Who Are You Rẹ? The Pragmatic Implication of Fela Kuti's Question

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Abstract

The paper adopts a pragmatic approach to the understanding of a question posed by the late Fela Anilulapo-Kuti in one of his evergreen musical compositions. The underlying meaning of a borrowed word in the expression is systematically investigated with a view to determining its actual purpose and comprehension with respect to the peculiar Nigerian linguistic environment. The finding is that the word conveys an underlying meaning sensitive only to its contextual occurrence. The paper concludes that more attention be paid to the infusion of foreign words in the contextual use of language.

Keywords: Nigerian English; Context; Fela Kuti; and Pragmatics.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of everyday life. Either orally or through the written medium, human beings communicate for so many reasons. Ranging from confessing and affirming love to cherished ones, to giving advice, imparting knowledge, soliciting for favour, asserting authority, praying to any deity and chastising/rebuking erring individuals/wards. The importance of communication in human society is second to none, especially in this high wired age of the internet. However, for communication to be said to have taken place within a particular context, the mode of communication must have been used correctly. In other words, the proper combination of words and sentences, together with the use of an appropriate tone cannot be over-emphasised in the process of making sense of one another. Coultas (2003) submits thus:

> …if we are to communicate effectively and operatesuccessfully within society, we must be able to uselanguage in a way that is appropriate and in whichlanguage will be understood(15)

The reasoning above contains the fact that language could be manipulated to suit one's purpose because of the resources available in it. It is possible to use language badly−the sense in which we critique the grandiloquent speaker/writer or the unnecessarily verbose orator. It is also possible to use language well, not necessarily in terms of the choice of simple words, but the rhythmic balance and casual penetration on the part of the average listener/reader. If the message a speaker wishes to communicate becomes lost either for one idiolectical reason or another, or as a result of inappropriate tone employed in conveying it, it may signal a failure of communication.

Consequent upon this, it becomes important to decipher what is truly intended to be passed across by users of language in everyday linguistic situations. Semantics alone sometimes may not adequately explain the thought behind an utterance. So, in order to convey a speaker/writer intended meaning to the hearer/reader, sometimes it is pertinent to consider extra-linguistic factors that are nevertheless essential and contributory to meaning.These factors include, but are not limited to speech acts, mutual contextual beliefs (MCB's), context, presupposition, inference, etc. All these are theories in the study of pragmatics which shall be discussed later. Even in everyday conversations, examples abound of instances of inferring meaning by adding contextual conjectures and paradigms to the linguistic expression under investigation. For example, the sentence "Shut the door" may have different interpretations depending on particular contexts. It could mean that the respondent is being informed by the speaker that the weather is cold and as such, a little warmth is required by shutting the door(pragmatic meaning) or simply that the speaker just does not like the door open.

In the light of this, the assertion again by Coultas (2003:15) that 'social rules and conventions and cultural associations and traditions play a significant role in the way we use language' becomes useful. Social and environmental factors cannot just be ignored in the study of particular instances of language use. The skills of being sensitive to the nuances of language use, mores and fads of particular speech communities and the knowledge that particular tones of discourse suit particular linguistic endeavours mark out a good language user from an average one. This level of linguistic dexterity is not learned within a classroom but can only be attained by sustained integration in a particular linguistic environment.

Since the purpose of the paper has been identified and strengthen with this short commentary, it is now necessary to lay a solid sociolinguistic background for the proper investigation of our text, with regards to the context in which it was used.

THE CONCEPT OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH

The reason for a brief exploration of the English language in Nigeria is to lay the grounds for the linguistic and socio-cultural context in which the utterance underinvestigation was uttered. According to Ehlich(1986) quoted in Buhrig and Thije (2006: 22):

> …to speak a language variety primarily means acknowledgingone's membership of a social group. Whoever doesn't speaka language well manifests, on the contrary, his or her "strangeness" and lack of familiarity with the norms of thegroup

The linguistic phenomenon known as Nigerian English is a controversial one. Controversial in the sense that while some notable language scholars see it as a genuinely valid variety of the English language since no language remains static, others view its 'existence' as a linguistic aberration; a poor, shoddy effort at giving substance to an uncodified,mutually unintelligible variation of the language. It stems from the argument of what a standard form of any particular language should be, bearing in mind that certain linguistic and socio-linguistic phenomena develop when languages come in contact.

Scholars like Adegbija (1989), Akere (1982), Bamgbose (1982), Bokama (1982), Jowitt (1991), Walsh (1967) have all argued for the recognition of that variant of English known as Nigerian English, NE. A variety that incorporates the Nigerian socio-cultural vagaries and experience in the lexicon and phonological structure of English. Ogu (1992), cited Walsh(1967) where he writes that:

> The varieties of English spoken by educated Nigeriansno matter what their language have enough featuresin common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English.

The argument in the above reasoning is that despite the multiplicity of languages in the Nigerian linguistic stratosphere, a claim can still be made of a particular variety of English that can only be described as Nigerian, judging by its phonological, morphological, lexico-semantic and syntactic features. Ittranscends all ethnic, socio-cultural and religious barriers in the country and will be mutually understood by the average educated Nigerian.

Adekunle (1985:36) talks about "the mix of English with native Nigerian elements to make it local". Indeed, it is the 'nativization' of English to suit the Nigerian experience that forms the basis for the argument of the existence of NE. Besides, every clime in the world apart from native speakers, now has its own variety Kachru (1992). Adegbija (2004) comments on the domestication of English in Nigeria in the light of a domestic servant doing what his master asks him to do. To achieve this, certain elements from the indigenous languages found their way into the lexicon of Nigerian speakers of English as a second language.

Although, national cum international intelligibility is adduced by some scholars as a potent argument for the restriction of NE to particular regional boundaries within Nigeria due to the prevailing linguistic code in this particular regions, it can still be argued that the average Nigerian will have an understanding of the English spoken by his compatriot from any part of the country no matter the infusion of peculiar regional features into English. The local acceptability and international intelligibility questions raised and adequately answered by Odumuh (1987, 1993) come to mind. He surmises his argument thus: our position is that there exists at the moment a single super ordinate variety of Standard English in Nigeria which can be regarded as "Nigerian English".

Other scholars also attribute the linguistic, lexical and phonological distinction in NE as the manifestation of errors of usage and derivations, (Adeyanju 2004). To him,inadequate mastery and subsequent flawed use of the language are the very basis for the emergence of NE. Although this argument sounds impeccable, some sociolinguists believe it amounts to overgeneralisation. They ascribe to the phenomenon the inclusion of local content into the vocabulary of English.

No doubt there are differences in the phonological, morphological and lexico-semantic features of NE across the various geographical regions of Nigeria, it still can be argued that they are mere geographical variations of the same variety known as NE. As regards to this paper, the infusion of the word '*r*' which could mean "you", "your" or "yours" from the South-Western Yoruba language does not make the question vague or mutually unintelligible to the average Lagosian/Nigerian. According to Willmott (1979):

> the newcomer to Nigeria does not need to be told thathe is meeting a definite regional variety… this initialbarrier or strangeness is a matter of stress, rhythm andintonation, to which the visitor's ear becomes accustomedbut it remains the most obvious 'variety signifier'

Going by the review so far, it becomes logical to conclude that acknowledging or denying the existence of NE only shows the fact that it is a topic that cannot be ignored in the evolution and spread of the English language in the world.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pragmatics has been variously described as the contextual meaning of words and utterances. Lawal (2003) defines it as the general study of how context influences the way we interpret utterances. To Mey (2001), it studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. Katz (1977:19) says pragmatics explicates the reasoning of speakers and hearers. Also, Adegbija (1982) makes case for the pragmatics of social interaction. From the foregoing, we can summarize pragmatics as the study of the speaker-intended meaning in language use. It is a branch of linguistics that studies extra-textual interpretation of words and utterances and it has as one of its major tools the concept known as implicature. According to Grice (1989), implicature refers to what is suggested in an utterance, even though neither expressed nor strictly implied .Cruse (2006:85) call it "parts of the meanings of utterances which although not intended, are not strictly part of what is said in the act of utterance, nor do they follow logically from what is said". From the definitions above, it can be deduced that meaning in particular instances is derived, not from the actual words uttered, but by embedded information in the utterances that is shared/understood by both the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. In other words, it takes the mutual compatibility of the language knowledge on the part of the utterer and the listener to actually grasp the intended meaning in that particular linguistic construction.

Indeed, the socio-cultural contexts of linguistic interactions cannot be over-emphasized when analysing texts from a pragmatic perspective. Through a system of shared beliefs, common background knowledge and mutual understanding as a result of prolonged co-existence, members of a speech community have a bond, a core and a circle of mutually understandable knowledge. It is from these shared knowledge that deeper underlying meanings and inferences are made from what is ordinarily said. Six levels of context of Lawal's (1995) Aspects of a Pragmatic Theory are employed for this study. The table below as adapted from Ayodabo (2003) in Lawal (Ed.) illustrates the logical sequence of flow in the relationships of meaning.
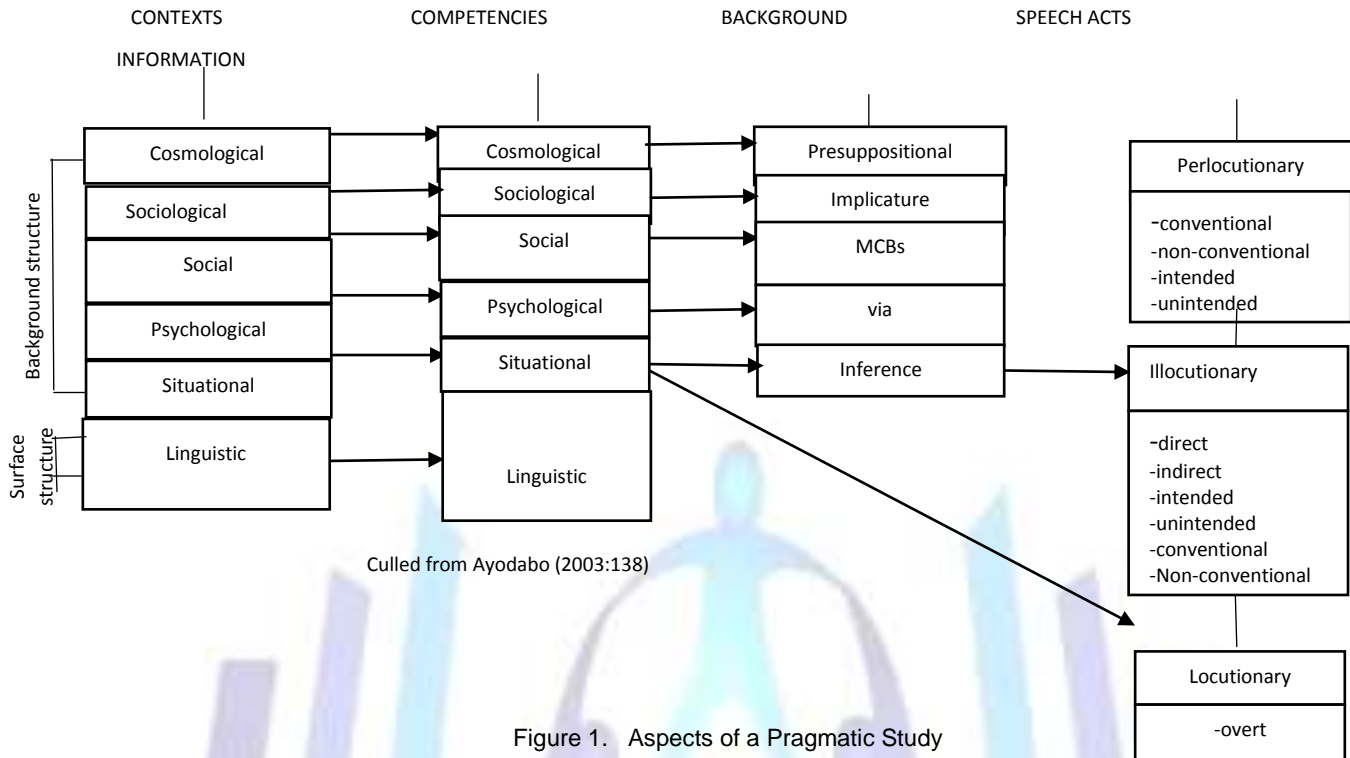
Figure 1. Aspects of a Pragmatic Study

The six levels of context are called linguistic, social, sociological, psychological,situational and cosmological contexts of any utterance. Linguistic context has to do with the competence of language user−both the speaker and the hearer in a particular instance while the social context explains the relationship between interlocutors. The sociological context deals with the socio-cultural and historical settings in which an utterance takes place while the situational context concerns itself with the topic of discourse and the factors of the physical event including concrete objectives, persons and location. Thepsychological context accounts for the mental state and personal beliefs of language users. The cosmological context centres on language user's worldview and his ability to link events with some established facts. All these according to Lawal (1995) contribute to contextual decoding of linguistic forms. It is nearly impossible to separate where, how and why something is said if we are to verify the real intended purpose of the speaker of the said utterance. In other words, to ascertain meaning sometimes, cultural, social and linguistic factors have to be taken into consideration.

The social relationship between the interlocutors and the subject of the conversation aid understanding, as far as language is concerned. Faleke and Alo (2010) talk about the relationship between health workers on the one hand, and between health workers and their patients on the other hand. According to the article, in the interactions among the aforementioned categories of people, there is a subtle 'understanding' of 'boundaries' which are not to be crossed and rules which guide the switch from esoteric conversation to generic communication.

It is on this theoretical premise that we shall seek to relay the events that led to, and analyse the text itself. Hopefully, the desired results of appreciating the contextual basis for its understanding would be met. It is hoped that the background to the text and the analysis of the text itself will shed the necessary light on the subject of the paper.

BACKGROUND TO THE TEXT

A background check on the incident that propelled Fela to compose the song says much about the purpose of this paper. Fela was said to have been accosted by a rather inebriated patron of a nightclub in Lagos at the entrance of same. The tipsy man felt Fela exuded more confidence unexpected of an ordinary Nigerian and quickly sought to cut him to size. He asked sneeringly 'Who are you?'. Fela retorted by asking him, in a demeaning manner 'Who are you *rẹ*?, to the laugher of everybody present. Fela's aim was to deflate the man's ego and make him realize he amounted to nothing.

The clash of egos and the overriding habit of the average Lagosian to assert an air of importance or social/economic class around himself definitely led to this episode. It is not unusual for a Nigerian to want to show off his 'importance' or consequence often in an attempt to intimidate others to become subservient to him or simply accord him some form of respect.

Text

An excerpt from the album '*Who Are You?*' released in 1971 by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti serves as the text. In it, he relays the experience we discussed earlier. The encounter is summarized into a short lyric by the musician and an interpretation is provided opposite it

O wo mi titi wowo wowo	You studied me carefully
O lanu o soro (2ce)	You decided to say something
O ni tani mo je	You said who am I?
O ni who are you?	You said who are you?
Who are you *rẹ*?	Who the hell are you?

Culled from Fela Anikulapo-Kuti's *Who Are You?* (1971).

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The text is in five lines. Composed in Yoruba language albeit the sentence of research interest is said in English with a Yoruba word ending it. The first four sentences relay Fela's description of the attitude of the man who sought to verify his social standing and worth with a view to ridiculing him, while the fifth is Fela's own response to the question asked by the man. Below are the various contexts through which we attempt to analyse the question.

Contexts

(a.)   Linguistic: A proper grasp of the grammatical rules and meaning in English language in relation to Nigeria is required. A little acquaintance with the Yoruba language may or may not be required.

(b.)   Social: No prior relationship existed between the interlocutors according to the dialogue.

(c.)   Psychological: The nightclub patron felt insulted by Fela's bravado, air of importance he exuded and the temerity he had to reprimand him. He wished to ascertain what gave him (Fela) such confidence to try to assert authority over him.

(d.)   Situational: Fela's partner in the dialogue was inquiring about his respondent's right to question his behaviour in the light of him being 'a big man'. Unknown to the man, his hearer was a star musician popular for his anti-government rhetoric and weird lifestyle.

(e.)   Socio-cultural: The society to which the interlocutors belong attached and still attaches importance to social and economic status. A society that defers to hoe big your ego is. They both also wanted to assert that either of them was 'right−in the societal sense of right and wrong.

(f.)   Cosmological: Fela's worldview is in consonance with the patron of the nightclub in the sense that they both understood the deeper meaning embedded in asking the simple question 'who are you?'.

The implicature derived from the question is that Fela really sought to know the aggressor's social pedigree, educational achievement, economic class, his rung on the ladder of the club's customers, and his place in the Lagos of 1971. It literally translates to 'what do you really amount/add up to?' Although, all these are not exactly stated, they are inferred when that particular question is related to the environment in which it was asked at that particular instance. In other words, the pragmatic implication is revealed when understood against the background of all the contexts in which it was uttered. It will only take a person who is conversant and familiar with English as used in Nigeria to actually decipher the real import of the question.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far, we have been able to establish the importance of context in the use of language. For communication to be effective, it must be done on the assumption that both the speaker and the hearer are on the same or similar linguistic plain and that decoding of utterances takes more than just the actual words spoken.

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