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Literary Creativity in Second Language English: A Speech Act Study of Ola Rotimi's Ovonrawmen Nogbaisi

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1.0 Introduction

Language remains the most formidable tool that writers use for literary creativity. It is the vehicle through which literature delights and instructs. The most important gift God gave human beings over and above other creatures he created is the power of language (Ezeigbo 2008). Language is indispensable to the creative artists, to literary critics, who must have a facility for words. Words are no doubt a powerful tool in the literary arsenal of the writer. In the hands of a writer, words can do a lot of things. Writers are creative people who create with words. It is no longer in doubt that the English language has become the most dominant language in most domains of communicative activities in the twentieth century. It is also the language that has the largest population of speakers in the world. Akere (2004) identified three types of users/speakers of English across the world. The first types are first language (L1) speakers, that is those for whom English is a first or native language. This group of speakers are estimated to be above 375 millions. The second type is second language (L2) speakers who are as many as native speakers. They are those for whom English is a second or added language. The third type of speakers, are those for whom English is a foreign language (EFL). Nigerians belong to the second category of speakers.

Nigeria occupies a significant position among the nations of the world where the English language has acquired non – native speakers. The language has over the years assumed the status of official second language (L2) in Nigeria. It is interesting to note that its adoption as an official language does not result from a recent governmental legislation, rather, its official imposition began with the colonial administration more than a century ago. Today, English is no longer regarded pejoratively as a colonial language.

The English language obviously operates as a tool for expressing cross – cultural artistic and literary sensibilities in plays written in English as a second language.

Generally, literature thrives on a dynamic exploitation of the figurative and allusive features of language, which abound in the English language and fascinate most non – native writers who find them to be effective tools for harnessing the rich resources of two or more linguistic and cultural codes.

Thus, their works bustle with distinctive rhetorical patterns, compelling images and multiple significations that capture their peculiar experiences. It is on this premise that the study demonstrates how a systematic and in- depth understanding of the nature and form of the language of such literature is attained largely through a pragmatic and speech act study of their discourse patterns, context and implications. These nature and form of the language of non – native English dramatic works, distinguish plays written in English as a second language.

In this study, the historical play of Ola Rotimi, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is used as representative material for analysis. Ola Rotimi, a professor of dramatic literature was no doubt one of the foremost African play wrights, who was until his death in 2002, an internationally acclaimed Nigerian playwright.

His works are not just a projection of his ideologies and philosophies but a critical and subtle condemnation of social injustice and violation of human dignity. He was not only interested in the deconstruction of societal structures of oppression and exploitation in his works, but also in the aesthetic decoration and entertainment of the lovers of the works of art.

2.0 Theoretical foundation and analytical framework:

Investigating the context of English language as the most formidable tool for literary creativity calls for a special theory of language that can effectively capture the text being used for the investigation. Thus, pragmatics and speech act theories are found suitable and appropriate for this study. Pragmatics and speech act are related, the theory of speech act is part of pragmatics, which in turn is part of the sociolinguistic inquiry into the factors of linguistic performance.

2.1 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a legitimate off – shoot of sociolinguistics approach to the study of language, which itself started as a stiff reaction to structural linguistics (Lawal, 1997). Yule (1985) referred to pragmatics as ‘the study of intended speaker meaning’ he posits that when we read or hear pieces of language, we normally try to understand not only what the writer or speaker mean, but what the writer or speaker of those words intended to convey.

Pragmatics was first developed by J. R Searle (1969) and later by H.P

Grice (1975). These linguists postulated that pragmatics is a functional account of the ways speakers use language to express messages in communicative activities and events. This particularly has to do with “the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the contexts in which they are uttered” (Leach and Short, 1981). The first concept important to Gricean pragmatics is speaker meaning. Speaker meaning not only allows a distinction between two kinds of meaning (a division between semantic and pragmatic meaning), it also suggests a particular view of human communication that focuses on intentions. Grice’s notion of conversational implicatures emphasizes that the fact that implicatures “are set of ...general principles underlying the efficient co – operative use of a language, which jointly express a general co – operative principle” (Levinson, 1983). This principle, in Gricean parlance, is labelled “the co – operative principle” (LA) and it consists of four specific maxims as follows:

i. The maxim of quantity:

This maxim states that a speaker should make his/her contribution as informative as is required and avoid making his/her contribution more informative than is required.

ii. The maxim of quality:

It stipulates that a speaker should make his or her contribution one that is true.

This implies that one should not say what he/she believes to be false or say that which one lacks adequate evidence.

iii. The maxim of relation or relevance:

This maxim contends that contribution be relevant, that is should not be out of context.

iv. The maxim of manner:

The principle entails that a contribution should be devoid of obscuring of expression, ambiguity, unnecessary prolixity and should be orderly.

It is important to note that these maxims derive not from the nature of conversation perse, but from the fact that talking is “a special case or variety of purposive, indeed rational behaviour. It is these principles that provide a basic for the inference of implicatures: the CP and its attendant maxims allow speakers to lead their hearers to interpretations of their communicative intents (speaker meaning) that go beyond logical meanings of what they “say”.

2.2 Speech act theory.

Speech act theory was first developed by J. Austin as published in his 1962 post – humour’s book, tittle “How to Do Things With Words”. According to Shiffrin (1984) his theory was developed from the basic belief that language is used to perform actions: thus, its fundamental insights focus on how meaning and actions are related to language. While pragmatics consider some ways in which we interpret the meanings of sentences in terms of what the speaker of those sentences intended to convey, speech act on the other hand, centres on the way and manner we usually know how the speakers intend us to “take” (or interpret the function of) what they say. Hence, we can usually recognize the type of “act” performed by a speaker in uttering a sentence.

Yule (1985) explains that the use of the term speech act covers “actions” such as requesting, “commanding”, questioning and “performing”. He says further that it is typically the case that we use the following linguistic forms with the following functions.

Austin makes distinctions in what he termed “constative” and performative utterances. According to him constatives are declaratives whose truth could be judged while performatives are declaratives that “do” an action. He proposes that all utterances have quantities that were initially seen as characteristics of constatives and performatives. The focus of attention, he said, is no longer sentences, but “the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation.

Austin (1962) further postulates that all utterances perform speech acts that are comprised of three aspects as follows:

(i) Locutionary act: A locutionary act involves the uttering of an expression with sense and reference that is, using sounds and words with meaning. This seems to capture the properties of the original constative group: the act “of saying something”. A locutionary act is a sentence uttered with a determinate sense and reference, an act performed in order to communicate. The study of locutionary acts is the domain of descriptive linguistic which comprises phonetics & phonology, lexis, syntax & linguistics semantics (Lawal et al 1997).

(ii) Illocutionary act: An illocutionary act is the act performed “in saying” the locution, such that what was said had the force (not the meaning) of that illocution. This level captures the acts initially viewed as performative. These acts are conventional in that they could be made explicit by a performative formula.

Illocutionary or performative acts can be classified into direct and indirect ones. I am going for instance, which is a direct performative of “stating” or “informing”, can perform the indirect performative of “warning”, “threatening” or “promising” depending on the communicative context. Hence the speech act theory is essentially concerned with how interlocutors (speakers and listeners) understand one another in spite of the possibility of their saying what they do not mean. It is this possibility of indirectness and implicitness of meaning which recommends pragmatics as a useful analytical tool in literary criticism (Lawal 1997)

(iii) Perlocutionary act: A perlocutionary act is the consequential effects of an utterance on an interlocutor, i.e. what is achieved “by saying” something. It results from a language users’ utterance and a product of the listener’s interpretation. In the view of Levison (1980), it is the intended or unintended consequence of or reaction to what is said. To Lawal (ibid), this act is not part of the conventional meaning of the utterance, but it is derived from the context and situation of the utterance. Lawal postulates further that if for instance, a child starts crying in reaction to the statement “I am going”, uttered by the mother, the crying of the child is the perlocutionary act. This is because the act is the consequence of the child’s interpretation of the mother’s locutionary act of ‘stating’ as an implicit or indirect threat.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Method of data collection:

This study centres on the use of language in L2 English dramatic works by writers to whom the English language is a non – native, but to whom it serves as a primary medium of creative expression and communication. Thus the historical play of Ola Rotimi, *Ovoranmwun Ngbaisi* constitutes primary source of data for this study.

Linguistic texts and works on literary theories and criticism constitute the secondary source of data for the research work. They are used to map out the theoretical focus and perspectives of our analysis in such areas as pragmatics and speech act theory.

3.2 Method of data analysis:

The method of data analysis is largely analytical, interpretive and descriptive. The play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is subjected to critical analysis along certain linguistic and literary principles with the aim of establishing the validity or otherwise of the text being investigated.

4.0 Data presentation and analysis:

4.1.1 *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*: synopsis:

Olawale Rotimi, an ardent lover of historical events wrote and directed several plays with varied settings. The play under review, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* is the study of Ovonramwen (Idugbowa) great king of the powerful Benin kingdom. The story revolves round this tall, stout, fair complexioned and courageous historical character with a majestic voice. He was son of Adolo, crowned the Oba with the title of *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* in 1898. As soon as he becomes the king, he executes four chiefs from the house of Iwebo for opposing his ascension to the throne. In a reprisal attack, two chiefs from the house of Iwebo (Obaruagbon and Esasoyen) kill Egiebo – the Oba’s chief adviser for his role in the

execution of their brothers. To stamp his authority, the Oba kills his perceived enemies in spite of the advice of his court jester, Uzazakpo to tread cautiously. This action in turns triggers – off internal rebellion and revolts in such a critical time, when the corporate existence of the great empire is threatened by colonial invasion. The Oba high – handedness gets to its peak, when he places a trade embargo on the Ijekiris, the condition for lifting the trade embargo is based on their ability to supply twenty thousand iron roofing sheets to his palace. The seizure and destruction of Udezi's two royal swords further deepens the crisis and escalates the rebellion, resulting in the disintegration of the once united and powerful empire.

Queen Victoria's emissaries (Gallway and Hutton) who are sent to get the signature of the Oba for a trade treaty are sent back. The priest of Ifa oracle divines bloodbath and indiscriminate destruction of lives and property and advises the Oba and his chiefs to act cautiously.

However, his chiefs out of overzealousness and the misinterpretation of the Oba's calmness and caution as a sign of weakness, massacre (decapitate) seven members of the British advance party to Benin empire, in a premature demonstration of bravery and valour in 1897 for violating the Ague festival.

The resulting effect of this action is the punitive expedition in 1897 of the Oba. The Oba, after hiding in the bush for six months is eventually captured, tried, humiliated and sent on exile to Calabar. Most of his chiefs are tried and executed for their involvement in the murder of members of Phillip's party. The punitive expedition in 1897 of the Oba and the subsequent execution of his chiefs result into one of African greatest empires with glamour and glory crumble into fragments under the superior fire – power of the British military forces and Benin eventually becomes a British colony.

4.2 Data analysis:

It is methodological expedient to analyze our data along the two major linguistic principles adopted in this study, pragmatics and speech act theories. This is imperative in order to situate the text under investigation within concentric nexus of meaning relations. First is the pragmatic investigation of the text followed by its speech act analysis.

4.2.1 Pragmatic analysis:

We begin our analysis and interpretation of the text with its pragmatic structure and function. Language and context are so intricately inter-woven that a piece of language can create its own context (s) and, conversely, certain contexts of social interaction tend to predetermine their own language forms (Lawal 1997). He identifies three contexts which are considered closely inter – connected and very relevant to the text being investigated. These are situational, psychological and social contexts. Social cultural as well as cosmological contexts would also be employed in this study.

In the opening scene of the play, the psychological context of the conversation between Oba Ovonramwen and one of his chiefs, Obaruduagbo is marked by emotion, tension, mutual suspicion and mistrust as evident in the speech of the Oba thus:

Text 1

Some men dread trouble, others court trouble (pg 4)

Obaruduagbon boldly responds:

Text 2

We ask the Oba: why did he kill our brothers of the house

of Iwebo (pg 4).

The Oba's response further heighten the tension when he accuses Obaruduagbon and his group as rebels who are plotting against him:

Text 3

"brothers ha: rebels – allthe whole four :rebels: or who was

so blind to the obstacles which those scoundrels hurled upon my

rise to the throne of Adolo, my father?"(pages 4- 5)

These aspects of the psychological context are responsible for tension, mutual – suspicion and misgiving that eventually trigger off internal crisis in the land in such a critical time when the corporate existence of the great empire is threatened by colonial invasion.

This colonial invasion eventually not only leads to the destruction of Benin kingdom but also the humiliation of her powerful king. Moor, the British general, orders his men to either capture Ovonramwen alive or get him killed:

Text 4

"I said I want Ovanramwen dead or a – l – i – v – e ". (p 45)

The psychological context of the two lexical items "dead" and "alive" have the pragmatic force of tension and crisis in the entire kingdom. This aspect of psychological context results to mistrust and hatred between the two leaders, Moor and Ovonramwen. This problem of misgiving and hatred eventually leads to a sudden termination of the powerful Benin kingdom.

The oba and his chiefs are warned by the Ifa priest to act cautiously. He predicts blood bath and indiscriminate destruction of lives and properties thus:

Text 5

Oba Alayeluwa Lord of Benin... the shadows I see

Over your empire are heavy. Too heavy. Heavy and dark...

Fire and an ocean of blood bodies floating in it (p 15)

The two lexical items "dark" and "fire" potend danger and crisis. The word 'blood' is presupposition of killing, destruction and violence – all are entailment of serious crisis and the beginning of the end of the

empire. It is a pragmatic force of skepticism and pessimism. The cosmological context of the Ifa priest prediction is the resultant effect of the action of the Oba's chiefs who massacre seven members of the British advance party to Benin and the subsequent reprisal attack by the British army.

This is evident in the statement of Moor, the British general when he orders thus:

Text 6

“gentlemen the city of Benin must fall within eight days (pg 4)

The lexical item “fall” connotes destruction and collapse of the Benin Empire. Hence, the prediction of the Ifa priest came into reality. This confirms the belief in African cosmos of the futility of man's struggle against a predestined fate.

In African culture, an Oba is regarded as the custodian of the customs, norms and values of the society. He represents the gods on earth and his authority remains unchallenged. The humiliation of Oba Ovonramwen by the white – men is against the tradition of the African people. When the British army eventually captures the Oba, he is asked to pay homage to them. Roupell addresses Ovonramwen thus:

Text 7

“is overami truly ready to surrender?.

overami will now pay homage in a native fashion (pp 52 – 53)

The socio – cultural context of the British officer statement depicts complete humiliation of the great king and the entire kingdom. Moor, another British officer, takes a step further to banish the king from his kingdom when he orders the expedition of Ovonramwen:

Text 8

“.... You will be removed from Benin.....

You will be on your way to Calabar, never to return

to Benin (p 77)

The actions of the British officers are quite alien to African tradition. This punitive expedition of the Oba and the subsequent execution of his chiefs results into one of African greatest empires with rich cultural heritage glamour and glory crumble into fragments.

4.2.2 Speech act analysis

Having analyzed in the preceding subsection, the pragmatic structure and function of the text, we now attempt its speech – act analysis for further interpretation. For this purpose, the eight utterances (otherwise referred to as text) are analyzed on the basis of their propositional (i.e. direct illocutionary) acts, indirect illocutionary (i.e. performative) acts and perlocutionary acts (i.e. effects).

Text 9

Obaruduagbon: we ask the Oba: why did he kill our brothers

from the house of Iwebo? (pg 4)

- a. Direct illocutionary act: This is 'directive' act of stating, precisely a question which requires an answer.
- b. Indirect illocutionary act: This utterance has a 'verdictive' function of stating which implicates the Oba's high handedness of his subjects.
- c. Perlocutionary act: The question is 'face threatening' and it signals 'mistrust' and 'hatred'. The result is crisis, rebellion and revolts in Benin kingdom.

Text 10

Ovonramwen:if you want the ban on trade removed,

your chiefs must meet my terms: first, Ijekiri land is still

part of the Benin Empire (pg

- a. Direct illocutionary act: This is 'assertive' act of stating. It has a pragmatic force of autocratic order.
- b. Indirect illocutionary act: This is an indirect statement of warning. The Oba's statement clearly violates Grice's (1975) 'co – operative principle' that refers to quasi – interactional agreement which speakers enter into as they perform speech acts.
- c. Perlocutionary act: The Ijekiris' traders (the representatives of the Ijekiri people) are perplexed and helpless. The plead by them that the Oba should deal lightly with their people is rebuffed by his Majesty. The placement of trade embargo on the Ijekiris further deepens the crisis and escalates the rebellion resulting in the disintegration of the once united and powerful empire.

Text 11

Ohonsa: why, I ask your Majesty, is it in my life time that

the madness of drumming and strange visits should

break up this solemn worship and so bring eternal

curse upon my ageing head? (pg 28)

- a. Direct illocutionary act: This is overt directive act of questioning.
- b. Indirect illocutionary act: The question serves as indirect illocutionary act of apprehension ,fear and the feeling of impending doom on the entire land.



- c. Perlocutionary act: The indirect performative of this utterance prompts the king to summon his council and Warriors for war and take arms against the white – men.

Text 12

Moor: Gentlemen, the city of Benin must fall

within eight days: (pg 40)

- a. Direct illocutionary act: This is an assertive act of stating.
- b. Indirect illocutionary: The indirect illocutionary force of this statement is that of command. Hence, this is an indirect 'directive act'. The interlocutor however makes this act to become direct and easily understood by the listener through his comment – 'Benin must 'fall'. This comment therefore serves extratextually as a hedging perforemative directive act intended.
- c. Perlocutionary act: The illocutionary force in 12(b) results into the invasion and the subsequent destruction of one of the most powerful kingdoms in Africa.

Text 13

Ajayi: Oya, Oya, Oya – make una – no just tinnap yonda

leke mumu – hey – una yeri dhe oyin say make una get

dhis place ship – sharp for big palaba? Ehn? Una yeri

abi una no yeri? (pg 50)

- a. Direct illocutionary act: It is a 'directive' act of questioning.
- b. Indirect illocutionary act: the performative act is an indirect expressive act of giving order for some tasks to be carried out. However, the grammatical phraseology employed by the speaker here under – scores the low level of his literacy and social status. He is an illiterate who acts as an errand boy to the white – man, Roupell. Here is a native ironically working for foreigners to destroy his people and society.
- c. Perlocutionary act: The indirect performative of this utterance serves as the preparation of the court house where the erstwhile powerful king is tried leading to his banishment from his royal kingdom.

Text 14

lyase: forget self! forget status! let power die so that

Benin may live; Do as he commands ... for Beninfor

Benin (pp 53 – 54)

- a. Direct illocutionary act: This is a 'directive' act of stating

b. Indirect illocutionary act: This is an indirect 'verdictive' act of persuasion and pleading. The protagonist (Ovanramwen) is still not ready to surrender despite the invasion of his kingdom by the British army. This courageous historical character with majestic voice is still not deterred with the invasion of his kingdom as he fights on to defend his great empire. But his prime minister and warlord, Iyase pleads with him to surrender, at least to save the kingdom from the impending doom.

c. Perlocutionary act: The effect of the illocutionary force of this utterance is that the Oba eventually surrenders an act which subsumes total submission to the power of her royal majesty, Queen Victoria.

Text 15:

RouPELL: from this day, this land of Benin belongs to her

royal majesty queen Victoria; (p 54)

a. Direct illocutionary act: The statement is an 'assertive' act of stating.

b. Indirect illocutionary act: The indirect illocutionary force of this statement is that of declarative. The lexical item 'belongs' in the declarative has a pragmatic force of invasion, it is an indirect and final verdictive of ridiculing the royal father and climatic culmination of all the preceding, covert acts of mistrust, hatred, disagreement and crisis between the Oba and the white – men leading to the forceful take over of Benin kingdom by the Queen's representatives.

c. Perlocutionary act: The illocutionary force of the statement has a devastating effect on the entire empire. It signals the collapse and fall of the powerful and dreadful kingdom.

Text 16

Moor: - - - - - Overami, it is now quite clear that

you are not prepared to work with me in the interest of

and for the peace of this land You will be removed

from Benin.... You will be on your way to Calabar, never

to return to Benin (p 77)

a. Direct illocutionary act: This is a 'directive' act, precisely a proclamation.

b. Indirective illocutionary act: This is an indirect 'verdictive' act of proclamation, 'decreeing' and 'banishment'. The lexical item 'removed' has a pragmatic force of de-thronement and the humiliation of the Oba and his subsequent banishment from his kingdom. Like in text 10b, the speaker obviously violates Grice's (1975) co – operative principle in the use of language. The way and manner Moor addresses the royal father without any consideration for his position and status is nothing but humiliation of not only the Oba, but the entire Benin kingdom.

c. Perlocutionary act: The effect of the illocutionary force of this utterance is punitive expedition of Oba Ovonramwen. This punitive expedition of the Oba and the subsequent execution of his chiefs results

into one of African greatest empires with rich cultural heritage, glamour and glory crumble into fragments under the superior fire – power of the British military forces and Benin eventually becomes a British colony.

5.0 CONTEXT AND ITS COMMUNICATIVE IMPORT:

The context of the discourse is in two folds: first is the internal rebellion and revolts in Benin kingdom and second, the colonial invasion, all resulting in the disintegration of the once united and powerful empire and the subsequent take over of the kingdom as a British colony. Through dramatic conversation in the text investigated, the writer was able to successfully combine the contextual features of English and those of his environment, which enables him to tap the resources of two distinct languages and their cultural contexts. As such, the distinctiveness of L2 English writings is hinged on the wealth of the languages they operate in, their social and cultural backgrounds and the creative and innovative of the writers. Part of the distinguishing features of L2 English dramatic work is context oriented. Thus the study has clearly shown the contextual pragmatic behaviour of dramatic language in L2 English. The study also considered how the speech acts are combined to explicate in a functional manner the unique expressive communicative applications and realizations of the English language in L2 English dramatic medium. The study has established the trends and patterns of linguistic and English dramatic discourse.

The distinctiveness on the use of English in non – native English literature points to the fact that to fully appreciate the non – native English literature, one needs to pay attention more on its expressive and communicative form than in the linguistic features. Ola Rotimi demonstrates this in this play in the conversation of a character like Ajayi, who though an illiterate is still able to express himself to the understanding of his listener:

Ajayi: Oya, Oya, Oya – make una – no just tinnap yonda leke

mumun – hey – una yeri dhe oyibo say make una get dhis place

ship – sharp for big palaba. (Text 12)

Though the linguistic features of his utterance do not conform with standard norm, yet the utterance serves its communicative purpose and shows the low level of literacy and status of the speaker

Ola Rotimi takes a step further to explicate this play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* as a cohesive conversational transaction and a coherent verbal exchange in the utterance of both the white – men and the natives. He demonstrates his literary creativity in his use of English language to express cross – cultural artistic and literary sensibilities in a play written in English as a second language. Thus, the analysis of the context and communicative import of this study, has ascertain the viability of the English language for literary work and the validity of the perceived distinctiveness of the use of English in non-native English literature.

6.0 Conclusion:

Our findings in the fore – going study of Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* as a play written in English as a second language has pragmatic and speech act implications. The results tend to validate our theoretical position that a systematic and in – depth understanding of the nature of the language of

plays written in English language is attained largely through a pragmatic and speech act study of their discourse patterns, context and implications.

An implication derivable from our findings also show that the ultimate goal of pragmatics and speech act studies is not to simply identify the linguistic patterns in a text but to also analyze the contexts implicated in these patterns and how the contexts in turn are instrumental to the performance of certain acts, the sequencing and patterning of which would give a distinct thematic focus and a definite perlocutionary force to the text.

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