

Language and Meaning in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

Chilenwa Ignatius Metu

Department of Humanities,

School of General Studies, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri, Imo State.

Email: meetchileonline@gmail.com

Abstract

Relationships and interrelationships form the foundation of human society, and language is essential to both human nature and societal existence. Our societal view and the artistic expressions of our humanity are fundamentally shaped by the dynamics of language. Through his odd linguistic experiment, Gabriel Okara cleverly captures the living imagery of African speech patterns in *The Voice*. Through a process of interference, he modifies English language resources to precisely suit the requirements of his creative vision. Traditional African speech patterns are translated into English using their rhythms, visuals, nuances, and metaphors, which have the effect of making them more acceptable in society. This paper therefore, looks at language and meaning with a view to revealing the distinctiveness of the indigenous use of language as a medium of communication in Okara's *The Voice*. To achieve this purpose, linguistic benchmarks were applied to the literary work. The descriptive system of data analysis, primary and secondary data collection and analysis method and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were employed. Additionally, this essay emphasizes and raises awareness of this crucial literary art technique that uses a foreign language to successfully accomplish Nigeria's socio-cultural reformation in all respects.

Keywords: Language, Literary arts, Social milieu, Social-cultural reformation, Pragmatics

Introduction

Language trends and social dynamics have always affected Nigerian prose fiction. Unequivocally, literary art devoid of sociolinguistics is inconsequential. The relationship between both is on the sense that the structure of a society determines the trend of language use. Language like the society, is dynamic manifesting divergent opportunities and distinctive impulses. Language is mankind's most unique possession being the medium by which the culture and collective experiences of a people are transmitted from generation to generation. The major bond between language and literature is in arts enhanced by the science of linguistics. Finegan (2012:5) observes "the fundamental function of every language system is to link meaning and expression to provide verbal expression for thought and feelings, for that expression to be comprehensible to others". The ability of a reader or a hearer to decipher the interaction of the speaker or writer and group information as intended by the latter, defines his expertise in drawing feasible meaning out of the given language situation. Literature cannot be divorced from the evidenced reality of the society and the artist himself. To this end, Ngugi (1986) asserts:

The socio-political and economic dynamics of a given society give literature its shape, direction, and even its area of concern. It does not emerge or develop in a vacuum. Every writer reacts to the constantly shifting social context with all of his personality. As a type of sensitive needle, he picks up on the tensions and conflicts in his evolving civilization to varied degrees of success and precision (15).

Language is the means by which a people's culture and collective experiences are passed down from one generation to the next. It is language that can interpret this experienced knowledge by giving it a sense of meaning. This inflames interactional relationships which allow them to perform as acts of meaning:

In this sense, the world of semiosis penetrates and coexists with the corporeal world. Language's capacity to evoke strong emotions stems from its ongoing assertion of its relationship to the material world; the notion of metafunction enables us to decipher the context in which and how these connections are being formed (Halliday 2003: 249).

It is the sine-qua-non of communication and mankind's most unique possession. Language is a creation of the society and an instrument of interactive communication while literature uses language to communicate, ideas and experiences of human situations (Orisawayi 2004:68). Ndimele (1999:11) opines, "the nature of the human language is essentially a communication system in the sense that it associates meaning (i.e. the message) with a set of signs (i.e. the sounds or symbols). Therefore, language does not only mean the words but a man's entire world view-social, cultural, economic and political." The visional reality of a work of art can only be functionally assessed through the language because, the human community portrayed in a literary text reflects the linguistics realities of the artist's society.

Language could be classified as a tool box at the disposal of a literary artist which avails him the various instruments of need for unlocking and assembling significant parts of his creative mind. The artist's ingenuity

enables him to apply the tools to the best of use of his purpose and vision. Language is unique to mankind, representing man's efforts at inter-relationships in a conflict-ridden and economically precarious society. Through language, man's retrospection and introspection are given substance and vent for articulation and appreciation. Language is dynamic and "manipulatable" and that gives a writer, the latitude to make appropriate situational applications of it as desired. This quality of language such as English is what justified the experiment by Okara in *The Voice*. It is language that manifests and defines every human quality and identity that gives meaning to our communal existence.

Regarding language's significance to humankind, Osoba (2006) believes that:

If the majority of linguists concur that language is not instinctive and that a kid raised outside of the human community cannot use language unless he learns it, then it is possible that language's origins are linked to the beginnings of the human society. This assumes that if two people live together, their language will inevitably develop if they haven't already or haven't had any contact. (1)

The sentence above implies that language is a part of human nature or that language is human. Language is the most widely utilized form of human communication out of all available means. The one element that enables the existence of all human communities and organizations is the ability for man to talk.

According to Daramola (2006:356), who defines language:

Language functions in the context of situation and culture and is a process by which at least two people produce meaning. It can be spoken or written.

In this definition, Daramola provides an explanation for the emphasis on meaning and his claim that it is the most significant word—meaning is the manifestation of ideas through language. Another way to look at language is as a dynamic collection of sensory symbols for communication and the tools to work with them. The utilization of such systems as a general occurrence can likewise be described by language. Humans are thought to be the only animals that can communicate through language. Animals cannot use every trait used by linguists to categorize language, even though it is true that other animals may communicate with one another and that this type of communication is sometimes referred to as "animal language."

According to Vajda Edward's Wikipedia entry on language:

Language has traditionally been identified with reason in western philosophy, which is also a uniquely human use of symbols. The Greek word *logos* was used to refer to both language and speech in ancient Greek philosophy. Thomas Hobbes, a philosopher, extended this meaning to the English word 'speech' to include reason. But more often than not, the English word 'language', which is originally derived from the Latin word 'lingual', which means 'tongue', only refers to rational utterances that other people can understand, most plainly through speaking (Wikipedia, 2009: 12).

As a general phenomena, language endures, travels, and evolves across time. Languages are classified as dead when they stop evolving or changing. On the other hand, a language is referred to as living or current if it is always changing. "Each live language is continually changing as people easily adapt it to new conditions," as also noted in Wikipedia (2009: 1).

Human beings are known to be creative animals and language serves as the most important tool for this creativity. Commenting on the significance of language to human beings, Ezeigbo (2008:2) states that:

The capacity for language, or the ability to communicate and use it, is the most significant gift that God bestowed upon humans over all other species. All other creatures were forbidden the ability to speak, with the exception of humans. Words are a powerful tool. Writers employ language in inventive ways. Phrases have power. Words are an effective weapon in a writer's literary toolbox.

It is clear from the aforementioned claims that language is the primary literary device. Both literary critics and creative artists use it as a powerful tool for creativity.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a thread of analyses to discourse, which include frameworks and theories that directs its searchlight on the social inequalities that are hidden in language use. Ezeifeke (2018) states that "CDA is therefore a socially and morally committed linguistic resource for people struggling against domination and oppression in their linguistic forms". CDA emphasizes texts produced by elites and powerful institutions; the

aim is to reveal discourses buried in language used to maintain power and sustain existing social relations. Bouvier and Machin (2018) opine that CDA see “language as a form of social practice that is used to legitimize, maintain, and naturalize forms of social power and inequality” and that power and inequality are seen in institutions and organizations such as schools, businesses, and media where the use of language in said organizations “reflect the interests of those in power and create a kind of 'consent' that is taken as common sense and best for all”. Upon that premise, CDA tries to analyze texts to find out how ideology is revealed and how these dominant operations are sustained. Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework of discourse analysis is employed in this study to describe, interpret and explain the data for this research. The domain of CDA inquiry includes but is not limited to political discourse, ideology, institutional discourse and institutionalized power. Owing to the fact that ideology requires analysis, it perpetually continues to be an important subject in CDA

The Voice: Synopsis of the Plot

The protagonist Okolo hails from Amatu. He embarks on a quest for what he chooses to refer to as “it.” This quest was seen as an affront to the existing socio-psychological reality manifested in individuality, egoism and selfishness which characterized the socio-political status-quo. He argues that the ruling class and its followership were in dispossession of the “it”: the consciousness of the human essence and values of conscience. This quest evoked serious discord and created discomfort among the political class as epitomized by Chief Izongo of Amatu, Abadi and others. Izongo, Abadi and their cohorts, conspired with the people to muzzle out Okolo. Though he was defiant, but they succeeded ultimately and banished him from Amatu to Sologa. At Sologa, his deal of confronting the powers and the corrupt society continued. His frustration and rejection at Sologa under the “Big one” worsened, until he had to return to Amatu. His return is seen as his determination to proselytize his message and get whatever punishment that comes his way. He returned to the height of antagonism which resulted in his execution but, his message had already been passed to the society.

Language and Meaning in The Voice

One of the most important aspects of being human is language. It is a communication medium that provides context-based meaning. Noting that meaning does not exist in a vacuum is also important. Instead, it manifests itself in the words we choose to use. In African traditional civilization, language serves as the foundation for the development of interpersonal connections. In this sense, the words used and the meaning they evoke reveal something about the moral beliefs of both the individual and the societal context. African systems lay a strong emphasis on the ideas of character and language, which are derived from the African language system. According to Ozumba (2001:21), ambiguity in language always alters the meaning that is intended. That is to say, our ethical conceptions are impacted when language is misused. Given that language is the means by which meaning is developed and communicated, this statement is obviously true. For the 2003 Nwigwe et al.

Language is central in our thinking... The objects of experience do not exist separately from concepts we have of them. For this obvious reason, words enter into the very structure of our experience. The way we perceive the world ... is a function of our linguistic apparatus. What this means is that... the mind is made up of conceptual schemes with which we think. These conceptual schemes constitute... the categories of the mind. It is through language alone that we achieve forms... which are phenomenologically derived from material realities (1).

The importance of language to our thought processes is emphasized in the excerpt above. Meaning concepts begin in the mind and are subsequently expressed or made clear through language. The ideational function of language is helpful in this situation. The speech act concept also has an ethical component. Language has an effect on man as a moral agent. Language is a crucial factor in human thought processes. Thus, to ask if reality is comprehensible is to ask about the link between thought and reality.

Extensive analysis of the lexical sets reveals that they capture this behavior. As a result, the author's selection of lexemes is appropriately informed by their semantic importance with respect to the function of the text. Sets such as "materialism," "corruption and moral decay," and "honesty" fall under the category of Darkness, whereas "truth and integrity" go under the category of Light. Nevertheless, vocabulary sets like "education," "time," and "location" make up the material and social environments that both forces—that is, light and darkness—are using to further their opposing agendas. Instructively, Okolo, the conscience (voice) of society, works with Tuere and is aided by the cripple Ukule to promote the agenda of "light" and social reform, while Chief Izongo, the elders, the white superintendent of the "listeners" in Sologa, and the "Listeners" pursue the agenda of "darkness."

The meaning of Okara's *The Voice* is largely dependent on the context of the passage. This is a crucial facet of social conversation. For example, lexical choices only make sense when we apply what we know about the text's common environment. This explains why phrases like "search with all his insides" (p. 23), "His head is not correct" (p. 27), and "Okolo had no chest" (p. 23) only make sense when taken into account in the context of the

sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic language in which the work is set. Additionally, we discover that common vocabulary words like "women," "money," "vehicle," "cloth," and "concrete dwellings" don't have any negative connotations because, as humans, we all require them for everyday living and can obtain them by honorable and legal means. However, the text's universe alerts us to its potentially corrupt implications. Once more, nothing would reveal the hypocrisy of statements like "we are all church people" (p.30) or "we are all know-God people" (p.32) if they are not placed in a clear and practical context. However, we are able to understand them correctly because we are aware of the ongoing struggle between the agents of Satan and the Angels of Light in the book. The primary idea is that each character in this text has an individual perception of life and attitude toward it, so meaning in this text is based on the user's pragmatic motivation. As a result, Chief Izongo blatantly calls Okolo, the truth-and-integrity ambassador, a "stinking creature" or a "crazy guy" (p.72). This dynamic generates the text's latent conflict. It is obvious that there is a conflict of interest, which leads to a conflict of character and attitude, which in turn creates a conflict of meaning and language. When Obododinma (1989) refers to "doing battle with words... the conflict is a battle of meaning," he properly depicts this issue. Indeed, according to Okolo, every person has a unique purpose in life. And that could be the source of the dispute (p.111).

Basic linguistic components including morphemes, words, phrases, and sentences define every speech. The idea is that discourse is made up of a series of sentences, and sentences are made up of words. Even a single content word considered in isolation can provide important hints about the text's meaning, as demonstrated in Okara's *The Voice*. As a result of the aforementioned, in addition to paradigmatic relations like antonyms, synonyms, and hyponyms and syntagmatic interactions like collocations, which are all made up of lexical items, we can also infer the text's theme from individual words. Words like "locked-up" and "groping," for example, imply darkness, but words like "plain" and "open," which we have categorized under Light, reflect truth and honesty. Words like "money" and "cars" imply materialism, whereas terms like "stinking," "smelling," "drinking," "spoil," and "foul" indicate moral degeneration. All of these terms fall under the category of Darkness. One important point is that the author purposefully uses these lexical repetitions to ensure his point is made across the entire article.

Repetition of the same lexical items inside a text is known as lexical reiteration. This, it seems, both reinforces cohesiveness and highlights the semantic significance of lexical choices. However, cohesion implies "...connectedness of meaning, the impression that anything is a text and not a random group of phrases or utterances," according to McCarthy and Carter (1988). Therefore, authors intentionally employ lexical coherence as a technique to bring a text's meaning together.

Tuere, Okolo's soulmate, and Abadi convince Chief Izongo to be patient with them so that they can let out their wrath. The repetition highlights that they would ultimately crush or truncate the two people's (Tuere and Okolo) hopes of moral and spiritual advancement since they are a more powerful force. The phrase "If an egg rolls against a stone, the egg cracks and if a stone rolls against an egg, the egg breaks" perfectly captures this. So let's chat. We're an egg (P. 121).

With her choice of words, Tuere emphasizes the message's recurring theme of fear: "...we fear not the elders." The audience heard Tuere's voice clearly. "We have no fear of anyone." They are afraid of us. They dread the straight thing because they fear us. Page 121–122. Chief Izongo and his elders are the topic of discussion here, and Tuere is the speaker. The word "fear" appears frequently in the text, highlighting its underlying significance because Okolo's "it" (truth) is what sparks the struggle and ultimately results in the greatest catastrophe (the death of Okolo).

According to Chief Izongo, "therefore whether you agree or disagree does nothing to me since someone who believes their brain is incorrect never admits that they are wrong" (p. 38). Here, he says he doesn't need Okolo's permission to think the latter is mentally ill and to search for "it" in a "turned world." It demonstrates how desperate Chief Izongo acts throughout the narrative. Understanding this quality is essential since it provides a semantic hint about his general manner and misbehavior in the text.

The most common general or superlative noun in Okara's *The Voice* is "it," which appears repeatedly as the goal of Okolo's quest. The text's central idea is "it," a little yet intriguing term that serves as the framework for the whole meaning. In the text, Okolo gives his life in pursuit of this goal. As a result, it represents honesty and moral rectitude as well as sanity, moral rectitude, and spiritual rebirth—all of which may be considered co-hyponyms under the umbrella term. Actually, "it," a pronoun that serves as an abstract noun, is a remarkable inclusion term that refers to every aspect of Light that is mentioned in the passage. On the other side, its ability to bind the text may be seen in that the adversaries in the narrative are frantically trying to overcome it. It sounds "like a mosquito's voice, driving even sleep from their eyes" (p. 19). It is significant to note that the word "it" is derived from the Ijaw word "Iye," which signifies "anything." Therefore, it is the "thing" that sets Okolo's "meaning of existence"

(P.111) apart from Chief Izongo and his associates'. This allows for a clear development of the text's conflict, which is essential to understanding Okara's novel as a whole.

A detailed examination of the text reveals additional lexical linkages that exist within the framework of lexical meanings. These ties combine to form a very cohesive and successful sentence-level pattern of meaning for the text. Among other things, Dijk (1977) alludes to this situation:

The examination of the connections among sentences in a discourse demonstrates how the meaning and references of a sequence's component sentences determine the sequence's meaning and references.

The following excerpt provides more evidence of this phenomena by examining lexical linkages including the use of structural words, references, repetition, and presupposition:

You know time finishes. Yet when my father's time finished and he went away, you people put it on my head. And when the time of my mother finished and she went away, you said I killed her with witchcraft. Whose time finishes not? Whose time finishes not? Our time is finishing just as the time of some of your relations (p.30)

In the passage above, we find that various lexical items are implicitly dependent on one another for an effective transmission of the contextual meaning. We find that the pronoun "he" in the second sentence refers to "father" while "she" refers to "mother". This is an example of anaphoric reference.

The language used by the Ijaw locals and its equivalents in Standard British English Expression are also shown to us. This encapsulates the meaning that words evoke when employed in a certain situation. It is evident from examining the language use and applied meaning that are drawn from the linguistic context below that meaning is obtained from contextual usage as well as from the socio-linguistic qualities that the language possesses that are relevant to its surroundings.

One whose head is not correct (p. 22)	A lunatic
Search with all his inside (p. 23)	Zealously
Fall from our jobs (p. 25)	Lose our jobs
Search with all his shadow (p. 23)	Spiritedly
His eyes were not right (p. 23)	Insane
Okolo has no chest (p. 23)	Lacks courage
Day's eye (p. 61)	Weather
Take the canoe to the ground (p. 53)	Ashore
Hunger held him (p. 52)	He was hungry
Tell me the bottom of it (p. 40)	rationale
Entered our ears (p. 51)	Heard
Put a law (p. 51)	Make or enact a law
Bad head (p. 68)	ill-fated
When Okolo came to know himself (p.80)	Regained consciousness

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how language, namely the English language, may convey meaning within the sociolinguistic milieu in which it is used. By examining the many lexico-semantic resources that indicate the hybrid character of language, the study has specifically established that Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* is a bilingual work in the sense that it renders the sociolinguistic aspects of the writer's lingua franca and its form. Furthermore, it has demonstrated that the author's linguistic "transliteration" is a legitimate and pertinent reaction to the dual nature of language in African literature, which is significant. This phenomenon implies that many socio-cultural and even historical factors play a role in the creation of an African literary text because, in the words of Adekunle (1987:1), "additional knowledge of the sociocultural variables present in the context of situation" is necessary for the effective communication of textual meaning. Therefore, the study's conclusion is that, in order to completely understand Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* and other African literary writings, one must place them in the appropriate sociolinguistic context.

References

- Bouvier, G. and Machin, D. (2008). *Critical Discourse Analysis and the Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media: Review of Communication*: 18:3, 178-192. Retrieved from doi: 10.1080/15358593.2018.1479881 on November 21, 2023.
- Daramola, A. (2006). "Defining Language and or Communication" in Ayodele, S, Osoba, G and Mabekoje, O (eds). *Aspects of Language and Literature: A Text for Tertiary Institutions*. Ibadan: Olu-Akin Printers, pp.348-360.
- Dijk, V. (1977). *Text & Context: Explorations in the Semantics & Pragmatics of Discourse*. London. Longman Group Ltd.
- Ezeifeke, C. (2018). *Discourse Analysis: Concepts and Approaches*. Awka: Patrobas.
- Finnegan, E. (2012) *Language: Its Structure and Use*. Boston: Wadworth Language Learning.
- Halliday, et al (1964); *The Linguistic Theory of Translation*. London: Longman.
- McCarthy and Carter (1988). *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Ndimele, O. (1997). *Semantics and the Frontiers of Communication*. Port Harcourt U.P.P
- Nwigwe, B. et al (2003). *Ethics and Corruption of Language: Perspective in the Philosophy of Language*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Okara, G. (1964). *The Voice*. London. Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Ozumba, O.(2001). *A Course Text on Ethics*. Lagos: Obaroh & Ogbinaka Publishers Limited.
- Orisawayi, D. (2004). "Language, Literature, Politics and Social Change: Implication for the African Renaissance in the 2st Century." *Journal of Nigerian English and Literature* Pp 20- 31.
- Wa Thiongo, N. (1986). *Language and literature*, In Emenyonu E.(Ed.). *Literature and Society*. Oguta: Zim Pan Africa. Pp. 84-90.