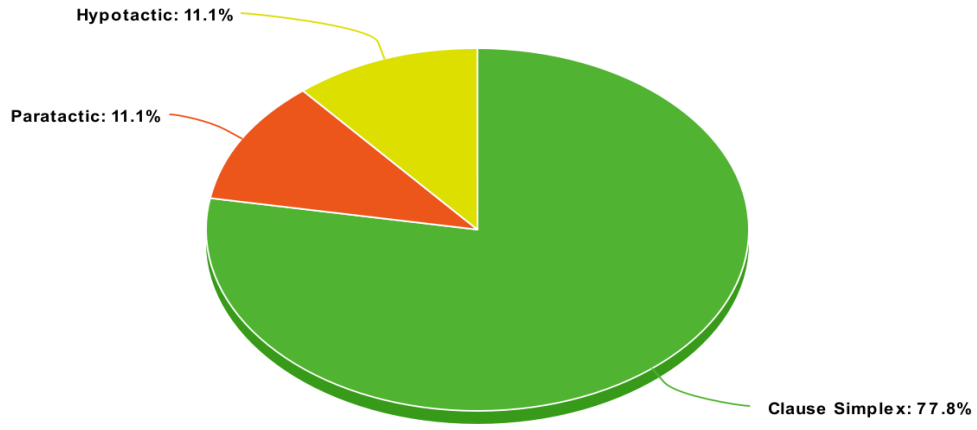
Pie Chart 4 – Robin S. Ngangom's *Flight*



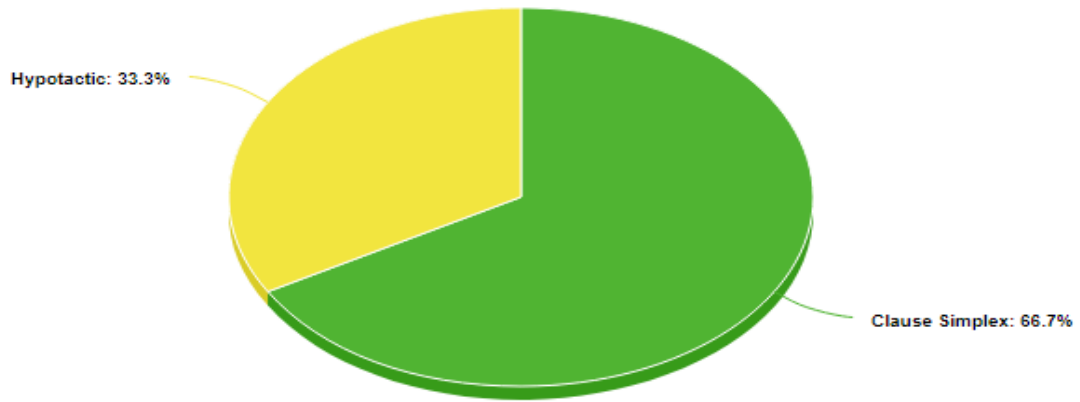
Pie Chart 5 – Robin S. Ngangom's *To Pacha*



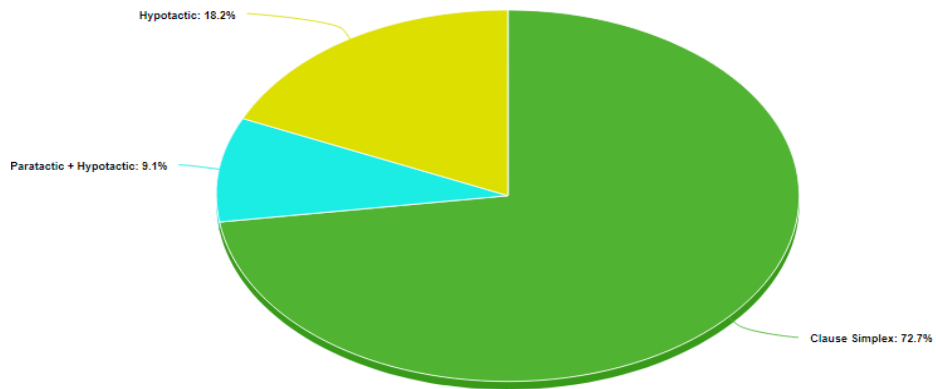
Pie Chart 6 – Robin S. Ngangom's *Last Word*



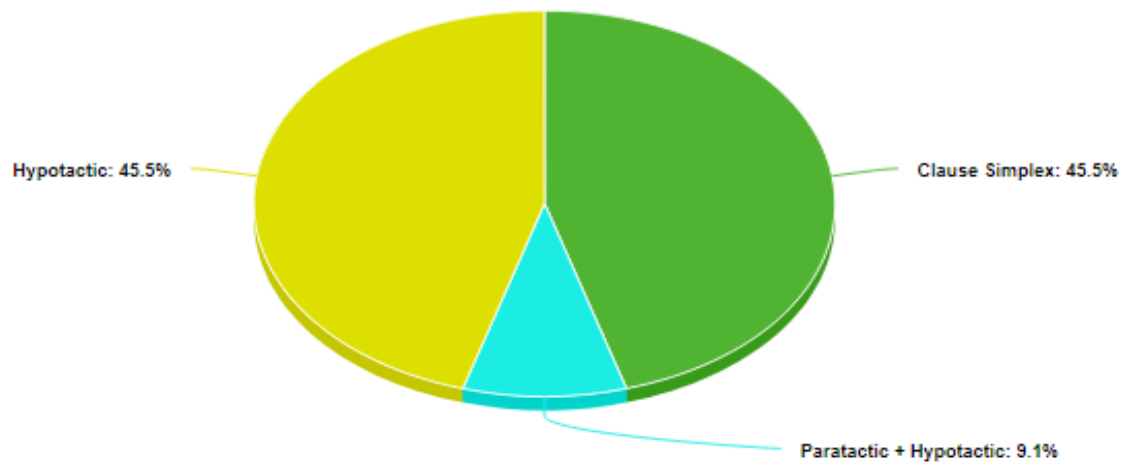
Pie Chart 7 - Mamang Dai's *Floating Island*



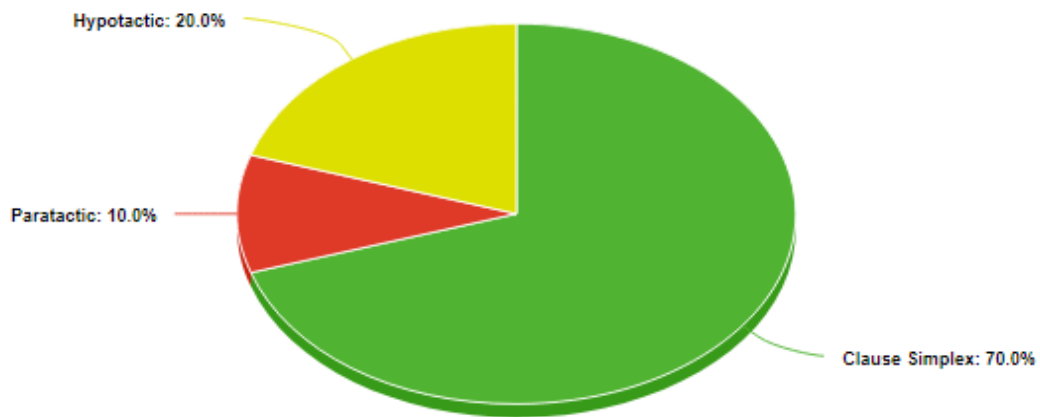
Pie Chart 8 - Mamang Dai's *Prayer Flags - 2*



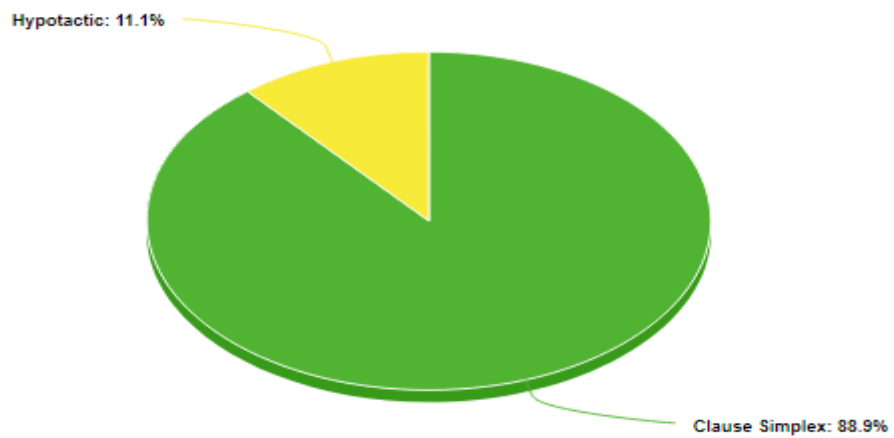
Pie Chart 9 - Mamang Dai's *Gone*



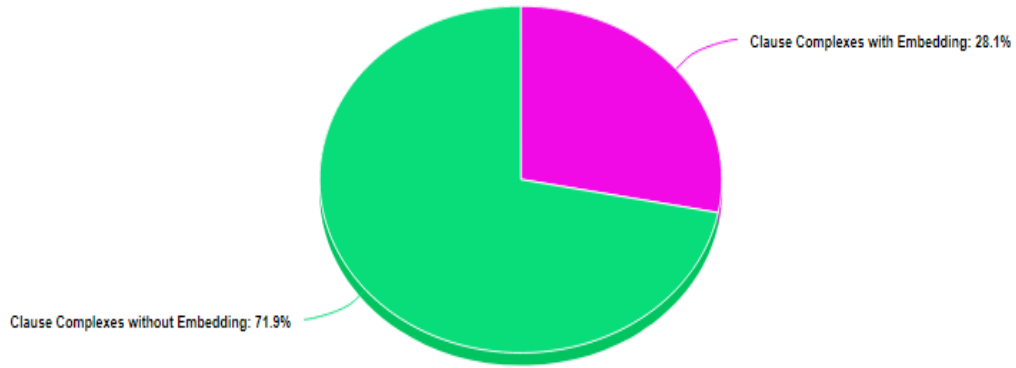
Pie Chart 10 – Mamang Dai's *Remembrance*



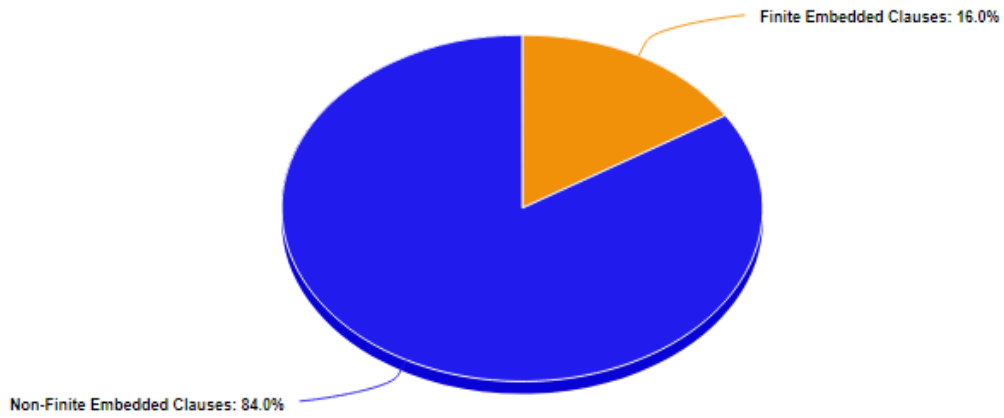
Pie Chart 11 – Mamang Dai's *No Dreams*



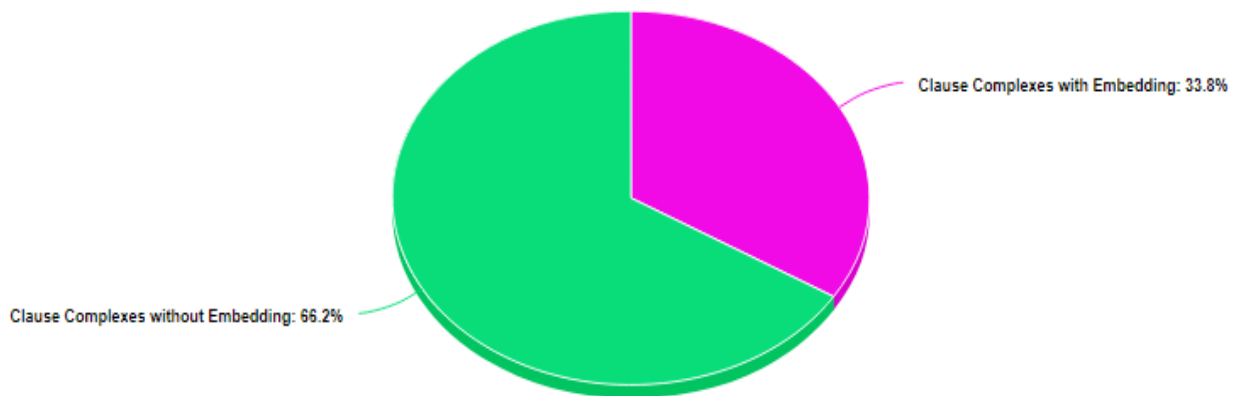
Pie Chart 12 – Mamang Dai's *Small Towns and the River*



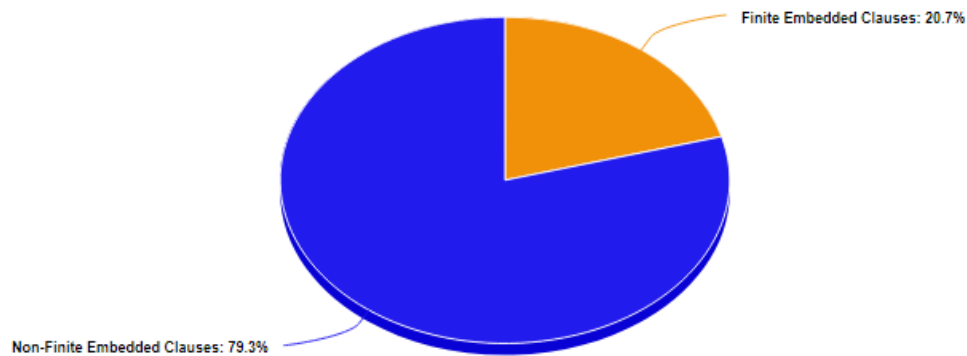
Pie Chart 13 – Embedding in Robin S. Ngangom's selected poems



Pie Chart 14 – Finite and Non-finite Embedded clauses in Robin S. Ngangom's selected poems



Pie Chart 15 – Embedding in Mamang Dai's selected poems



Pie Chart 16 – Finite and Non-finite Embedded clauses in Mamang Dai's selected poems

1.4 Findings and Discussion

In regard to the first research question, the analysis reveals that the most frequently used structures in the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom are clause complexes. In figures, 73.75% finite structures in his poems are clause complexes while only 26.25% finite structures are clause simplexes. But the case is almost the opposite in the poems of Mamang Dai as in her poems the most frequently used structures are clause simplexes. Specifically speaking, there are 70.26% clause simplexes in comparison to 29.74% clause complexes in her poems. This finding points towards a major variation in the text-construction strategy of Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai. Undoubtedly, syntactically the structures in Mamang Dai's poems are less complex and intricate than those in the poems of Robin S. Ngangom.

So far as the second research question i.e, frequency in the usage of paratactic and hypotactic relations in the clause complexes is concerned, it has been found that hypotactic relations are more frequently used in the formation of clause complexes in the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom. In the data, 33.65% clause complexes are having hypotactic relations, 19.66% clause complexes are having paratactic relations and 20.41% clause complexes are having both hypotactic and paratactic relations. This reveals that in majority of the clause complexes in the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom clauses are having a relation of inequality with one clause being the dominant and the other or the others dependent on it. The similar is the case in the selected poems of Mamang Dai where 23.18% clause complexes are having hypotactic relations, 3.51% clause complexes are having paratactic relations and merely 3% clause complexes are having both hypotactic and paratactic relations.

As regards the extent of the usage of embedding in the poems of these two poets, it has been found that there is not much use of embedding in the clauses complexes in the selected poems of both Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai. In figures, merely 28% clause complexes are having embedded clauses whereas 72% clause complexes are without any embedded clause in the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom. Similarly, in the selected poems of Mamang Dai, 33.8% clause complexes are having embedded clauses whereas 66.2% clause complexes are without any finite or non-finite embedded clause. It is again interesting to locate that in the selected poems of both Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai, the majority of embedded clauses are non-finite.

For instance, there are 84% non-finite embedded clauses in comparison to 16% finite embedded clauses in the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom. The case is not very different in the selected poems of Mamang Dai which are having 79.3% non-finite embedded clauses in comparison to 20.7% finite embedded clauses. The three main types of non-finite clauses that have been embedded in the clause complexes in the poems of these poets are –ing clauses, -ed or past participle clauses and to-infinitive clauses. Of these, in the selected poems of Mamang Dai, the most frequent are –ing clauses followed by the -ed or past participle clauses. The use of to-infinitive clauses is quite rare in her poems. Here are a few instances of -ing clauses embedded in the clause complexes in her poems:

1. |||Deep in my centre a woman is asleep
[[pressing her cheek on my pillow
vivid with dreams]]. |||
Mamang Dai's Floating Island
2. |||Now we are floating smudges of colour
[[flying high over the mountain barrier.]] |||
Mamang Dai's Prayer Flags - 2
3. |||At night we sleep with guns and gulls
[[tugging at land and oceans]],
Mamang Dai's Gone
4. |||Foragers for a destiny,
all the days of our lives
we stare at the outline of the hills,
[[lifting our eyes to the invincible sky.]]|||
Mamang Dai's Remembrance

So far as the selected poems of Robin S. Ngangom are concerned, the -ed and to-infinitive clauses are equally used and the least used are the –ing clauses. The following instances from the data show the usage of to-infinitive non-finite clauses embedded in clause complexes in his poems:

1. |||Poetry in your
homeland must die a natural death
1 α
|| when one must "sew up his lips and
clog his ears with mud,"
1 β
|| and [[to be a
man]], first of all, you must sell yourself
to the highest bidder. |||
2
Robin S. Ngangom's To Pacha
2. ||| So I said:
1
|| "I wanted my poems [[to exude a heady odour]]
2
|| but only the sweet taint of blood

or burning flesh emanates from my poem." |||

3

Robin S. Ngangom's *Last Word*

Likewise, here is an instance of an *-ed* or past participle clause embedded in a clause complex in one of his poems followed by an instance of *-ing* clause:

1. |||As they went to the outpost of guardians

β

|| they left chickens [[running in the yard]]

and the dog [[lazing on the steps.]] |||

α

Robin S. Ngangom's *Flight*

2. |||My home is a gun
[[pressed against both temples]]
a knock on a night [[that has not ended]]
a torch [[lit long after the theft]]
a sonnet about body counts
[[undoubtedly raped]]
[[definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny.]] |||

Robin S. Ngangom's *My Invented Land*

However, these findings regarding the taxis system in the poetry of Robin S. Ngangom and Mamang Dai and the listing of variations or similarities in their poems on account of the usage of taxis and embedding are preliminary and merely suggestive and need to be probed further by analyzing a wider corpus before being considered as generalizations in this regard. Since in SFL language is regarded as the product of a wider cultural context, it would also be linguistically and culturally rewarding to locate whether the poems of these two North-East Indian poets vary from the poems of other poets writing in English in other parts of India on account of the usage of taxis and embedding.

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