

Temporal Shifts as Trauma Vehicle in Peter Omoko's *Herding South*

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Abstract

This study investigates Peter Omoko's poetry collection, *Herding South*, showing how choices of grammatical tense and aspect serve as tools for expressing trauma connected to the herdsmen conflict in Southern Nigeria. Using Text World Theory, it treats trauma as a disturbance of temporal and cognitive order that is enacted through discourse. Ten key poems are studied qualitatively. The analysis highlights the frequent use of simple present tense as a temporal anchor, sharp switches between past and present, and persistent progressive aspect expressed through non-finite -ing forms. These subtle grammatical patterns construct trauma marked by intrusive recollections, ongoing alertness, and the collapse of temporal distance between past violence and present experience. The findings show that Omoko consistently avoids using the past tense as a stable foundation, instead foregrounding an overwhelming, present where violence, displacement, and institutional betrayal are experienced as constant. Temporal shifts and aspectual patterns simulate flashbacks and repetitive grief associated with PTSD, while occasional modal changes create sub-worlds of resistance and imagined justice. The study suggests that scholarship focusing only on socio-political themes overlooks the crucial work that grammar does in generating emotional and psychological force. By combining grammatical analysis with cognitive approaches to analysis, the research demonstrates that temporal grammar is central to how contemporary Nigerian poetry encodes and communicates collective trauma.

Keywords: tense, aspect, trauma, herdsmen, southern Nigeria

Introduction

Approaches to trauma in linguistics and literary studies have moved from treating trauma as something that cannot be captured in language to examining how survivors actively use grammatical structures to organize or fail to organize their memories. This shift recognises language as a

functional system that can both support integration of traumatic events and reflect psychological fragmentation.

Foundational trauma scholarship of the 1990s, such as Caruth (1996) and Bar-Tal (1996), framed trauma as something that strains or exceeds language, often portraying it as outside ordinary discourse. Early psychoanalytic and literary views therefore described trauma as an event that shatters the survivor's capacity to respond. Later interdisciplinary works, however, turned to the question of how narratives help to place trauma in the past. Van der Kolk et al. (1996) argued that trauma must be shaped into narrative form so that it can be located and processed.

In current psycholinguistic research, the temporal organisation of narrative is seen as a key sign of how a person positions themselves psychologically in relation to a traumatic event. Studies show that trauma narratives often rely heavily on the present tense, which is linked to more intense symptoms and a sense of reliving the event. In contrast, a shift to the past tense is associated with temporal distancing, allowing the traumatic experience to be categorised as completed. Tense places the event in time, while aspect and larger narrative structure reveal how its duration and completion are experienced internally.

Trauma narratives are frequently fragmented, with broken temporal order and features such as repetitions or fillers. Although some research emphasises lexical content over grammar as an indicator of emotional processing, structural markers remain crucial for understanding cognitive effort during recall.

Despite growing recognition that language is central to trauma, relatively few studies directly address the detailed linguistic mechanisms by which trauma is represented. Newer work connects trauma to cognitive linguistics, asking how grammatical systems provide specific means for processing war, displacement, and systemic violence. In *Herding South*, Peter Omoko strongly foregrounds this kind of systemic violence: the unchecked brutality of herdsmen, combined with a sense of government complicity. This complicity worsens the experience of Southern Nigerian communities. Omoko (2019) calls this the government's 'loud silence.' As an accomplished poet, he documents state actions and inactions in several collections; *Herding South* critiques both herdsmen's atrocities and the apparent collusion or neglect by the Nigerian state.

The herdsmen conflict in Southern Nigeria has intensified from localised disputes into a major humanitarian and security crisis. The combination of forced displacement, destruction of farmland, and loss of

life has left deep communal and psychological scars. Omoko's *Herding South* intervenes creatively by capturing the emotional, cultural, and physical fractures produced by this continuing violence.

However, there remains a serious gap in the way Nigerian crisis literature is analysed. While trauma is often identified thematically in contemporary Nigerian poetry, there is little work on the specific linguistic and stylistic techniques through which this trauma is encoded. Most criticism of recent conflict poetry prioritises large-scale themes such as political critique, eco-critical concerns, sociological commentary, or graphic depictions of violence. These approaches treat the poems largely as historical or political documents, overlooking the fine-grained linguistic patterns that create their emotional and psychological power.

Trauma, psychologically and cognitively, is fundamentally a temporal disturbance. It disrupts linear time: the past repeatedly intrudes into the present through involuntary memories, and the future appears blocked or destroyed. Linguistically, tense and aspect are the chief tools writers have for structuring and expressing time. If trauma tears apart human time, then an author's manipulation of tense and aspect inevitably becomes a primary structural means of representing that fragmentation. Yet, there is a clear shortage of stylistics-based research that systematically examines how tense and aspect function as cognitive channels of trauma in Nigerian poetry. Without analysing these categories, we cannot fully understand how sudden tense shifts such as an abrupt move from a stable past to a vivid historical present or the interplay of progressive and perfective aspects mirror the victims' psychological instability in *Herding South*.

Critical approaches that ignore these grammatical details fail to account for how Omoko weaponises language structurally to generate suspense, endless grief, and cognitive dislocation. Thus, the problem this study addresses is the absence of a thorough stylistic analysis of tense and aspect as vehicles for trauma representation in *Herding South*.

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To identify and catalogue specific linguistic markers of tense and aspect shifts in selected poems from Peter Omoko's *Herding South*.
2. To analyse how these temporal and aspectual shifts function as world-switches that construct a traumatised mind style, using Text World Theory.

3. To assess how effectively these temporal shifts operate as stylistic resources for conveying individual and communal trauma arising from the herdsmen crisis.

The research thereby aims to correct the narrow focus on themes alone, showing that without close attention to grammatical time, our understanding of how contemporary Nigerian poetry stylistically frames national crises remains partial. By tracing how Omoko manipulates tense and aspect, the study illustrates how he linguistically shapes and communicates the psychological devastation of the herdsmen conflict.

Review of Related Literature

The worsening socio-ecological and ethno-political tensions surrounding the nomadic herdsmen conflict in Southern Nigeria have produced a robust body of defensive and responsive literature. Writers have shifted from observing from a distance to recording an ongoing, lived regional crisis. While political and environmental scholarship has documented the material dimensions of the conflict, literature especially recent poetry captures its psychological and emotional effects.

Contemporary Nigerian writing has long engaged with themes of resource scarcity, environmental degradation, and localised violence. Earlier conflict literature focused largely on the Biafran War or ecological devastation in the Niger Delta (Adumati, 2025; Esemefade & Oboli, 2024; Malreddy, 2015). More recently, attention has expanded to include the agro-pastoral crisis in the middle-belt and southern regions (Apeh et al., 2021; Nnamani et al., 2024). Scholarship on this emerging body of work tends to centre on themes and socio-political analysis, reading herder–farmer clashes through the lenses of state failure, eco-criticism, and ethnic tension (Nnamani et al., 2024). Literature is often treated as documentation of climate change, desert encroachment, and uncontrolled open grazing (Adumati, 2025). Poetry and drama are viewed as creative archives of displacement, sexual violence, and communal mourning (Irokansi, 2026; Nnamani et al., 2024).

Although these perspectives are important for historical context, they risk what stylisticians label the ‘content fallacy’, which is treating texts as transparent windows to social reality while neglecting the detailed linguistic and structural decisions that produce their affective force (Whiteley, 2015).

To understand how trauma appears in literature, it must be conceptualised as more than an emotional theme but also a structural and

temporal disruption. Cognitive Psychology and trauma studies show that events such as massacres and violent displacement fracture linear time (Giovanelli, 2022). Normally, memory orders events in sequence, but trauma prevents such orderly processing. The past remains unfixed, returning in intrusive flashbacks, nightmares, and persistent hyper-vigilance (Mmeka, 2025).

In texts, this psychological break cannot be conveyed by vocabulary alone; it requires deliberate distortion of the narrative timeline. Poems that seek to represent traumatic experience must therefore enact temporal disorientation, mirroring the chaotic mental landscape of the traumatised (Díaz, 2026; Mmeka, 2025). Here, tense and aspect become crucial: tense anchors events relative to the moment of speaking (past, present, future), while aspect signals whether actions are completed wholes (perfective) or ongoing processes (imperfective/progressive). Traditional grammar treats them as strictly rule-governed, but stylistics views them as expressive resources that shape attention, empathy, and distance (Giovanelli, 2026; Khan, 2025). For example, a sudden shift from past to historical present can intensify immediacy, while a heavy reliance on progressive forms can trap a narrative in a sense of endless suffering.

Empirical Review

Recent scholarship applying cognitive stylistics to African conflict texts provides an important foundation for this work. Mmeka (2025), for instance, uses Schema Theory and TWT to study mind style and traumatic memory in Dul Johnson's *Across the Gulf*. That study shows how layered text-worlds and nested memory/future sub-worlds construct a fragmented worldview in characters experiencing post-war dislocation, and links structural splits between external reality and inner experience to identifiable discourse-level patterns.

In poetry studies, Díaz (2026) applies a text-world approach to explore how historical catastrophe and collective mourning are impressed in verse, arguing that landscape and setting organised through deixis and spatio-temporal structure actively materialise grief. Similarly, Giovanelli (2022) combines textual analysis with reader-response data to show that foregrounded linguistic features, particularly those that reorient readers in space and time, are central triggers for empathy and the simulation of distress.

Isaac-Agbontai (2025) examines linguistic patterns in “Omotekoro” to reveal exploitation and devastation in the Niger Delta. Although the work highlights vivid depictions of suffering, it does not consider how

tense and aspect help shape the trauma. It is precisely this omission that the present study seeks to address.

While *Herding South* is widely recognised as a powerful thematic indictment of the herdsman crisis, no study has yet explored how its internal linguistic mechanisms work. There is a gap in research on how Omoko manipulates grammatical time particularly tense and aspect shifts as a deliberate structural strategy for encoding individual and collective trauma. By applying TWT to *Herding South*, this research fills that gap and connects close grammatical analysis with the cognitive processing of social grief.

Theoretical Framework

To clarify how variations in tense and aspect turn into an experience of trauma, the study adopts Text World Theory (TWT). Developed by Paul Werth (1999) and refined by Joanna Gavins (2005, 2007), TWT is a discourse model that describes how readers construct mental representations during communication (M. Hamed, 2020).

According to TWT, readers build an initial text-world as they process language (Gavins, 2005). This mental space is shaped by: World-building elements: information about time, place, participants, and objects. Tense operates mainly at this level, setting the timeline of the discourse. Function-advancing propositions: the actions, states, and processes that move the discourse forward. These are strongly influenced by aspect, which indicates whether actions are complete or ongoing. Gavins' work places particular emphasis on sub-worlds and world-switches. Whenever a text shifts in time, space, or modality, the main text-world recedes and a new subordinate mental space emerges. He further notes that a sudden tense change produces a temporal world-switch (Gavins, 2005). In conventional fiction, such switches can mark transitions to backstory. In trauma narratives, however, temporal world-switches can represent psychological flashbacks (Mmeka, 2025). The reader is forced to jump between fragmented mental layers, mirroring the way a traumatised mind is pulled from a fragile present back into past terror (Whiteley, 2015).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Text World Theory. It draws its data from *Herding South* which comprises 30 poems centred on the devastation caused by herdsman and the perceived complicity of the government. From the 30 poems, ten poems that most

clearly foreground the concerns of this study are purposively selected. The analysis focuses on how tense and aspect patterns build and destabilise text-worlds, trigger temporal world-switches, and construct traumatised mind styles. Particular attention is paid to simple vs. progressive aspect, past vs. present/future tenses, and the role of modal expressions in creating sub-worlds of fear, paralysis, or resistance.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Text 1: Cow Dung

The first poem, titled ‘Cow Dung’, consists of 3 stanzas and 30 lines. Rather than following a traditional chronological timeline (Past, Present & Future), the poem locks the reader into a highly concentrated temporal space. Lines 1 to 7 present the simple present tense, e.g., *am, sing, speak*, which remains stative and habitual. Lines 7-10 present the future modal, which is anticipatory, *will sing, will dance*. From Lines 17–24, we have Simple present + Imperfective Progressive participles, such as *sway, mow, dance, decapitating*, and *swathing*. Lines 25-28 we see simple present + Continuous participles *drift, are strewn, supervises, parading, bearing*.

What we are experiencing here is a stagnant present, making it an immediate, permanent reality. In trauma literature, the omission of the past tense is a significant stylistic choice. Omoko completely bypasses the past tense as a baseline world-building anchor. The poem does not treat the herdsmen's crisis as a historical event that has ended; instead, the text-world is anchored entirely in the simple present tense.

The poem opens with ‘*I am intoxicated with the pains of the land*’ and transitions in the second stanza to ‘*I am drunk with the problems of the land.*’ Grammatically, these are present stative conditions. They indicate that the trauma is a constant, unceasing environment. Choosing the present tense over the past, the persona forces a cognitive collapse of distance between the reader and the crisis. The trauma is happening right now, trapping both the poetic personae and the reader in the immediate terror of the assault. While tense situates the poem in the present, Omoko’s choice of aspect serves as the primary vehicle of trauma. The poem relies heavily on the progressive aspect through the deployment of non-finite -ing participles. Consider the following examples in the poem:

decapitating -progressive aspect, which is a graphic portrayal of violence in motion.

swathing -progressive aspect presenting the continuous generation of misery.
parading-Progressive aspect portraying perpetual, unresolved terror.

In Text World Theory, these function-advancing propositions lack a definitive temporal boundary, because the actions are grammatically unbounded. They present the violence as a movie frozen on a loop. The cows are continuously *swathing misery on the teeth of tender cassavas*, (lines 24-25), and the invader is perpetually *parading...* AK47(line 29). Denying the reader the perfective aspect (which would indicate completed actions, such as decapitated or paraded), Omoko structurally denies the text-world any sense of closure or healing. The trauma remains actively unfolding, replicating the psychological state of continuous vigilance where the victim feels the threat is never-ending.

The only major temporal world-switches in the poem occur through the introduction of the future modal *will*, I will sing to spite the scorpion (line 8) I will dance without restraint. (line 10). In a traumatised mind style, when the immediate present becomes unbearable, the consciousness shifts modality to create an escapist or defiant sub-world. The future modal *will*, project a psychological coping mechanism. The speaker cannot change the present reality of the *shrivelled cows* and *desert turf*, so they create a future sub-world of uninhibited expression *dance without restraint* to survive the current psychic paralysis.

The poem closes with a shift to the modal of dark destiny: *That man may die for cow to live* (line 30). The modal verb *may*, shifts the text into a grim, predictive state, indicating that the trauma of the present has completely contaminated and rewritten the possibilities of the future. Anchoring the text in a suffocating simple present tense and driving the narrative through an unbounded, progressive imperfective aspect, the poem linguistically manifests the true nature of communal trauma: a structural reality where the past is erased, the future is compromised, and the terrible present refuses to end.

Text 2: Native Peace

In Text World Theory, a sudden shift in grammatical tense forces the reader to experience a temporal world-switch, abandoning the baseline text-world to construct a subordinate mental space. In “The Naive Peace”, this switch happens across stanzas, between the past and the present. From a cognitive-trauma perspective, this structural oscillation

replicates the exact psychic mechanism of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and memory intrusion. The victim is trapped in a cyclical nightmare. The simple past verbs code the historic, physical violence of the herdsmen crisis (*murder, property destruction, and sexual assault*). They are consistently paired with past-tense verbs (*bumped, cut, swaggered, smashed, tied, lunged*) that advance a destructive narrative, while the immediate transition to the simple present (*stares, prays, reels*) indicates that this past terror continuously breaches the present consciousness.

The trauma is not just in the past; it is re-lived in an ongoing, helpless present. The male persona is locked in a simple present habitual loop of psychological paralysis (*stares, prays, reels, dodges*). This linguistic arrangement constructs a traumatised mind style characterised by cognitive dissociation and cowardice. The simple present tense emphasises that his trauma has manifested as static, permanent helplessness, rendering him incapable of confronting the past actions of the invaders.

The introduction of the future modal auxiliary verb *shall* (*shall give ears*" 48) shifts the discourse into a sub-world framed as an unanswerable rhetorical question. Trauma, at its highest level, destroys the capacity to imagine a safe or predictable future. While the poem's tenses handle the shifting locations of memory, Omoko's manipulation of aspect dictates the internal, emotional duration of the crisis. It uses progressive participles to show continuous terror. The poem deliberately deploys non-finite -ing present participles to strip the narrative of closure. In line 12, the sexual assault is framed as *hitting my buttocks*. We see in lines 14-15, the domestic response, "*praying that the intruders / are not offended*"; and in Stanza 8, the speaker describes her husband's actions" *fretting at the dust / of fleeing rodents*."

Referring the imperfective/progressive aspect over bounded, completed actions, Omoko structurally prevents the reader from escaping the scene, keeping the household in a state of continual terror. The grammatical construction presents the cognitive reality of a survivor for whom the violation has no definitive endpoint. The poem showcases from lines 31-40, a complex cognitive blend that highlights the permanent geopolitical trauma of the South. *Now, bushmen grew wings / and dug roots in my farmstead, / erecting slumming quarters / where they collect 'ground money' from me*". This stanza masterfully collapses the text-world parameters: It begins with the present deictic time-anchor "now", then immediately connects this present anchor to past-tense verbs

of function advancers (*grew, dug*). Finally, it transitions through a progressive participle, *erecting*, into a habitual present-tense verb (*collect*).

Linguistically, this temporal blending that shows displacement (*the roots dug by the invaders*) has seamlessly turned into a normalised, ongoing structure of present subjugation and economic extortion (*collecting ground money* (line 40)). It is important to note that the poem reaches its stylistic climax with grammatical fragmentation at the end of line 45. Ending the poem on a hanging modal question combined with the final, continuous participle *herding* (line 51), Omoko structurally sentences the southern states to an open-ended, unresolved state of vulnerability. The future is not a space of hope; it is grammatically suspended in a perpetual, oncoming doom.

Text 3: Wailing the Herdsman's Flute

The poem is made up of 9 stanzas and 31 lines and is structurally unique because it operates primarily within a repetitive framework. The use of the simple present tense generally runs through the entire poem, keeping the personae in an ever-present nightmare. The poem opens with a stark observation about the psychological impact of terror: '*Memory may fail*'. Linguistically, the modal auxiliary verb *may* create a sub-world characterised by uncertainty. Trauma frequently damages cognitive processing, causing memories of extreme violence to fragment or become repressed. However, the speaker immediately stabilises the text-world by shifting into the present perfect aspect: '*But I have searched the gauntlet, / Behold the precipice and I am sure*' (lines 2-3).

The present perfect verb *have searched* bridges a completed past action with an immediate, definitive present state of clarity (*I am sure*). The speaker's trauma is validated through this aspectual choice: though memory threatens to fail under the weight of the crisis, the physical reality of the danger (*the precipice*) remains actively anchored in the present. Aside from the opening lines, most of the poem is heavily anchored in the simple present tense. Omoko uses verbs like *cuts down, hunts, kills, sneers, scavenges, slaughters, and sacks* to describe the actions of the herdsman.

In cognitive grammar, this use of the present tense shifts from describing a single, immediate action to establishing a habitual aspect. Avoiding past-tense markers for these atrocities (*the herdsman slaughter* line 23), the poem implies that the destruction of Southern agrarian communities is not an isolated historical event. It transforms the

herdsmen's crisis into an unceasing, timeless status quo. The marauder is perpetually cutting down forests; the herdsman is continuously slaughtering farmers. This creates a highly claustrophobic mind-style for the victims, who are denied any temporal distance from their oppressors.

The most sophisticated use of temporal shifting as a trauma vehicle occurs in the subtle variation of the poem's repeating refrain. *The marauder cuts down forests to spite / The grass, his hands drip with the blood of boast* (lines 5-7). *The marauder cuts down forests to spite / The grass, his hands dripped with the blood of boast* (lines 14-15). *The marauder cuts down forests to spite / The grass, his hands drip with the blood of boast* (lines 20-21)

For two stanzas, the reader is accustomed to the ongoing, active presence of the blood (*drip*). The unexpected shift to *dripped* forces a sudden cognitive relocation. It functions as a linguistic intrusive psychological flashback. For a moment, the text fractures to show that the ongoing present terror is fuelled by a pool of completed, historical bloodshed. The sudden return to *drip* on line 28 completes the traumatic loop, showing that the past and present are locked in an inseparable cycle of violence.

In line 29, the poem introduces the temporal adverbial phrase *But everyday*. This phrase instantly triggers an iterative aspectual frame, completely altering how the final lines are processed cognitively. The noun phrase, *The mound of slain women and children* (line 30) is paired with the present-tense function-advancing proposition *Rain curses* (line 31).

Framing communal murder through the lens of the iterative *everyday*, the text signals the ultimate destination of long-term societal trauma: the complete normalisation of horror. The loss of life is no longer an anomaly; it has become an integrated feature of the daily environmental cycle.

In 'Wailing the Herdsman's Flute', Peter Omoko successfully uses temporal grammar to draw out the psychological dimensions of the herdsman crisis. Utilising an unyielding present to depict aggression, forcing a traumatic structural flashback through the *drip/dripped* refrain variation, and concluding with an iterative everyday loop of mourning, the poem effectively demonstrates how grammatical structures can serve as the vehicle for presenting collective trauma.

Text 4: Herding South

The opening sections of the title poem build a baseline text-world that lacks historical distance. Omoko establishes an immediate, claustrophobic reality by combining the simple present tense with progressive aspectual markers. In Sections I and II, the crisis is introduced not as a past catastrophe, but as an ongoing condition: *Herders heading south in / Un-courted rage to / Enforce the craze of countless colonies* (lines 5-7). *The ululation of mega-corruption... Floats in the midst of morbid hyacinth* (lines 16-18). Selecting the present tense (*choose, enforce, floats*), the violence is framed as a present condition.

In Section IV, this immediate present is populated with destructive actions driven entirely by present participles (-ing forms): *Casting sickles and machetes on open necks...* (line 69) *Champing their teeth on lazy twigs...* (line 73). In Text World Theory, these function-advancing propositions are imperfective, because the actions have no grammatical boundaries showing completion, the text locks the reader in the ongoing trauma. The blades are perpetually *casting* and the cattle are perpetually *champing* through the ruins of Southern farmsteads.

Then Sections VI and VII regress to the past. It begins as a historical narrative anchored in the simple past tense, describing a community massacre. The whole episode is captured as a past occurrence. 'Five or six soldiers *took* charge... / 'I know that man,' *chorused* Iortom... / When the body of his pastor... / *Sank* into the shallow mass grave / The bones of children... / *Picked* from the craggy grass...'

These past tenses allow the reader to process the funeral as a historical event. However, Omoko violently shatters this temporal distance by introducing a sudden, unannounced shift to the simple present tense and the progressive: it oscillates between three aspects.

Crank together in one grave, / Massed together in a funeral mass / As Miyetti-Allah spokesperson claps / To the sky, clanking the sour blood'. This is a sign of mental trauma in a victim trying to maintain stability but can't.

Switching mid-stanza from *sank* and *picked* to *claps* and *clanking*, the poet executes an immediate Temporal World-Switch. The historical distance collapses, dragging the past massacre into the immediate present. The trauma is magnified by closing the section with a Future Modal Warning (will die) combined with a present conditional clause *if you don't donate, More souls will die / If you don't donate your lands / For our grazing rights* (lines 181-183).

The future modal projects an inescapable trajectory of ongoing violence, transforming the poem from a lamentation of past events into an active, prophetic threat. The final page of this sequence introduces political commentary, utilising a unique combination of the past perfect and simple present to expose the psychological trauma of institutional neglect. *The president is a father / His mourning broadcast divides...* (simple present then shifts to past perfect. *It is a communal conflict, he had said* (lines 193- 195). The use of the past perfect distances the state's empty promises from the immediate, bleeding reality of the victims. The political rhetoric is framed as old, recycled language, while the suffering of the farmsteads remains trapped in an unresolvable present.

Text 5: I love my President

The structural engine of this poem relies on a stark transition from an ironic present state to a deeply chronological narrative past, before ending on a chilling, permanent present-tense ideological declaration. The poem opens with a deceptive, childlike stability anchored in the simple present tense. *I love / My President / And my President / Loves me too* (lines 1-4).

In Text World Theory (TWT), this builds an initial text-world of mutual affection and security. However, Omoko immediately fractures this baseline by dropping into the simple past tense to reveal the origin of this belief: *He swore to protect... And so he campaigned to my house* (lines 5-8).

A fascinating grammatical anomaly occurs in this opening stanza. Linguistically, using the present form *vote* inside a past-tense conditional framework, *He swore... if I vote* creates a temporal mismatch. The personae's consciousness is so captured by political promises that past assurances are processed as if they are active, living truths, completely blinding them to the impending danger.

Stanza 6 marks the sudden shift from political illusion to physical violence. Omoko achieves this by unleashing a rapid, unyielding chain of simple perfective verbs: *settled, came, flooded, forgot, ate, defecated, burnt, left*. Linguistically, these verbs represent function-advancing propositions that occur in quick succession. The text compresses massive trauma into a short space: *cattle came, ate up crops, defecated in the home, cattle rustlers came, burnt down the house, and left with the souls of the village* (lines 41-57).

This rapid pacing, from a cognitive-trauma perspective, mirrors the overwhelming speed of a real-world crisis. The victim's baseline reality

is shattered instantly. Using the past perfective aspect, the poem emphasises the absolute finality of the physical destruction; the village is gone, and the souls are irretrievably lost. The resolution of the poem from line 58, features a profound temporal and linguistic shift that marks the ultimate stage of psychological trauma, which is systemic abandonment.

When the President finally arrives after a security meeting, the narrative baseline shifts as the President's inner circle speaks, *The language of his birth / That is unknown to me* (lines 63-64). The sudden insertion of the present tense verb *is* breaks the historical narrative, signalling a permanent state of exclusion. The speaker realises they are completely alienated from the centre of power.

This alienation is captured visually and grammatically in the final lines: *Casting a benign smile at / The decapitated bodies of children / He patted my back and / Assured me that my / losses are in the interest / Of the nation!* (lines 67-72). While the President's physical movements are finished past actions, his smile is captured as an ongoing, unbounded state. He is caught in a perpetual loop of smiling at the decapitated bodies of children. This aspectual choice freezes the image of political indifference, amplifying the horror of the scene.

The poem concludes with the President's reported speech anchored firmly in the simple present tense: *my / losses are in the interest / Of the nation* (71-72). Shifting the final verb to *are*, the poem moves away from historical narrative and enters the realm of a permanent, unyielding truth. The victim's trauma is no longer temporary; it finalises the psychological trauma, leaving the speaker in a state of permanent sacrifice for a state that does not speak their language.

In 'I Love My President,' Peter Omoko masterfully demonstrates how temporal shifts act as a direct vehicle for conveying trauma. Transitioning from an ironic present to a quick, destructive past narrative, and finally culminating in an absolute, institutional present, the poem captures the ultimate betrayal of the agrarian community of Southern Nigeria. The grammar itself tracks the path of a survivor: from blind trust, through the flash of violence, to the chilling realisation that their suffering has been normalised by the state.

Text 6: The Bunkering Song

This poem introduces a crucial thematic and structural twist: it links the internal economic trauma of the Niger Delta (illegal oil bunkering) directly to the external security threat of the herdsmen crisis. The poem

does not follow a stable chronological order. Instead, it moves between the past and present before mapping out a causal loop where past resource exploitation funds present security lapses.

The poem opens by building a text-world based on a past-tense violation, which immediately collapses into an active, terrified present tense: *You smuggled her in torn pants... / As darkness blinds the eyes of the sky. / River gods... Are afraid* (Stanza 1). Linguistically, the transition from the past tense (*smuggled*) to the simple present (*blinds, are*) acts as a Temporal World-Switch. The reader is not allowed to view the trauma of illegal bunkering as history.

Pulling the narrative into the immediate present, the poem shows that the ecological and cultural systems (River gods) are trapped in a state of ongoing fear. The trauma is sustained in Stanza 2 through the progressive participle *Dragging* (line 10), an unbounded aspectual choice that forces the reader to watch the continuous degradation of the land in real-time. In Stanza 3, the speaker confronts the local collaborator: *Obogoma, why have you chosen to murder / The clan in the pot of oil bunkering* (13-14). The selection of the present perfect aspect (*have chosen*) is highly deliberate. Unlike the simple past (*why did you choose*), the present perfect denotes a past decision whose catastrophic consequences are permanently tied to the present.

This aspectual choice establishes that Obogoma's greed is not an old mistake; it is a living, ongoing act of violence against his own people. This matches the traumatised mind of the community, which is forced to bear the weight of internal betrayal alongside external aggression.

Stanza 4 shifts entirely into a violent, active present tense to describe the environment: *Obogoma, your leaking kegs / Vomit death into the sinews of the land, / The burning pots of your greed clog the shoulders... / Clanks the roots of weeds...* (lines 23-27).

Choosing simple present verbs, Omoko treats the land as a living body undergoing active physical trauma. The land is suffocating right now, creating a sensory loop of horror that offers no psychological relief or temporal escape. Stanza 5 executes a complete Temporal World-Switch into a historical past tense world: *Truly, our oppressors promised us operating licenses... / But were soon possessed by demons... / That horrible nightmare scared the gods / And mermaid left our shores*. This sudden shift to the past tense builds an alternative mental space to explain the origins of the current crisis. The flight of the spiritual protectors is sealed in the past, signifying a final, historical loss that leaves the current host community completely vulnerable.

The poem's ultimate trauma vehicle appears in its final lines. The present tense presents corruption *collecting a thousand naira toll* (line 44) is what enables the external invasion. The poem concludes with the typographical isolation of the present participle: *...To / Keep watch / Of herders, / Herding south* (lines 46-49).

Ending on the imperfective, continuous aspect, Omoko strips the collection of any sense of resolution. The future is completely overshadowed by an ongoing, unstoppable migration. The grammatical style leaves the southern communities trapped in a cycle where internal corruption permanently paves the way for external terror.

Text 7: The Day Papa Tip-toed into the Night

The poem rejects a linear timeline, opting instead for an unstable temporal structure that blends ancestral time, immediate memory, and a paralysed present. The poem begins by building an initial text-world anchored in complex timeframes: *I have heard of the cooing of the dove... / The wind had kissed the lips of forest trees.*

Linguistically, the present perfect (have heard) and past perfect (had kissed) create a sense of distance. This configuration represents a pre-trauma state; a peaceful memory of the land before the crisis. However, this distant memory is immediately disrupted by a shift to the present tense: *The fog spreads its white garment... calling the steerman of / The spirit boat.* (lines 6-8)

The sudden arrival of the present tense *spreads* acts as a Temporal World-Switch. It signals that the peaceful past has been cut short by the immediate, chilling approach of death (the spirit boat).

In Stanza 3, Omoko deploys a profound grammatical disruption that serves as a direct vehicle for trauma: *The iroko tree has shed the remains / Of its precious leaf, / The masquerade now danced naked* (lines 13-15). Linguistically, pairing the present deictic adverb *now* with the past-tense verb *danced* breaks standard grammatical rules.

In the context of trauma studies, this structural mismatch mimics a post-traumatic flashback. For the personae, the past shock of the crisis is so raw that it overrides linear grammar. The past event (danced naked) is dragged directly into the psychological *now*, showing that the trauma is actively re-lived rather than remembered.

As the poem processes the death of Papa, the text shifts completely into a heavy, unyielding simple present tense: *Pale grasses sleep in the oily mud / That sticks to the throat of murderers / The clan wail; men and women...* (lines 20-23).

Choosing the present tense over the narrative past, Omoko blocks any sense of historical distance. The environmental pollution (oily mud) and the community's grief (the clan wail) are presented as an inescapable, ongoing reality. The trauma is locked in place, leaving the host community trapped in the immediate aftermath of the assault.

The poem relies heavily on the progressive aspect through non-finite present participles to sustain its dirge: *Whimpering the communal dirge* (line 25) *...Fearing the gaze of a lifeless body...* (line 31) *Facing a smiling photograph...* (line 33). In Text World Theory, these participles function as propositions that lack a definitive start or end point. Instead of completed past actions, the grammar denies the scene any sense of resolution. The mourning mirrors the psychological reality of grief, where the pain of loss feels continuous and unending.

The poem closes by establishing a definitive historical marker, shifting back into the simple past tense: *That day, / The herders slept in their migration...That night, / The dirge was hummed across the clan* (lines 26-38). The deictic anchors *That day* and *That night* isolate the tragedy, marking it as a permanent scar on the community's timeline. Finishing the poem in the past passive (was hummed), the text shows that the immediate shock has settled into a collective, historical trauma. The individual loss of Papa is permanently woven into the broader story of the herdsmen crisis.

Text 8: They Call Me Restive

This poem focuses on how the text uses grammatical tense, aspectual packaging, and modal shifts to articulate the psychological transition from passive trauma to defiant resistance. The poem opens by anchoring its baseline text-world firmly in the Simple present Tense: *You call me restive / For asking to be equal with you"...I call you thief / for taking what belongs to me* (lines 1-5). The trauma depicted here is not the sudden flash of physical violence, but the slow, psychological weight of systematic marginalisation and labelling.

The host community is trapped in an unfair discursive space where the legitimate defence of their land is continuously turned against them as restiveness. The non-finite present participles reinforce this unbounded, uncompleted duration of structural injustice.

Stanza 3 abruptly disrupts this present-tense baseline by utilising a simple past interrogative alongside a present participle: *Did you not see the ridge of your mouth, / ... swallowing the stars of the sky?* (lines 7-9)

This introduces a Temporal World-Switch. The speaker forces the oppressor to look back at the historical moment of invasion.

The trauma of resource depletion is captured through the progressive aspect of the participle *swallowing*. Presenting the consumption of the South's resources as an active, continuous process rather than a completed past action, the grammar mirrors the community's perception of the herdsmen's crisis: a relentless, ongoing destruction of their livelihood that refuses to stop.

In Stanza 4, the poem highlights the true source of the community's psychological fracture by juxtaposing two tenses: *Yet you call me restive (simple present) / ... When you seized what belongs to me (Simple past)*. Through the earlier poems of Herding South, the personae are often trapped in a state of mourning or structural paralysis. This poem provides the ultimate turning point by shifting into a Future Modal Sub-World: *I shall come to you with clubs, cudgels, / and machetes to slice away that you've taken*(lines 13-15).

When a present reality becomes completely saturated with trauma, the human consciousness uses a future-oriented modality to regain control. The closing phrase, that we may be equal, uses a *modal* to project an eventual restoration of balance, breaking the loop of victimhood entirely.

In this poem, Peter Omoko masterfully redefines the trajectory of regional trauma through strategic grammatical positioning. Instead of allowing the text to sink into a permanent present loop of grief, the poem uses the simple present tense to expose structural hypocrisy, uses the simple past tense to present historical accountability, and strategically deploys the future modal *shall* as a liberating structural vehicle. The grammar itself helps to produce a psychological awakening, which is moving the speaker from a labelled object of trauma to an active, self-determined agent of resistance.

Text 9: Village Square is Empty

The poem is anchored in a continuous state of absence, using the present simple tense to depict an empty society. In the section satirising political deception (represented by the character 'Lai'), Omoko uses a striking temporal transition: The deluge of lies that sit in Lai's mouth / ... Now they are congealed in Lai's gullet. The introduction of the present deictic adverb *now* alongside the passive verb *are congealed* represents a significant shift. The political propaganda surrounding the crisis is no longer just active deception (sit); it has solidified (congealed) into a

physical, choking mass. For the community, the trauma of being lied to by the State has hardened into a permanent structural barrier that blocks truth and justice.

The poem tracks the physical cost of economic policy and insecurity on agricultural communities: His exported yams *have bent* the backs / Of the Benue's clans (lines 39-40). Rather than using the simple past (*bent*), the present perfect serves a result function. It links a history of exploitation and trauma directly to the present day. The backs of the Benue farmers remain physically deformed in the poem's current text-world, showing that past suffering continues to shape their current physical reality.

The poem reaches its emotional peak through anaphoric refrains dedicated to the *Minister of blood*. Here, the text uses a string of present passive verb forms to detail the geographic scale of the crisis: *The bones of his Zamfara rice farmers are / Dismantled and crushed* (lines 45-46). *The homes of his Taraba fruit farmers are / Drenched in the blood of betrayal* (lines 48-49). *The homes of his Benue yam farmers are / Raped and razed to ashes* (lines 51-52). Avoiding the past tense, Omoko prevents the reader from treating these atrocities as finished history. The present passives frame the destruction of these communities as an active, ongoing process.

The last three stanzas introduce legal figures (Sagay, Falana, Keyamo) to show how the nation's intellectual elite handles the crisis. Their actions are captured entirely in the simple present tense: *Sagay cries rooftops to mock fecund statesmen* (line 71) *Falana hangs his wig on a pendulum*, (line 78) *Keyamo taunts the monkeys* (line 85). The legal elites are caught in a continuous loop of performance, greed, and political posturing while the country burns. Their betrayal is normalised as a daily routine, finalising the community's psychological trauma: they are physically hunted by invaders in the fields, gaslighted by politicians in the media, and abandoned by lawyers in the courts.

In this poem, Peter Omoko demonstrates that institutional betrayal is just as traumatic as physical violence. Framing the empty public spaces in a stative present base, capturing the state's propaganda through a congealed present passive, and locking the complicit legal elite into a present loop, the grammar effectively conveys the deep sense of societal abandonment.

Text 10: The Clan Song

The poem is divided into two distinct structural halves: a descriptive, unbounded present-continuous state of suffering, followed by an imperative, future-oriented call to resistance. The poem opens by building a primary text-world anchored in a predictable, repeating cycle of environmental and physical deprivation: Every season of draught (line 1)/ Empties our hopes... (line 2)/ As the clan march out for the routine (line 4)/ Drink of sour grapes (line 5).

Linguistically, combining the temporal adverbial phrase *Every season* with present simple verbs sets up an aspectual frame. Within the community's mind style, the herdsmen crisis and its accompanying famine are no longer processed as an unexpected shock. Instead, the grammar normalises the terror into a routine. The text-world is built on a bleak baseline where suffering occurs with the regularity of changing seasons.

While the action moves iteratively in the present, the physical descriptions of the victims are captured using past participles acting as adjectives: ...cage of stayed laughter, (line 3) ...faces paled (line 6) ...Drenched on the shadows of wailings (line 7).

In Text World Theory, these function as World-Building elements. Even though they are past-tense verbal forms, their placement here denotes a finalised current state. The laughter is stopped permanently, and the vitality of the faces is drained. This grammatical arrangement perfectly captures the lingering residue of deep psychological trauma: the initial violent event is over, but it leaves the victims frozen in its shadow. Omoko relies heavily on a continuous stream of non-finite present participles (-ing forms) to manage readers' attention and psychological distance.

In Stanza 1, the host community is framed through progressive aspect *Staring at faces* (line 7), *Eyeing death* (line 8) and *Hoping, hoping one day* (line 11). Because these propositions lack a definitive grammatical boundary, they present the psychological agony of the clan as a continuous, un-healing duration. The repetition of *hoping, hoping* acts as an aspectual elongation because it shows that the desire for deliverance is trapped in an endless loop, offering no immediate path forward.

Stanza 2 begins with a present-tense realisation that breaks the loop of passive victimisation: *Cries and wailings do not go / To the battlefield to receive medals*. Once the speaker recognises that passive mourning yields no protection, the text abandons descriptive grammar entirely and

unleashes a series of imperative verbs: *Lead the way, let's speak the language... and tuck needles in their boots... Heap egbesu poison in their teacups* (lines 17-20).

Linguistically, switching to the imperative mood constructs an action-oriented sub-world. The community's mind style transitions instantly from helpless observation (staring, eyeing) to tactical resistance (tucking, heaping). The language shifts from the passive endurance of an ongoing invasion to an active orchestration of defensive warfare.

The poem concludes by projecting the outcome of this resistance using the modal *would*. *That in the passion of their greed, / They would swallow anguish and pain*. The modal shifts the ultimate weight of the trauma away from the host community and places it squarely on the invaders. The *anguish and pain* that the clan endured in Stanza 1 is grammatically transferred to the aggressors, providing a sense of psychological resolution.

In 'The Clan Song, 'Peter Omoko uses temporal grammar to exemplify the psychological journey from victimisation to self-defense. The text proves that temporal shifts can serve as an active vehicle for both encoding trauma and bringing about linguistic liberation.

Conclusion

This study sets out to conduct a cognitive-stylistic analysis of Peter Omoko's poetry collection, *Herding South*, using tense and aspect to bring out cognitive features. The primary objective was to investigate how the micro-linguistic mechanics of grammatical tense and aspect serve as structural conduits to encode and communicate the profound individual and communal trauma resulting from the southern herdsmen crisis in Nigeria.

To bridge the gap between formal grammatical structures and the psychological processing of textual meaning, the study adopted Paul Werth and Joanna Gavins' Text World Theory (TWT) as its primary framework. Through systematic textual analysis across various poems, the study tracked how variations in temporal parameters manipulate the cognitive simulation of societal grief.

The comprehensive findings of this study lead to the conclusion that linguistic choices regarding tense and aspect in crisis literature can be instruments of trauma. Peter Omoko's *Herding South* structurally shatters the conventional, linear progression of time to manifest the psychological disorientation of a society under siege. The findings show that by anchoring the baseline text-worlds in a suffocating simple present

tense rather than a historical past narrative, the collection eliminates chronological distance. The herdsmen crisis is structurally encoded not as a past memory to be reflected upon, but as an inescapable, permanent law of existence that host communities must continuously endure in an un-healing ‘now.’

Abrupt Temporal World-Switches such as the rapid oscillation between past and present stanzas or the deliberate pairing of present adverbs with past verbs like *now danced*, function as the literal linguistic equivalents of PTSD symptoms, intrusive memories, and psychological flashbacks. The text forces the reader’s cognitive processing mechanisms to violently shift between temporal layers, mirroring the fractured mental processing of survivors.

Through an over-reliance on the imperfective/progressive aspect via non-finite *-ing* participles (parading, swathing, decapitating, whimpering), the text systematically denies the text-world any sense of perfective completion. Actions are caught frozen mid-motion, translating the psychological state of continuous vigilance into an ongoing, unbounded loop of terror.

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