

**NWABUEZE'S *A PARLIAMENT OF VULTURES* AS A DRESS REHEARSAL OF
SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITIES IN NIGERIA: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

The style of the man is the man and a skillful merger of, theme and style makes for the excellence of a literary style. Nwabueze appreciates the truth in this fact and, therefore, weaves a story that violates every known conversational principle but projects a pragmatic force that speaks more powerfully than ordinary words of the play, *A Parliament of Vultures*. This paper, therefore, explores the provisions of implicature in pragmatics to show how it is that Nwabueze uses ordinary words and sentences of English to send messages that have no direct relationship with the formal additive value of the linguistic medium of transmission. By this, the paper shows that language is an adaptable instrument for a fictional representation of events in real life.

Introduction

Knowledge is just an ornament in prosperity and that is probably why many people thirst to know and understand the world around them. The artist constructs his own idea about this world, and history provides part of this knowledge but that which derives from the past. Literature is make-belief but it provides part of this knowledge that is always in season and therefore current for all times. The politician splits the universe into two halves: “me and not me”. They juggle with the resources of the nation to acquire what they can to become what they can. In-fact, the whole world and not just Nigeria is in a crossroad of Socio-political development. Social thinkers project development along the lines of industrial growth but the political elites express development in terms of what McMichael (2000:278) describes as the endless accumulation of wealth as a rational economic activity.

Nwabueze’s reference to the political tensions in Nigeria jars us with its vibrant language. An artist who is ablaze with guts and knowledge will never be content to stand aside and watch the socio-political tensions and contradictions. The Nigerian political scene is a stage and in *A Parliament of Vulture*, the parliamentarians are at the center where each man, in his time, plays many parts, sometimes in the process of building up and at the other times in the process of pulling down.

Generations which depend on these self-seeking politicians may face their children with covered faces but the playwright tries to save his own by creating fun out of a serious situation and in this way, expose the stench which emanates from the anus of the rotten politician. Nwabueze as an artist, has something for posterity, and in his condemnation of the predatory leadership in Nigeria, he formulates a discursive agenda that exploits the theater as an enlightenment forum and of course, a dress rehearsal of the socio-political realities.

Nwabueze’s *A Parliament of Vultures* reflects the tensions and ideals in the heart of a concerned artist. The twin affliction of political corruption and social insensitivity are his focus in the play and the audience is caught in the play by events of different dynamic qualities which pull us here or push us there and at the end, leave us emotionally drained. Our reaction or response is caused not just by the language and the playwright’s manipulation of what one may call theatrical dynamics. As Sporre (2001:19) said, art is a powerful means of expression and we cannot really recognize or understand how it affects us without using language. For this reason it is important that we become literate in the language of the arts. Language, therefore, acts as the stimulant of our senses through which the playwright sets the time, place and atmosphere. Nwabueze as a craftsman creates events and actions in a masterful technique that underlines the rich and complex reality of the Nigerian politics.

Of all arts, theatre comes closest to personalizing the love, refection, disappointment, betrayal, joy and suffering that we experience in our daily lives. This is because theater uses live people acting out situations that often look and sound like real life and in this way, help us find the character pieces in ourselves. Although drama is only an attempt to reveal a vision of human life through time and space, it gives us flesh and blood human beings involved in human actions that are sometimes strange and unprecedented. Yet theatre is ordinary make- believe.

Arts generally and not just literary art, involves communication and sharing. The humanizing experience in arts shows that the artist needs people with whom he can share his experience and

to whom he can convey his perception of human reality. In this communication and sharing, literary art may function as enjoyment, political and social tool, therapy or artifact (p.16) and no one function is more important than the other nor are they mutually exclusive. As enjoyment, plays and concerts can provide important escape from everyday care and can treat us to pleasant times or social occasion. In the same way, works of art can be used as therapy for healing individuals with illness. Psychodrama for instance provides a vent for mentally ill patients to act out their illness. Works of art in a much broader sense also act as healing agent for society in general by creating awareness of the failing and excesses of society. Serious as a work of arts may be, it may create laughter at some points and we know that laughter caused by comedy releases endorphins (chemicals produced by the brain) which strengthen the immune system. Artists can create situation that bring about political change to modify the behaviour of the people. In ancient Rome, for instance, the authorities use music and drama to keep masses of unemployed youths occupied in order to quell urban unrest.

Roman playwrights used public platforms to attack incompetent and corrupt officials. The Greek playwright, Aristophanes, in *The Bird* employs comedy to challenge the ideas of the leaders of ancient Athenian society and in *Lysistrata*, he creates a story in which all the women go on a sex strike until Athens is rid of war and war mongers.

From what we have seen so far, artists can create situations that bring about political change to modify the behaviour of the people and in doing this, language remains the rich and adaptable instrument for the presentations. In literature, the choice of words and sentences is entirely the author's but the situation that informs his choice, he shares with the readers. There is something about this situation that places the reader in some disadvantage: while the author is aware of the situation, the reader is not, yet the ability of the reader to place the context makes for proper interpretation of the text. The author's language is very important because according to ... (1986:13), "it creates a grid of meaning which encourages a slanted perspective of what is presented" in line with the relevant beliefs the author has been socialized into holding in his literary world. Nwabueze picks his words meticulously to carry the burden of his experience but there is not much yet by the way of critical analysis of the structure of language as the author's unique way of carrying the burden of his experience. Since a proper interpretation of *A Parliament of Vultures* can best be done when the context is brought into focus, grammaticalization of the author's reference to the events and people in the text through the Theory of Implicature becomes an appropriate interpretive scheme that involves both the formal features of language and the relationship between these features and the decisive context of situation. This paper, therefore, exploits the provisions of pragmatics to project Nwabueze's construction of Nigerian political experience, in carefully selected words so as to entertain, instruct and inform (Kah Jick 1999:56).

Implicature in Text Interpretation

For every text, there is always a speaker and writer "speaking" to a people. Although the speaker or writer does not know the listeners and readers, he is believed to share certain experiences with them. These listeners or readers, who are familiar with the author's socio-political or literary world, are expected to make some linguistic, social, political, cultural or political allowances in order to operate properly within the given scenario. This is an important principle that governs language in use and this principle has tested applications in the theory of pragmatics. The theory of pragmatics begins with Austin's Speech Acts which provides the original thesis of "how to do things with

words". Although this paper is primarily concerned with the theory of implicature in text interpretation, side comments must be made of Speech Acts especially in reaction to the extreme claim of Logical Positivism that unless a sentence can be tested for its truth or falsity, that sentence is, strictly speaking, meaningless. This bogus claim cannot stand the test of time since language is a social phenomenon which is used to act, to ask question, to give orders, to pronounce judgment and to baptize. The following sentences are important illustrations.

- (1) "I name this baby John" (by a priest at a church)
- (2) "I do" (in answer to the question, do you take this man as thy wedded husband... until death do thee part)
- (3) "I sentence you to five years" (by a judge)

These sentences are not truth-evaluable statements and nobody has the right or power to say "that's not true" after they have been uttered. Such sentences which are referred to as performative utterances are, however, subject to some Felicity Conditions which must be met for the acts to be taken as performed. For instance, the act must be completely performed under conventional procedure and by the right people. These conditions should be strictly observed for if a priest, for any reason, names a baby as "Judas" instead of "John", there is what Austin calls misfire and the act is not achieved.

It is important to debunk the principle of truth evaluation of sentences in order to create a comfortable spring board for the application of implicature in text interpretation. Otherwise, it will be difficult to arrive at what is not said from what is said since the whole notion of implicature hinges on this kind of projected deduction. The concept of implicature as it is used in this paper derives from the original Gricean (1975) thesis of conversational implicature which shows that the intention of a speaker in every talk-exchange is dependent on specific context identifiable from the speaker's operational world. The Gricean theory specifies that every meaningful communication is based on certain cooperative principles with four constitutive maxims. These maxims are summarized as the maxim of quality which requires that participants make their contributions true while the maxim of quantity demands that they be as informative as necessary. The maxim of relation says 'be relevant' but the maxim of manner demands that participants "be perspicuous" to avoid obscurity and ambiguity. These maxims are important guides which are, however, easily and consciously broken with the assumption that the hearer will certainly be able to work out the intention of the speaker. This intention is the actual message technically referred to as the Conversational Implicature. The illustrations below are necessary to show how this theory can be applied in the interpretation of non-literary text.

Oyeleye and Ayodele (1990:81) examined some *Vanguard* and *The Guardian* newspaper cartoons to show how the discourse structure enhances the pragmatic force in the conversational implicature. A cartoon entitled Generous Foe has the following dialogue between A and B.

A: Mind if I smoke?

B: Why not? As a matter of fact, I can get you 10 packets.

A: I see. You work in a company that manufactures cigarettes?

B: No: I work in a company that manufactures caskets.

The first excitement comes from the incongruity in the title. The fact that one is dealing with a foe who is surprisingly generous violates the maxim of relation. A sudden shift from smoking and cigarette production to casket manufacture breaks the conversational principle and provides a

vacuum which is to be filled through the power of implicature. Although there is no connection between the Generous Foe and the content of the cartoon and although there is no direct relationship between cigarette smoking and casket manufacturing, the conversational implicature of the above mismatch is the smoking from the medical point of view which the participants in the talk exchange know, causes death through lung cancer. And anyone who offers 10 packets of cigarette to another person is not really a friend but a generous foe since cigarette smoking is dangerous to health. The intended message, therefore, is that speaker B manufacture caskets for burying the dead and would, as a matter of business, do everything to encourage more death, smoking being one way to facilitate that.

Textual Analysis

This section of the paper has two operational objectives. First, the section applies the principle of implicature as a new standard of relevance in the interpretation of *A Parliament of Vultures*. Secondly, the section shows how this method of analysis improves our power of understanding and interpretation of drama. It may be necessary to state that the theory of pragmatics and the specific application of implicature have a tested application in the novel in Leech and Short (1981:297) and in the interpretation of poetry in Onuigbo (2005).

It is important to state also that descriptive procedures and critical perspectives in appreciation of literary texts must be carefully pursued since every critical principle is more or less an interpretive guide and not a prescriptive rule. The interpretation provided in this paper cannot therefore, be seen as literal truth but as a fictional shorthand representation of the author's intention and propositions in *A Parliament of Vultures*. This analysis characterizes some of the linguistic elements which the playwright constructs to present the texture and implicature of the actions and utterances in the play. The play has a common focus on political tension-resulting from the unusual desire and pursuit of wealth by the parliamentarians. In examining this theme, one appreciates the author's contrived verbal patterns as important contextualization cues in the analysis. At the end of this enterprise, "mnemonic irrelevances" resulting from subjective generalizations in the interpretation of the text would have been reduced to the barest minimum. Above all, an alternative training in interpretive technique would have been provided for the appreciation of drama.

The attraction in this study begins with the title of the play. It is a parliament of vultures. The vultures are known to gather where there are carcasses and such a gathering of predatory birds can never be described as a parliamentary assembly. The author therefore, violates every known principle of acceptable conversational rules. Ordinarily, the parliament is the legislative body of a country which is made up of a group of people who make or change the laws of a country. And these people are politicians who, in their day to day activities, provoke feelings of expectations that will never square up with the realities of the day. On the other hand, the vultures are predatory birds that devour dead bodies. The image of the vulture provokes a feeling of filth and evil. It is really the mismatch between "vulture and parliament" that violates the co-operative maxims in implicature and, therefore, stirs up imaginations of a chain of processes and results that are likely to be embodied in the play.

The talk between madam Omeaku and Mr. Brown dictates the tone of events to follow in the parliament and the possible political dividends that will flow out for the masses. According to Mrs. Omeaku "what matters is the position you get in parliament. That's what determines your financial

security”. And Mr. Brown intimates that “we brought Dr. Parkers back from America for a purpose”: we felt he should have enough connections to help us put money in foreign banks.” Situation One initiates the reader through a path of unfaithful relationship that run through the play. Mrs. Onwaku has “a bushman for a husband” in her own judgment (p3), the parliament is not just a legislative body but essentially an institution that provides “financial security” (p3), Mr. Brown negotiated the right figures for the election of Dr. Parkers and Mrs. Omeaku into the parliament. According to him also, Reverend Jossy is not really a minister of God but “we called him reverend during the campaign because we thought that the title would purchase us some credibility from the voters”. And Prof. “was a factory worker in London. We asked him to take that title in order to make our party look intellectual... He doesn’t have a certificate” (p4). Again, Mr. Omeaku thought he “can invoke the powers of a husband” to stop his wife from continuing in politics but is a “husband for mouth” who doesn’t know that “it takes more than a heavy wind to uproot an Iroko”. In other words, madam Omeaku is an Iroko.

The implicature of the above comments has a Strong pragmatic force that provides an elaborate background for the proper interpretation of unfolding events in the play. Since implicature according to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2005:1) presents “something meant, implied or suggested distinct from what is said”, it is important to start our analysis with these comments to see how Nwabueze has used the resources of language to project messages that do not necessarily have direct relationships with the additive value of the words in the sentences. The author breaks the co-operative maxim of quality and relation with the assumption that the reader will be able to work out the intended implicature.

When we apply the theory of implicature in the analysis of the text, we discover that the author has broken the conversational maxims in various ways. Mrs. Omeaku breaks the maxim of quality a number of times by saying what is literally untrue: that she has “a bush man for a husband” and in deed, a “husband for mouth.” The implicative force of the-statement indicates the depth of Mrs.’ Omeaku’s bitterness and resentment towards the man who is really her husband. Mr. Omeaku does not live in the bush and he is the biological father of Nkechi. ‘the fact that he could “make his wife pregnant establishes his potency. In other words, he is not a husband for mouth but a husband indeed. Yet, as we examine this background of their matrimonial relationship, we see that he is after all “a chicken-hearted man.” A husband that can be pushed down by his wife even after all the poise to challenge her is really a chicken-hearted husband for mouth.

Again, it is out of tone with established electoral practice to negotiate the right figure for the election of Dr. Parkers and Mrs. Brown. The success or failure of a candidate depends on the number of votes the candidate attracts and not on the power of negotiation of a political godfather. Since it is not proper to negotiate the right figures”, the expression violates the maxims of quality and quantity because it does not provide enough information. The reader, therefore, asks a number of questions that could be reasoned out to provide the author’s intention and the message which it implicates which is simply that even though both Dr. Parkers and Mrs. Omeaku failed in the election, the results were manipulated in their favour. In the same way, the use of the verb purchase predicts a tangible noun as the object to be purchased but the choice of “some credibility as the object of purchased violates the co-occurrence rule and the cooperative principle. In other words, when Brown declares that the title “reverend” attached to Jossy “would purchase us some credibility from the voters, he was saying what is literally untrue but politically true. One needs,

therefore, to invoke the Nigerian political landscape to understand the truth in the expression. From the above illustrations, the playwright demonstrates the power of language in the operations of human activities. And the reader should appreciate the place of language as that instrument with a great power of implicature.

The “politics of bitter-leaf soup and the Canadian masquerade’ (p. 22) makes no meaning unless the special context of use is invoked. Madam Omeaku runs a restaurant known for a delicacy in bitter-leaf soup and this delicacy has been a special attraction to many people including members of parliament. These members are apparently positively disposed to madam Omeaku to be elected as a member of parliament in preference to Barr. Umeh who has a Canadian wife. In terms of excellence, Barr. Umeh is preferred to madam Omeaku but because Madam Omeaku has many of the members in her grip through her bitter-leaf soup, she is elected. Ootobo therefore, describes the context as “a campaign of bitter-leaf and the Canadian masquerade.” This description does not represent the situation in literal terms since the contest is simply that between Madam Omeaku and Barr. Umeh. However, when the social background on which these contestants stand is considered, the whole Contest seems to be the politics of bitter- leaf soup and the Canadian masquerade. This apparently represents the general condition that affects many national issues and to Dr. Parkers, therefore, this is simply a generation of vultures (p. 24). In the real sense, this is a generation of people who are helplessly entangled in the web of unreason. The people are human beings but since they behave like vultures, which always gather over carcasses, Dr. Parkers describes this generation as a generation of vultures. This reference breaks every known conversational maxim but when the pragmatic conventions are imposed, the author’s intention would become clear and the behavioural pattern of the actors confirms the reference to vultures as a relevant characterization of these people.

The actual message of the play cannot be clearly manifested from the raw linguistic code but there is a general tone of rascality among the members of parliament. Dr. Parkers and Mr. Ootobo seem to be the sanitizing agents but it is doubtful if two people can positively affect a -generation of vipers. In one of the parliamentary sessions, the house, in spite of the objections from Dr. Parkers and Mr. Ootobo decides to swear in members of the assembly, using the ancestral symbol instead of the bible. The chief of protocol sets Oghunabani on the table before the chairman (p. 37). There is the need at this point to re-examine the recurring metaphor of vulture. In the first place, the parliament is made up of a generation of people and not of vultures. The Nigerian political landscape has continued to generate comments that are really out of tone with acceptable political expressions. And one continues to wonder why the playwright and even some members of the house have chosen such expressions. As the reader places these expressions against the relevant socio-political background, he understands the intention of the author to capture the incongruity in the procedure and results in the house. An illiterate roadside food seller has been elected into the parliament through unconventional process and she maneuvers her way to the exalted position of the parliamentary, secretary. The house votes a colossal sum of 3.5 billion naira for parliamentary party and Mr. Ootobe and Dr. Parkers who question these excesses are framed and detained. Within a short period, Madam Omeaku acquires a fifty-acre estate, completes three buildings in Commercial Avenue and purchases three different models of the Mercedes because according to her, “God has buttered my bread” (p. 68).

A Parliament of Vultures is really the play of the season when hypocrites infest the political scene and assault both the mental and spiritual sensibility of people. Critics have tried in many ways to interpret what the playwright intends but the theory, of implicature as applied in this paper offers a unique analytical procedure that projects the author's literary world for a proper interpretation of his message. At the end, we can say with great conviction that the theatre actually presents a dress-rehearsal of the socio-political and spiritual realities of the author's world.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that language is a rich and adaptable instrument. This instrument is a veritable weapon of offence and defense and at the same time a wondrous tool which can be used to say more than what is linguistically encoded. Although Grice postulated what is popularly known as cooperative principle which participants in a talk exchange must follow, these rules are often intentionally broken with the assumption that the hearer will always work out the intended message which is the implicature. Politicians will always provoke feelings of expectations that will never square up with the realities of the day. Literary artists will always create situations and events that can be effectively interpreted only when the literary world of the authors is involved. Cartoonist also have the capacity to stretch their sense of humour to a level that can only be appreciated when the situational imperatives are invoked.

Language has a great power of implicature and it is only by applying adequate socio-cultural contexts on the formal linguistic medium that effective communication can be achieved. And this marks the distinction between a formal linguistic analysis of a text and a pragmatic analysis of the same text with emphasis on implicature. That politicians raise expectations that never square up with the realities of the day is a universal truth. But that people generally, and not just politicians cannot take in too much reality so they can run down the convenient road of denial is quite clear. Unfortunately too, that road is a crowded highway which most men tread. And artists most often have to travel this way also to find their characters.

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