

## **A Critical Pragmatic Analysis of illocutionary Acts in Political Conversations in Esiaba Irobi's Post-Independence Text; *Nwokedi***

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyzes selected political conversational discourses in Esiaba Irobi's drama text *Nwokedi* and aims to examine how meaning is generated, interpreted and understood in the context of conversations and how various political underlying ideologies were enacted in the text. Five conversations were selected from the text, using qualitative research method the conversations were studied and analyzed using speech acts theory as modified by Kreidler (1998) and Grice (1975) cooperative principle and conversational Implicature. Analysis shows that there are uses of various illocutionary acts such as assertive, expressive and verdictive acts for meaning explication and communication of the author's implicit ideology, in addition such pragmatic tools like inference, reference and implicature were used to reveal meaning imbedded in the texts which helped the readers follow the theme and story line of the text.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Critical Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Implicature.

### **Introduction**

The relationship between language and literature cannot be overemphasized. This is because language exposes the inner intent of the writer in order words revealing more meaning from the text thereby enhancing the

understanding of discourses among interlocutors. The focus of the study is on pragmatics which has to do with the overall intensions one has in using language, the way in which these intentions can be communicated and strategies needed

for intension discovery. Pragmatics studies the relationship between the meaning of an utterance and the context in which the utterance is produced. It is the study of language from the point of view of users especially of the choice they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the acts of communication. (Crystal 379) Pragmatics is important in understanding language use in the context of situation, socio-political and culture because it gives a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior.

Critical pragmatics works in the fashion of critical discourse analysis and adopts its methods in the analysis of text and discourse. Critical pragmatics is a methodological frame work that investigates how language could be used to foster a democratic culture of innovation and positive change in the society. Korta and Perry (93) view critical pragmatics as a tool to portray a picture of how parts of the language are used to materialize human thoughts and actions because it critically tries to probe into how human beings use language to shape and influence the realities of the communities in which they belong. Korta and perry's approach to critical

pragmatics analysis is rooted in the field of philosophy of language. In their book, 'Critical Pragmatics. An inquiry into reference and communication' Korta and Perry presented three main ideas: 'language as action, communicative intentions and reflexive versus referential truth-conditions' (Korta & Perry 3-7). The main focus of their work is that language users need the reflexive, semantic (truth condition) content in addition to referential one in order to account for linguistic meaning in communication. Some of the tools of critical pragmatics include; reference, inference, conversational implicature, locution, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

Esiaba Irobi (1960-2010) was a Nigerian actor, director, playwright and poet of repute. His works include; *Nwokedi*, *Hangman Also die*, *Cemetry Road*, *The other Side of Mask*, *The froneded Circle* (plays); *Inflorescence*, *Cotyledon* (poems) among others. His works have implicitly challenged the successive political class of their voracious rape of their country's resources and Nigeria's inability to live up to its expectations of fulfilling the present and future aspirations of its teeming population in the areas of human and infrastructural developments. Esiaba Irobi's

*Nwokedi* (1991) is a fictional play that explores the rottenness in the political system and its effects on society, especially the youths. Set in an eastern community of Nigeria, the work focuses on the main character Nwokedi who has an unwavering mindset for change in the system of governance in his country.

There has not been so much work done on *Nwokedi*, but the little works were done from the literary perspective and focus on African tradition, ritual and mythology, lure of power, the various forms of social injustices in Nigerian and other African societies such as: misappropriation of public funds, denial of basic health care and non-availability of basic amenities like water, power and quality education. This paper on ‘The critical pragmatic analysis of illocutionary acts of selected political conversations’, therefore aspires to fill this gap in knowledge, as very few works have been done from the linguistic point of view.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The study focuses on selected political conversational discourses in Esiaba Irobi’s drama text, *Nwokedi* and aims to examine how meaning is generated, interpreted and understood in the context of the conversations and how various political

underlying beliefs and ideologies were represented and enacted in the text. The choice of the text is informed by its underlying political undertone and Nigerian setting. Five samples of conversations were selected from the text and were extracted because of the characters involved and the context in which they were used. Using a qualitative research method, the selected conversations were studied and analyzed using Paul Grice cooperative principle and conversational implicature (1975) and Speech Acts theory as modified by Kreidler (1998).

Herbert Paul Grice, one of the cognitive philosophical pragmatists believe that communication always involves speaker’s intention and that it is successful when hearers associate such intentions with speakers and that every communication contains one form of intention or the other. He suggests that there is a general cooperative principle which controls the way in which a conversation may proceed. Grice (1989:307) explains that our talk exchanges are not normally disconnected remarks but are characteristically to some degree cooperative efforts and each participant recognizes in them a common purpose or a set of purposes. The cooperative principle states as follow: ‘make

your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged'. He further explains that this principle is a norm governing all human utterances in cooperative interactions, it involves the speaker's and hearer's mutual cooperation to understand themselves in a particular way in communication. This principle is anchored on four categories which he called, quantity, quality, relation and manner maxims.

**Maxim of Quantity** deals with the amount of information required or supplied in a conversation. It requires participants to be as brief as possible during communication. It has two sub-maxims;

- a) Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- b) Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

**The maxim of Quality:** super-maxim- Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Sub- maxims: a) Do not say what you believe to be false

- b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

**The maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.

The maxim of manner: the super maxim says 'be perspicuous'

Sub-maxims or specific maxims are:

- a) Avoid obscurity of expression
- b) Avoid ambiguity
- c) Be brief
- b) Be orderly.

In a conversation, some maxims can be violated, flouted, infringed, suspended or opted out on.

Charles Kreidler's model of speech acts is a later development on Austinian and Searlean speech act. Kreidler (1977) agrees with Austin's proposition that utterances have various functions and observes that they are independent of form. According to him, speakers have some intentions in producing utterances and expects the hearer to interpret them since they share a common/mutual background. Kreidler is of the opinion that for an utterance to achieve its purpose 'the lexical content of the utterance must be appropriate, the social situation in which it occurs must be appropriate, the speaker must be sincere in what he says and the hearer(s) accept the utterance as having that purpose' (Kreidler, 1998 p. 183) He further

distinguishes seven kinds of speech acts namely: assertive, performative, verdictive, expressive, directive, commissive and phatic. In his book *Introducing English Semantics*, Kreidler stated that each speech act has a different purpose, either factual or potential, prospective(future) or retrospective (past). The speech acts further explains that the action performed when an utterance is produced can be analyzed in three levels which are; locutionary act, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect. This is different from Austin's opinion which says that there are three kinds of speech acts which are locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Their theories mean the same but uses different terms. Illocutionary act which is the focus of this paper is the intention of the speaker in producing an utterance. It is the action one performs in saying something. The pragmatic force of an utterance.

According to Kreidler, **Assertive act** relates to fact. Its goal is to convey information, state facts. The speaker or interlocutors use speech act to convey what they know or what they believe.

**Performative speech act** is an utterance that conveys an event or situation such as

blessing, baptism, arrest etc. they bring about the state of affairs they name.

**Verdictive Speech Act** makes assessment or endorsement about an action taken by others, especially the interlocutor. They include verbal act like rank (rating), accusation, judgement, and forgiveness, they make use of such verbs like thanking, forgiving, appreciating, accusing, blaming, praising etc. Verdictive speech act expresses the speaker's assessment of the action that has been performed.

**Expressive Speech Act** arises from the actions that have been performed by the speaker. They include such verbs like admit, argue, apologize etc.

**Directive Speech Act** are those acts in which the speaker tries to get the addressee to perform some act or refrain from performing an act. When it is valid or can be carried out it is felicitous but when it is not valid, it is infelicitous. A directive could be a command, a request or a suggestion.

**Commissive Act** expresses the speaker's commitment to carry out an act in the future. The verbs used include promising, threatening, pledging, vowing and swearing.

**Phatic Acts** are used to express the feelings of the speaker. They are mainly used to

establish and maintain good relationship or rapport in conversation. Phatic speech acts include greetings, saying goodbye, saying I'm sorry, thank you, I couldn't come yesterday, how are you doing, excuse me, how are you doing etc.

### 3. Presentation of Texts and analysis

**Text 1**---Background--- When the unemployed youths of Ugep burnt Arikpo's house and smashed his car.

Conversations between Arikpo (a politician) and Mrs. Nwokedi, his mother-in-law;

Arikpo- My house, my new house at Ugep. What that house cost me is my secret. The doors were sliding doors. The floor was tiled with Italian Carrera marble. The walls were sprayed with terracotta.....'

Arikpo- 'They said I built it with stolen money; political money, corrupt money, the voter's money.....that I didn't perform in my first term in office.....' '.....And for that leperous reason, mother-in-law, for that senseless reason, they wrote me a letter ordering me not to run for a second term of office.....' '....that they had selected one jobless young man who studied law...'

Mrs. Nwokedi- and did you campaign?

Arikpo- why not? I ignored their lousy letter and campaigned. I printed my posters and pasted them on every wall in Ugep.....but what happened before I got back to the house? It had been shattered from wall to wall. They smashed my windscreen with a thousand stones.

### Analysis of text 1

Using Kreidler's speech acts as theoretical framework, Arikpo's utterance is an assertive act which is an act of reporting. He reported to Mrs. Nwokedi, his mother-in-law that his house has been burnt. When Mrs. Nwokedi asked why his house was burnt he continued to give her more information. Arikpo uses language to pass information to the addressee and the readers alike.

From the utterances and context of use, it could be inferred that:

Arikpo is a politician, that his people are not happy with him because he didn't perform well nor represent them well in his first term in office. In this context, the author uses language to criticize political office holders and to highlight critical issues relating to politics in the society. Political office holders are expected to help develop

their constituencies and communities as well as propose laws that will benefit their people especially the youths.

Arikpo's response, where he said 'I ignored their lousy letter and campaigned, I printed my posters and pasted them on every wall in Ugep'..... shows his selfish ambition to be in the senate. He is not going there to represent the interest of the youth, to provide job opportunities for the youth and basic amenities for his communities as promised during electioneering campaign but to amass wealth for himself and family. Arikpo's response above is also an assertive speech act which commits the hearer to the truth of a proposition. He affirms that he did campaign, printed posters, bought buses, mounted megaphones on them etc.

**Text 11- Background** – The Ekumeku youths' voice (the unemployed youth of the town) were heard from outside, singing war song, preparing for their end of year festival. Nwokedi junior is their president. Arikpo, who was in Mrs. Nwokedi's house was frightened by their approaching voice but Mrs. Nwokedi asked him to relax. Frightened by the youths' war song asked Mrs. Nwokedi;

Arikpo: '.....Am I the only politician who promised his people water and light and roads and didn't fulfil his promise?' (p.8)

Mrs. Nwokedi: 'you are not the only one, Nwokedi's father also promised these young men jobs before they voted him in four years ago but he didn't fulfill his promise, that's why this time around they treated him like fowl-dropping that clung to the sole of a rich woman's slippers.' (p.8-9)

Arikpo's question above is an expressive act. An expressive speech act relates to the speaker and is retrospective. It arises from the actions that have been performed by the speaker.

The utterance also presupposes that Arikpo, during his last political campaign promised his people light, water and good roads and didn't fulfill any of them.

Mrs. Nwokedi's response above is a verdictive act which makes speaker's assessment about an action taken by others. Here she assesses Arikpo based on his husband's own action four years ago which is an action that is viewed negatively.

Mrs. Nwokedi in that utterance flouts the maxim of quantity, instead of just saying that Nwokedi's father also made promises and failed, he added the clause 'that's why this time they treated him like foul-

dropping....’ She said more than is required from the question asked but the implicature as can be inferred from the extra information is that Arikpo would also be treated the same way.

This response from Mrs. Nwokedi implies that most politicians are guilty of Arikpo’s offense of making promises during campaign and not fulfilling them while planning to go for a second term in office.

**Text III – Background-** Mrs. Nwokedi mimicking Nwokedi’s speech to the Ekumeku youth, where he campaigned against his father that led to his losing his seat at the parliament.

‘.....standing beside me is a distinguished rouge, a political obscenity, a resourceful liar who thinks he can come here every four years and commandose us into selling our destiny to him.....this same crook standing here, this vegetable who calls himself my father summoned us four years ago... ‘

.....shall we sit here and watch our future shrink like the meat of a tiger in the pot of a roguish hunter? Ekumeku: No. (p.11).

Nwokedi’s speech above is a verdictive act made based on the assessment of his father’s act. Nwokedi, the Ekumeku youth president

with his fellow youths confronted the politicians aspiring for various positions based on their score cards and because they failed to deliver on their election promises in their first tenure, they campaigned against them and selected a younger person they could trust. The writer uses the character of Nwokedi to explain what is happening in most African countries, including Nigeria. The youths no longer want a re-circling of old politicians who no longer deliver the dividends of democracy. This ideology is presented and enacted in the text through communicative discourse using Nwokedi’s speech and Ozoemena’s speech (p.12-13)

The use of the simile ‘like the meat of a tiger in the pot of a roguish hunter’ flouts the maxim of manner which states that one should be perspicuous, avoid ambiguity in expression. The meaning of that expression can only be inferred from the earlier statement, the context of the anti-campaign speech against Nwokedi Snr.

**Text IV- Background-** When Nwokedi junior returned from NYSC camp for the Ekumeku festival and met Arikpo, his brother-in-law in their house with the mother. He accused Arikpo of using the wife (his sister) and his daughters who died when fire engulfed his house, for rituals.



Nwokedi: ...Senator Arikpo, I put it to you that you burnt Ezinna and her children. That you used them as the ingredients of a ritual sacrifice to fortify your political career.

Mrs. Nwokedi: That is not how it happened.

Nwokedi: Says who? Says who?

Mrs. Nwokedi: Says your mother.

Nwokedi: Mother, this man is a politician, politicians never tell the truth. (p.62-63)

Nwokedi's first and last utterances above are verdictive acts, Nwokedi in these statements makes judgement about Arikpo who claims that the fire that engulfed the house sometime, burnt his wife and daughters. Nwokedi insists that he used them as ingredients of sacrifice to fortify his political career, so he could win another election and hold on to power.

Similarly, the second utterance is a verdictive act. Nwokedi insists that Arikpo as a Politician is not telling them exactly what happened to the wife (his sister) and the children. These excerpts from the text are the public notion of Nigerian politicians who want to

be in power by all means. This is an exophoric reference to the Nigerian socio-political context. Cohesion in discourse can be achieved partly through reference, which is used here for referential meaning. The referent item, 'politicians' from Nwokedi's statements refer to the real world which is shared by the writer and the reader

**Text v- Background-** There was a martial music on radio while Arikpo was waiting for the election results to be announced, later the national anthem begins to play, which turned out to be a coup announcement.

Arikpo: A coup!

Nwokedi Snr: Soldiers?

Arikpo : .....In-law, these soldiers will rupture what is left of the future like a virgin's hymen. They will perforate it with bayonets and plant bullets within that womb.

Major Gen: (with an Hausa accent) I, major Gen. Dogon Burra of the National Army, hereby make the following declaration on behalf of my colleagues and members of the Federal Armed forces (p. 88-90)

The coup speech as announced by Major General Dogon Burra is made up of both verdictive and expressive speech acts. The verdictive act assesses the misuse of power by the civilian administration which was to

the detriment of national aspirations. The Expressive act enumerates some of the things the new government is set out to do to salvage the country. The coup announcement here shares similar features with past Nigerian coup announcements.

Arikpo's use of simile and metaphor above flouts the maxim of manner which states that one should avoid obscurity of expression. The interlocutors and the reader must share a set of background assumptions for the utterance to satisfy the maxim of relation, to understand what military take-over of power means for a country.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to critically analyze selected conversational discourses with political undertone in *Nwokedi*. The study shows the various kinds of speech acts used in the explication of meaning in the selected texts as well as how pragmatic tools like inference, reference and implicature were used to reveal imbedded meaning. Such illocutionary acts like assertive acts, expressive and verdictive acts communicate the utterance meaning of the interlocutors and the implicit ideology of the author while violation of quantity and manner maxims revealed the implicature of the utterances that their maxims were violated.

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