

SPEECH ACTS IN SOCIAL COMMENTARY: A STUDY OF FELA KUTI'S SELECT LYRICS

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Abstract

Language is a veritable tool for communication in any society. It is used to convey the experiences of the speaker; in understanding these communication tools, a listener must interpret such utterances within the framework of the intent and context of such utterances. Fela Anikulapo Kuti was one of the literary figures who harnessed the power inherent in language in criticizing the foibles of his society, while at the same time, performing certain actions. This research work focused on the analysis of the speech acts embedded in the lyrics of his select songs as they functioned to a great extent as social commentaries. The research design adopted was an appraisal of the select lyrics which formed as the primary texts which were selected purposively and analysed using textual analysis. From the detailed and critical analysis, it was established that Fela Kuti's background, exposure and society contributed greatly to his radicalism and by extension, the development of his lyrics and Post-colonial theory was employed to analyse the data. Furthermore, the research showed his use of representatives and expressive forms of illocutionary speech acts and recommended that Fela Kuti's songs should be considered as treasures stylistically and content wise.

Keywords: Language, Communication, Lyrics, Utterances, Society, Social Commentaries

Introduction

Often times, the utterances or writings of speakers may carry more meanings in it than what is just literarily said. In this context, one may have to rely heavily on the context of such utterances to get the full intended meaning of the speaker's utterance. No doubt, the most common definition given to pragmatics was "meaning in use or meaning in context". This is in line with the assertion of Jenny Thomas (as qtd in Adaoma Igwedibia and Christian Anieke, 7) that "people do not always usually say what they mean". He illustrates this with the example: "It is hot in here", this statement is open to different interpretations. It might mean "please, open the window" or ironically, "the room is too cold". All these interpretations are dependent on the context of the utterance and the intent of the speaker. Language is a veritable tool for communication in any society. According to Henry Sweet, Language, is "an expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts". It creates the platform for man to relate with the world around him through the expression of himself. For literary critics, "it is a means of expressing literary ideas", while for some philosophers, "it is a medium of understanding the state of the human mind" (Geraldine Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 1). It is used to convey information, messages, ideas and experiences by a speaker. This means, for one to fully interpret the meaning of an utterance, one must understand and put into considerations the purpose and context of such utterance in the light of the intent of the speaker. This becomes the main focus of pragmatics (a branch of the scientific study of language).

According to Stephen Levinson, "Pragmatics is a branch of study which is concerned with the ability of language users to pair sentences with context in which they would be appropriate" (24). It goes further to study and analyze the effects of an utterance or language use on the listeners according to the intent of the speaker. Every utterance has its communicative goal

according to its context. It can deny or restore freedom, it can make us to be committed to a course of action, it can urge us to carry out an instruction or it can change an already state of affairs (Ozo-mekuri Ndimele, 108). This is known as Speech Acts. Speech acts as proposed by Austin and Searle in the 1960s are the acts accomplished when a speaker produces an utterance of a natural language in a specific kind of communicative situation/context. It describes actions like requesting, informing, condemning, questioning, commanding, which are performed through the utterances of a speaker in a particular context. For Ndimele, “It is the communicative ability defined with respect to the intentions of the speaker while talking, and the effects of his speech on the listener” (107).

Generally, language creates the platform for literary artists who through the different media and forms of literature pass certain messages across to their audience. In this light, notable Nigerian literary artists like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Femi Osofisan, Wole Soyinka, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, among others harnessed this powerful gift of language in exposing and criticizing the foibles of the society of their time. These criticisms which are embedded in their works are conveyed by the power of language to their society. They assume the roles of ancestors in evaluating on issues and societal figures they intend to criticize all in the chanting for effective change; thus, they become social commentators.

As acknowledged by D.J Enright, one of the major functions of literature is its portrayal and examination of man as he sees through both pleasant and unpleasant experiences in his dynamic situation. Thus, social commentary is an art and act of a literary artist giving his voice to the socio-economic, political and other societal issues in his environment. It is an act of bringing a particular societal issue to the notice of the general public in a society. It is the act of using rhetorical means to provide commentary on issues in a society. An artist can be anything or anyone, but, must be a human being with heightened sensibilities and responsibilities to be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in his society. As Ngugi wa Thiong’o aptly states in his *Preface to Writers in Politics*:

Literature cannot escape from the power structure that shapes our everyday life. A writer has no choice; whether or not he is aware it, his work reflects on one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggles in a society. What he chooses is one or the other side in the battle field. The side of his people or the side of those social forces or classes that try to keep his people down. (23)

This was the “spiritual” role Fela Anikulapo Kuti and his colleagues played in their society. They took the roles of oracles to expose the social and political ills of the post-colonial Nigerian Society which has been characterized by disillusionment. Nigerians had the expectations of better prospects, equal opportunities, development in the aspect of the health sector, education, equality before the law and any other goodies that comes with independence. However, it is striking to know that with time, these hopes were dashed, these expectations were cut off as the utopic envisioned society became filled with corruption, repression capitalism and exploitation. This development created a feeling of great disappointment to the citizens of Nigeria; hence, many writers and musicians sprung up as commentators and created artistic works which expressed the state of disillusionment of the society. Among these artists were the likes of Chinua Achebe who attributed the problems of this failed post-colonial Nigerian society to failed leadership in his book: *The Trouble with Nigeria*. He categorically emphasized that “...the Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of the leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (1). From this statement, it could be inferred that the Nigerian leadership does not work

towards to the common good of the citizens, this has resulted to the decadency seen in the society.

Overtime, literary artists write and direct their works towards criticizing the menace of their society, thereby acting as social commentators. These are done out of their numerous experiences in their society, which forms their social contexts. Hence, they channel their works to express themselves and thereby reflecting their society. Originally, these works are aimed at drawing attention to certain societal issues embedded in these works. However, it is saddening to know that these ‘gospels’ are enjoyed by the audience at the superficial level, ignoring the factors that could have contributed to the preaching of these ‘gospels’, that is, the context, and the actions these works carry in them. This has led to situations where what ought to have been corrected in our society are still prevailing despite the messages from these literary artists. On the other hand, several research works have been carried out on the literary figure – Fela Kuti, yet none has emphatically analysed the actions his lyrics carry. This forms the gap in knowledge this article aims to fill.

Concepts of Speech Acts

According to Ndimele, “speech acts is a communicative ability defined with respect to the intentions of the speaker while talking, and the effects of his speech on the listener” (107). This means that psychologically, there exists a relationship between the speaker and the listener in a particular discourse, also, the utterances of a speaker carry in them effects or results which should be felt by the listener. For Yule, speech acts are simply “actions performed via utterances” (47).

In his book, “*How to do Things with Words*”, Austin groups utterances into: constative and performative utterances. According to him, constative utterances which reports or describes a state of affair. It summarizes the truth or false nature of the utterance. On the other hand, the performative utterance is embedded in its self, actions. It does not only describe but brings a change in the existing state of affair. In performative utterances, the intentions of the speaker of one of the basic needs complemented by the context of the utterance. He argues that performatives carry a “particular” type of verb: a performative verb, one that causes an action when used in a particular context. These verbs are usually in the present simple tense, has a first-person subject and in most cases carries the adverb “hereby”. Furthermore, he stipulated the circumstances for utterances to be performatives:

- There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.
- The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely.
- Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of the participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts and feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves and further;
- Must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.

In addition, Austin notes that violations of these conditions are not of equal stature. Violations of A and B conditions give rise to “Misfires” as he puts it: the intended action simply fails to come off. Violations of C conditions, on the other hand, are “abuses” not so

easily detected at the time of uttering the statement, although ultimately the insincerity will surface.

In expanding this theory, Yule went further to create a classification system on the general functions performed by speech acts according to Searle (Yule; 53) such as:

a. Expressives

Those kinds of speech acts that state what the speaker feels. They express psychological states and can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy or sorrow. They are about the speaker's experience and can be caused by something the speaker does or the hearer does. For instance:

- i. I'm really sorry!
- ii. Congratulations!
- iii. Oh, yes, great!

b. Representatives

They are those kinds of speech acts that state what the speaker believes to be the case or not. Statements of fact, assertions, conclusions and descriptions are examples of the speaker representing the world as he or she believes it is. For instance:

- A. The earth is flat
- B. It is a warm sunny day

c. Declarations

They are those kinds of speech acts that change the world through their utterance. In making such utterances, the speaker assumes an institutional role in a specific context in order to perform such declarations. For instance:

- i. Priest: I now pronounce you husband and wife.
- ii. Judge: I sentence you to life imprisonment.

d. Directives

They are those kinds of speech acts that speakers use to get someone else to do something. They express what the speaker wants. They are commands, order, requests and suggestions. For instance:

- i. Do not touch that
- ii. Get out!
- iii. Could you lend me a pen, please?

e. Commissives

They are those kind of speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action. According to Rajendra Sankaraveleyathan, "they express what the speaker intends". They are promises, threats, refusals, pledges, and can be performed by the speaker alone or by the speaker as a member of a group. For instance:

- i. We will consider your request.
- ii. I will be back.
- iii. I promise to pay your fees.

Going further, Searle introduces the notion of Indirect Speech Acts, which he claims to be particularly, an indirect illocutionary act. He describes it as "the process of the speaker communicating to the hearer more than he is actually saying by relying on their mutually shared background information both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer" (60). On this account, it means that there is a high need of shared background information between the speaker and the hearer in the analysis of their conversation. This usually happens when there is "no direct relationship between a structure and a function" Yule, (55). Indirect speech acts are usually used to show politeness between the speaker and the hearer. For instance, in the statement, "Could you pass the salt", indirectly, the speaker is requesting the hearer to pass the salt.

Speech Acts and Context

Context is key in the analysis of speech acts. It could be seen as “any relevant information needed in the interpretation of an utterance”. To Bach, “what one says in uttering the words can vary. What fixes what one says cannot be facts about the words alone but must also include facts about the circumstances in which one is using them” (14). This agrees with the thoughts of Claire Kramsch who stated that, “our choices of words are constrained by the context in which we use the language”. Austin also notes that words are to some extent to be “explained” by the context in which they are designed to be or actually have been spoken in a linguistic interchange (100). Linking this to the development of the lyrics of Fela Kuti, his context to a great extent contributed to their development. In the first phase of his music career, Fela Kuti’s lyrics were built on the themes of love. They reflected the culture and traditions of the Yoruba people, all mainly for entertainment purposes.

Before colonization, the African society has its unique culture and way of living. They also had their unique beliefs and religion which are unquestionable and respected by all the members of the society. There exist amongst this great people in their different regions their autonomous system of governance, until the coming of the colonial masters, who assumed themselves the occident; civilized, the full and complete human beings, the educated, right race, the good people, while the Africans are the others, orient; the barbaric, the evil, the monkey, and less human beings. With this concept they began to introduce policies that will subject Africans to them, in which Africa and its heritage will be change to theirs. In the process of this illegitimate and unconventional contact, Africa lost almost her identity. When the colonial masters left Africa in the 20th century, Africa could hardly remember her identity and heritage. Africa tried her best to get back her almost lost tradition, culture and identity. Some were lost but some were recovered and today, it is combined with the ones left for us by our colonial masters. Thus, her obvious nature and practice of hybridity. Africa today is faced with the challenge of which life to live; is it the white man's life or the traditional African life (culture)?

Fela Kuti and Social Commentary

According to Wikipedia, Social commentary is an act of using rhetorical means to provide commentaries on issues in a society. In Nigeria for instance, many literary artists have produced many works depicting the social issues in the country. These works depict man’s inhumanity to one another for the purpose power control, fame, wealth acquisition and other selfish reasons. These literary artists have vociferously fought against these societal issues even as they chant a way for their country through their works as opined by Achebe:

Most African states today are politically free... African states are managing their affairs—sometimes, very badly. A new situation has thus arisen. One of the writer’s main functions has always been to expose and attack injustice...as it is when new injustices have sprouted all around us...? (138)

Social commentary is valued as the artist’s discipline. He plays the role of projecting the people’s consciousness in his critical evaluation of the society with the sole purpose of chanting for a change. In the words of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, he re-echoed his stance on the role of African artists on the evaluation and re-evaluation of the postcolonial Nigeria in his *Homecoming* where he stated that:

I believe that the African intellectuals must align themselves with the struggle of the African masses for a meaningful national ideal. For we must strive for a form of social organization that will free the manacled spirit and energy of our people so we can build a new country. (50)

For Fela Anikulapo Kuti, he used his own style, Yabis and the Pidgin language to comment on the social conditions of Nigeria in the aspect of its politics, religion and economic growth. He out rightly criticized leaders during the military regime. He clearly stated his mission in an interview in July, 1986 during the issue of SPIN:

I am not your average politician. I believe in higher forces. I believe that suffering has a purpose. I cannot suffer like this for no reason. I'm not working for any selfish reason or ulterior motives; I'm working for the improvement of my fellow man. So I have nothing to fear. I suffered a lot, but I feel fine now. I'm happy for the suffering, because I believe it's opened the eyes of many people. I have accomplished so far two things: People finally know the honesty of my struggle and the potentially of my leadership. People now want to hear what I'm saying.

As Carlos Moore observed in his review:

One unique thing about Fela is that, his anti-establishment ideas, his fights for the common good of the common man, against the corruption of the day was not a way to gain popularity and earn profits. He was against the large music corporations who take music, commercialize it into a profiteering enterprise. He opposed this to his death and even when he lay in cold penury he rejected a multi-million-dollar contract, seeing his mission as one of empowerment.

In explaining why his music primarily took a political direction, Fela Kuti (as qtd in Veal, 81) disclosed that:

I use politics in my music. That is the only way a wider audience will get acquainted with the real issues. It makes sense culturally as well. In Africa we don't really sing about love. We sing about happenings and [comment on societal issues]. That is the tradition.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Literature which simply mirrors life, also portrays the struggle and challenge which Africans today encounters at the departure of the colonists. This is what Fela Kuti advocate with his music complaining what colonialism has done to the African society, especially Nigeria. This is why the appropriate approach to the criticism and analysis of Fela's select songs in his context is the "Post-colonial theory". In this light, it is admissible that grasping the underlying meanings buried in the lyrics of this great musician, Fela Kuti, one must consider the contexts of his utterances. That's includes his physical contexts, that is, his place and time (Yule; 130). Furthermore, it is important for his listeners to focus on the performance factors for a clearer interpretation of his "gospels". Hence, this forms the gap this study aims to fill. The research adopts an appraisal of the select lyrics of the music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti which serves as the primary texts. This appraisal was achieved through a descriptive, analytical and explanatory approaches which accurately provided information on the person: Fela Kuti, his society which formed his context which informed his diction and the actions embedded in his lyrics. The analysis was based on a textual analysis of the lyrics which involved sitting down, listening to and extracting the speech actions embedded in the lyrics as it relates to his commentaries on the social issues of his post-colonial society.

The method used in collecting the data for the study was through internet sources, library and review of documents. Furthermore, data were collected from listening and understanding the themes of the select songs which helped in the content analysis of the songs.

The lyrics of the select songs were analysed and classified under the following classification of speech acts:

- a. Expressive acts
- b. Commissive acts
- c. Representative acts
- d. Directive acts
- e. Declarative acts

Furthermore, a content analysis using the post-colonial theory was used in exposing more the themes buried in the lyrics of the songs under study. Post-colonial theory, as a literary theory or approach to criticism, looks at the effect of colonialism on the colonized. Furthermore, it looks at the aftermath of the contact between the colonial masters and the subject. Post-colonial theory has so many concepts and themes which include: Culture contact, Culture conflict, Hybridity, Identity, Feminism and many more. Also, a table was drawn to show the frequencies and percentage of the speech acts in the select lyrics. All these formed the basis of discussion.

Data Analysis

Extract 1: “Lady”

Locutionary – *I want tell you about lady*

She go say him equal to man
She go say him get power like man
She go say anything man do himself fit do
She go want take cigar before anybody
She go want make you open door for am
She go want make man wash plate
For am, for kitchen
She want salute man
She go, sit down for chair
She want salute man
She go, sit down for chair
She want sit down
For table before anybody
She want sit down
For table before anybody
She want a piece of meat

Illocutionary – Representative

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a. Affirmation by chauvinists and proponents of the traditional culture.
- b. Revolt from the feminists.

Extract 2: *Why Black Man Dey Suffer*

Locutionary – *We dey sit down for our land jeje*

We dey sit down for our land jeje
We dey mind our business
Some people come from far away land
Them fight us and take away our land
Them take our people and spoil our towns
Na since den trouble start oh
Our riches dem take away to their land
In return, them give us their colony
Dem take our culture away from us
Dem give us culture we no understand

Illocutionary – Expressive
Expected Perlocutionary Effect – Pity, Reflection

Extract 3 *Gentleman*

Locutionary – *Africa hot, I like am so*
I know what to wear, but my friends don't know
Him put him socks, him put him shoe
Him put him pant, him put him singlet
Him put him trouser, him put him shirt
Him put him tie, him put him coat
Him come cover all with him hat
Him be gentleman, him go sweat, all over
Him go faint right down, him go smell like shit
Him go piss for body, him no go know
Me, I no be gentleman like that

Illocutionary – Expressive

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a) Feeling of ridiculed by the people who dress officially.
- b) An affirmation from the opponents of Western Civilization.

Extract 4 *Unknown Soldier*

Locutionary – *Them go dabaru everything*
Them go turn green into white
Them go turn red into blue
Water dey go, water de come
Them go turn electricity to candle

Illocutionary – Representative

Expected Perlocutionary Effect – Pity and sympathy for the country

Extract 5 *Shuffering and Shmiling*

Locutionary – *Archbishop dey for London*
Pope dey for Rome
Imam dey for Mecca
My people them go dey follow Bishop
Them go follow Pope
Them go follow Imam
Them go go for London
Them go go for Rome
Them go go for Mecca
Them go carry all the money
Them go juba Bishop
Juba Pope
Juba Imam
Then them go start to yab themselves

Illocutionary – Expressive

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a. Reflection on the side of the religious leaders.
- b. Rethink on the side of the people who serve the religious leaders.

Extract 5b

Locutionary – *Every day my people dey inside bus*

*Every day my people dey inside bus
Forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing
Them go pack themselves in like sardine
Them dey faint, them dey wake like cock
Them go reach house, water no dey
Them go reach bed, power no dey
Them go reach road, go-slow go come
Them go reach road, police go slap
Them go reach road, army go whip
Them go look pocket, money no dey
Them go reach work, query dey*

Illocutionary – Expressive

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a. Readjustment from the government agencies
- b. Revolt from the masses
- c. Restructuring of the government parastatals

Extract 6 *Coffin for Head of State*

Locutionary – *I waka many village anywhere in Africa*

*I waka many anywhere in Africa
Pastor's house na him dey fine pass
My people them dey stay for poor surroundings
Pastor's dress na him dey clean pass
E hard for my people for them to buy soap
Pastor na him them give respect pass
And them do bad bad bad bad bad
Bad things
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
(Amen, Amen, Amen!)*

Illocutionary – Representative

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a. As a satire, it is expected of the religious leaders to check themselves and correct their nonchalance.
- b. The followers are expected to be rational.

Extract 6b

Locutionary – *I waka many business anywhere in Africa*

*I waka many business anywhere in Africa north
and South them get policies
One Christian and the other one Muslim
Anywhere the Muslim them dey reign
Na Senior Alhaji na him be Director
Anywhere the Christians them dey reign
Na the best friend to Bishop na him be Director
It is a known fact that for many thousand years
We Africans, we had our own traditions
Those moneymaking organizations
Them come put we Africans in total confusion*

Illocutionary – Expressive

Expected Perlocutionary Effect –

- a. Revolt against the foreign culture.
- b. Rethink on the approach and style of relationship with the foreign culture.

Summary and Conclusion

Looking at the Nigerian government which was responsible for election rigging and coups that ultimately worsened poverty, economic inequality, unemployment, and political instability, which further promoted corruption and thuggery, Fela Kuti strongly criticised the corruption of Nigerian government officials and the mistreatment of Nigerian citizens. His protest songs covered themes inspired by the realities of corruption and socio-economic inequality in Nigeria. Nigerians are on record as being some of the happiest people in the world, and “suffering and smiling” continues to be the mantra. According to Alithnayan Abdulkareem, a report by the World Economic Forum shows:

The country is plagued by depressing economic statistics Africa Rising narrative is only fuelled by exceptions and outliers who have managed to thrive, despite the odds. “Managing” is the watchword for the average Nigerian who continues to shoulder the effects of corruption in their daily lives.

What strikes Kuti is the load of reverence these people still give to their leaders whom he claimed to be evidently extorting them. The religious leaders not being exempted, in his *Shuffering and Shmiling*, he took on the ordinary man and his penchant for undue religiosity in the face of untold hardship, while those who head these religious bodies continue to live in extravagant luxury. He mentioned the Pope, the Archbishop in London and the Imam in Mecca as examples of those ‘oppressing’ the people but they are still revered as God’s representatives on earth (Extract 4). These same persons who render these reverences are the ones packed in a bus like sardine, they are the ones that would look into their pockets and find out that there is no money (Lines 10, 14, 18 and 25), yet, the little they have, they will give it to these religious leaders, then, turn to fight themselves. In the lyrics of *Coffin for the Head of State*, Fela Kuti lamented on the level of segregation that goes on even in the religious spheres.

Furthermore, the lyrics of Fela Kuti’s songs point to the conflicts in the presumed loss of identity of the African man. Hence, they functioned as special commentaries which functioned as campaigns on the effects of western education on African women, and effects of western education on the behaviours of Africans (Benjamin Olusegun Ojuola; 145). Fela talked about the westernized African woman (Lady) who has abandoned the African tradition and expectations of a woman to buy the idea of the western people. The African woman is known to be submissive and respectful to the man. The wife serves the husband as a king and lord but this *Lady* Kuti talks about been sophisticated and keep trying everything a man will do. We also see the rise of feminism and other forms of female gender advocacy in our society today. This concept is very strange to the African traditional culture. This western civilization makes the woman to smoke cigar which is not an African culture. She goes further to make the man to do the house chores which in the African tradition is the duty of the woman of the house (Lines 5, 6 and 7). The woman who should be serving the man is now served by the man which makes them to go with the saying “ladies first”. These and more are what Fela revolted against in his song. He maintained that in the true culture of the Africans, a woman should be under a man unlike what we experience in some places today.

On the other hand, Fela criticized the government of Nigeria. He talked about the corruption and violation of democracy in the governmental system. He complained of how the government mixes and messes everything up. We see how the Nigerian economy fluctuates on daily, how workers are not paid; misuse and embezzlement of public funds which the society experiences. This is the reason Fela said "they turn green into white and turn red into blue"(Extract 3; Lines 2 and 3). Fela Kuti depicted a government that scatters the economy and the country at large. Nothing seems to be growing because, everyday there is one problem or another. Finally, they turn electricity to candle (Line 5) which shows the backward movement of development and growth. Instead of developing and growing to a better height, the country is going back and depreciates more every day. This is the actual situation of Nigeria because of the bad leaders and government it has.

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