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A Lexical Pragmatic Analysis of Proverbs in Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*

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Abstract

This essay is a lexical pragmatic analysis of the proverbs in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*. It evaluates their effects and contributions to the proposition of moral and socio-political decadence in the society. It uses Carston's theory of explicit content - specifically lexical pragmatics. The playwright deploys twenty-five proverbs in the text from which ten pertinent ones are analyzed to show how they enhance the interpretation of the speaker's propositions within the text, and the playwright's propositions within the context of the Nigerian situation. It is observed that consciously or otherwise, other characters in the text narrow or widen the semantic scope of lexical items in the proverb to interpret Alatisè's utterances. Similarly, the reader does this pragmatic inference to get the meanings of the play. Thus in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, modulating the lexical constituents in the proverbs deployed, reveals the playwright's castigation of moral decadence such as: marital infidelity, sexual promiscuity and socio-political corruption, and the evils surrounding elections in the society.

Keywords: moral; socio-political; lexical pragmatics; *Midnight Hotel*; Osofisan.

1. Introduction

This essay is a pragmatic reading of moral and socio-political decadence in Femi Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*. It does this by analyzing ten out of twenty-five proverbs deployed in the text. In analyzing the proverbs, this essay observes that each has at least an ad hoc constituent which requires semantic modulation to get at the meanings of the proverbs. This modulation is not arbitrary, but contextually negotiated until the reader reaches his optimal relevance.

2. Literature Review

Examining the other two titles in Osofisan's trilogy, Emmanuel Okechukwu Okwechime submits that Osofisan reflects the social misnomer of gender bullying in *The Midnight Blackout* and *Fiddler on a Midnight Lark*. Okwechime is preoccupied with identifying the problems of gender bullying in the society which have begun to reflect on Nigerian literary works. He upholds that the two plays have beamed a search light on gender bullying as it affects the female folks (118). In one of his analysis, he points out that Chinwe's ordeal is a reflection of the fate of the female gender who is educationally bereft (122). Although this essay differs from Okwechime's in scope, they examine plays in the trilogy. Gender bullying is a social misnomer. If truly there is gender bullying in the texts, it is therefore germane to show, using a collaboration of linguistic evidence and contextual inference, how the playwright depicts this. However in the context of this essay, marital infidelity incorporates gender bullying.

Ameh Dennis Akoh classifies *Midnight Hotel* under post-military literary engagement. According to him a play such as *Midnight Hotel* reflects Nigeria's history of "constitutional anomaly of the First Republic, the fratricidal carnage of the Civil War, the squander mania of the Yakubu Gowon regime and its attendant oil boom lavish, the lasciviousness of the Second Republic, the tortuous years military misrule to the present of good dramatic works. He worries why Nigerian critics are still obsessed with the writings of the older generations like Soyinka, J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Sofola, Osofisan, Sowande, and sometimes Tess Onwueme (268). What then happens to the new generation of playwrights?

Clement O. Ajidahun does a linguistic analysis of metaphor in Osofisan's drama. He focuses on the playwright's deployment of animal predatory metaphors to "launch an offensive literary attack on the rich and the ruling elite in the society who use their privileged position to brazenly oppress and brutalize the poor and the downtrodden" (1). With reference to

Midnight Hotel, Ajidahun says Hen and Cockroach (*Midnight Hotel* 61) represent the oppressor and oppressed respectively. What this amounts to is that:

Metaphor, therefore, to Osofisan is a formidable and indispensable literary apparatus for lampooning and chastising the oppressive structure in the society and for enlightening and exposing the true conditions of the masses with a view to provoking them to stand in unity for their liberty and total emancipation. (3)

Thus apart from Ajidahun who does a linguistic examination of the text, this paper observes that the analyses on Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* are from the literary perspective. This essay aims to contribute to the frontiers of academic exposition on *Midnight Hotel*. It therefore upholds that a lexical pragmatic analysis of proverbs in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel* reveals the playwright's displeasure with the moral and socio-political deprecation befalling the society. More to it is that it shows a better way of understanding the text. This is because it observes that the general meanings of the text are embedded in the lexical constituents of the proverbs.

3. Theoretical Framework

This essay analyses the text from a pragmatic perspective using Carston's theory of explicit content. Robyn Carston explains the inevitable part that inference plays in utterances when she says that:

...the concepts encoded by the language system are but a small subset of the repertoire of concepts that the human mind can manipulate and that can be communicated. Lexically encoded meaning often serves as just a clue or pointer to the concept the speaker has in mind, but the relevance-based comprehension strategy is such that an addressee is usually able to figure out from the lexical concept and other contextual clues what the intended concept is. (819)

This is because contextual inferences not only contribute to what is implied, but also to what is explicitly communicated (Sperber and Wilson 182). Sperber and Wilson define an explicature as "an *explicit assumption* communicated by an utterance, which is a *development* of a *logical form* encoded by the utterance" (182). Carston, who is a major proponent of 'explicit content,' defines explicature as "...a propositional form communicated by an utterance which is pragmatically constructed on the basis of the propositional schema or template (logical form) that the

utterance encodes; its content is an amalgam of linguistically encoded material and pragmatically inferred material" (814). So the ad hoc constituents in proverbs are templates from which contextual modulations take off. The templates in the proverbs usually propose their literal meanings. These literal meanings are the linguistically encoded materials, while other contextual derivations constitute the pragmatically inferred materials.

Robyn Carston believes that most everyday utterances are deficient in one way or the other. It is almost impossible to separate linguistic items from context. Suzanne Eggins, a post-Hallidayan, corroborates this view when she says that somehow there is always context in text (49). She states further that context finds its way to text through "schematic structure" (Eggins 49). Her explanation of schematic structure as constituting one's intuitive analysis of the genres represented by each text (Eggins 49), sounds similar to the concept of inference. However, Carston, from a pragmatic perspective, sees the text as a template which guides one's context negotiation (Carston *Thought*, 56-57), not otherwise. This is the crux of her research which is called "Semantic Underdeterminacy." Semantic underdeterminacy explains the fact that linguistically encoded meaning of an utterance is incapable of portraying its propositional content (Romero and Soria 1). Carston believes that hearers/readers consciously or unconsciously do have to semantically modify constituents in the comprehension process. This provision is not arbitrary. The hearer does this through pragmatic inferences. Romero and Soria aptly summarize that "explicit communication concerns those propositions that are communicatively intended by the speaker and are derived by the hearer through a combination of linguistic decoding and pragmatic inference" (1). By this is meant that the visible linguistic element is not capable of transmitting the full thought process of the human cognition. This is one of the points at which pragmatics take over from semantics.

The pragmatic processes of interpreting ad hoc constructions are: narrowing and widening. Narrowing involves closing up the general sense of a constituent to a specific meaning in accordance with the context in which it is used. For instance in an utterance like "fly away from here", to a friend, the friend narrows the meaning of 'fly' to 'walk out'. Both include motion. However the former has more pace than the later. Widening is the opposite of narrowing. It involves expanding the sense of a constituent to the most appropriate in the context in which it is used.

The central aim of ad hoc constructions, according to Romero and Soria, is to "account for how lexicalized atomic concepts can, through pragmatic derivations, yield ad hoc atomic concepts" (185). That is, ad hoc

construction looks at linguistic metamorphoses that take place as a result of contextual inferences.

Midnight Hotel is the first of Osofisan's trilogy (*Midnight Hotel*, *The Midnight Blackout*, and *Fiddlers on a Midnight Lark*) in which he adequately chastises the moral and socio-political misnomer pervading the society. It is important to note that the playwright also addresses these issues in other plays, but the trilogy centres on Nigeria's Second Republic. What is more, proverbs are more profusely deployed in *Midnight Hotel* than the other two. It is this motivating factor which drives the essay to test Carston's lexical pragmatics on the text. The essence is to provide an easy and systematic procedure of understanding the text. However, not all the proverbs are analysed. Only the ones that fit into the text's discourse are analyzed because they treat issues of moral decadence and political corruption. Alatise (a character in the play) happens to be the sole user of proverbs, and he comes in the middle of the play.

Like Carston, this essay sees the proverbs as strings of words which form syntagmatic constructions. Within these constructions are ad hoc constituents. This paper does a meaning modulation to these constituents, and shows how they enhance the interpretation of the proverbs, and how they ultimately help elucidate the speaker's propositions within the text, and the playwright's intention within the context of the Nigerian situation. The ad hoc concepts within the proverbs are written in **bold** fonts for purposes of emphasis.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 Moral Decadence

When Alatise and his three daughters finally arrive at the hotel, they could not hide their temporal happiness. As a way of buttressing this transient relief, Alatise says:

- (i) No **expectant woman** enters the **labour room** with a smiling face. (27)

The ad hoc constituents in the above proverb are: 'expectant woman' and 'labour room'. A contextual modulation of those constituents goes thus:

expectant woman = a pregnant woman (literal meaning)

expectant woman* = one who wants a positive change in one's life (expanded meaning)

expectant woman** = Alatise and his daughters who walk around trying to find the hotel
(contextual meaning)

The reader initially inserts expectant woman* because he know that there is no pregnant woman in the scene. He is aware that Alatise's family currently experiences crisis as a result of the defeat at the electoral poll. So by implication, the reader inserts expectant woman**. Inferring from the proverb, the expectant woman** is supposed to come out smiling, but in the end of the play, Alatise's daughters are defiled by the lascivious soldiers, thus:

Bose: The soldier, he was so kind. Papa, how easy it is to earn money in the city. We should have come long ago... With the other soldiers. We'll be so rich. (60)

The constituent- expected woman** serves as a foresight to the ironic twist of fate that befalls the Alatises. This is a reflection of the moral furuncle the Nigerian society has degenerated into.

labour room = the room where pregnant women give birth to their babies
(literal meaning)

labour room* = a place/time of painful refinement (expanded meaning)

labour room** = the hotel (contextual meaning)

Because of the sense similarity that expectant woman and labour room share, the tendency is that both would have mutual meaning modulation. Thus, since expectant woman refers to Alatise's family who has just arrived a hotel, labour room therefore is the hotel. It is in this hotel that misfortune befalls the Alatises. This suggests the playwright's discontent with it.

Furthermore, Alatise runs across Awero, a Member of Parliament who has come to the hotel with another man (Suuru) to practise her adulterous escapades. When the head master interrogates her, she lies that she visits the hotel because of a little quarrel between her and her husband (33). In the end, Alatise replies with a proverb:

- (ii) A piece of meat, they say, is never kept successfully under the custody of teeth.(33)

Here, piece of meat and teeth are ad hoc concepts.

piece of meat = a part of the flesh of an animal (literal meaning)

piece of meat* = something meant to be ravished, which gives pleasure (expanded meaning)

piece of meat** = Awero or part of her body (contextual meaning)

The reader arrives at piece of meat** because he has already learnt from the context that sex is the business of the hotel, and moreover none of the characters in that scene has said something about the literal piece of meat.

With the above meaning modulation, interpreting 'teeth' becomes easy. Who would want to hunt a woman for pleasure, but a man? And the man in this context is Suuru. This goes to show that Alatisé is not deceived by Awero's hoax. He probably does not want to expose her due to her status in the society. This technically benefits Osofisan's art because it helps intensify the suspense in the play.

Another pertinent point worth noting is that in the context of Awero and Suuru, Suuru is the meat while 'teeth' refers to Awero. This art in the literary parlance is referred to as irony. People like Alatisé and Jimoh would hardly believe that a woman can be the hunter, while men the hunted in the sex game. These meanings are embedded in the ad hoc constituents of the above proverb.

Another possible interpretation to the above proverb is that Alatisé advises that Awero should not have left her husband at home, as this could expose him to the hazard of promiscuous Lagos women. This would mean that 'piece of meat' refers to Asibong, while 'teeth' refers to Lagos women.

As the conversation progresses to the discomfort of Awero who searches for every opportunity to lock herself in her room, Alatisé releases another proverb:

- (iii) a **naked lunatic** in the market is not ashamed, but his **relatives** are. (33)

Within the context, none of the characters has mentioned any insane fellow, yet they understand the constituent 'naked lunatic'. This justifies that the constituent has been semantically modified by the characters:

naked lunatic = an insane fellow (literal meaning)

naked lunatic* = one who lacks mental integrity (contracted meaning)

naked lunatic** = Awero (contextual meaning 1)

The reader is aware that Awero is a government officer and by extension she represents most government officials in the country. It is with this connection that the reader derives naked lunatic***.

naked lunatic*** = Nigerian leaders who live below expectation (contextual meaning 2)

naked lunatic*** is a shared reference between playwright and the reader. Awero understands naked lunatic**, and as such allows Alatise's daughters into her room. In the Yoruba culture, such a proverb presupposes that the speaker intends to do one a favour which the recipient has no choice over. So in the text, Alatise presumes that he does Awero a favour by bringing in his daughters. Meanwhile, the reader is aware that Awero does not see this as a favour but sheer disturbance. Furthermore, naked lunatic*** which playwright and the reader share presupposes that Nigerians are ashamed of the misconduct of their leaders who have brought disrepute to the relatives** (Nigerians).

Alatise's daughters become preys in the hands of the unseen soldiers. When he gets to know about it, he seems unhappy, but this essay is of the view that the father leads his daughters into prostitution. A critical examination of one of his recounts to Awero explains this point, thus:

- (iv) That's it ma'am! So yesterday, when I surveyed everything, I called these poor things and I said, listen girls, *eti ro-o!* your mother is dead, and I am all you have in the world! But you can see me myself totally wrecked. I am ashamed that I can no longer provide for you. But as they say, we do not prevent a child from growing long teeth, so long as he grows long lips to cover them. (35)

The girls must have understood the semantic import of the above proverb; this is what makes them sell their bodies to the soldiers. A lexical inferential analysis of the proverb buttresses this point, thus:

child = a boy or girl between birth and physical maturity (literal meaning)

child* = one who still has some innocence (contracted meaning)

child** = Alatise's three daughters (contextual meaning)

teeth = hard structure in the mouth used for biting and chewing food (literal meaning)

The ability to chew food means that one is gradually becoming an adult. That is one is no longer a child* (the opposite of child* is one who has begun to experience the good and bad of life).

Thus, 'teeth' is semantically expanded to mean teeth* (the act of experiencing the good and **bad** of life). Bad is emphasized here because in the context it means immorality.

lips = the two fleshy parts which form the edge of the mouth (literal meaning)

In the context, the lips are meant to cover teeth*. This means that lips transforms into lips*;

lips* = the act of covering up immorality (contextual meaning).

When the contextual constituents are inserted into the proverbs, the meaning becomes lucid, thus:

we do not prevent a child** from
growing long teeth*, so long as he
grows long lips** to cover the
teeth*.

The girls understand the proverb as stated above. To further prove this point, when Bose comes back from the soldiers' bed (with money in her hands), she says:

Papa, you'll soon be back on your feet. No more
humiliation, hunger, wretchedness. We'll save you. We'll
redeem you...

You're not pleased? And it was all for you. (60)

To reiterate his exploiting inclination, Alatisse tells Suuru that:

(v) You can **chew** for a child, but
you cannot **swallow** for her.
(61)

The reader, through shared inference, knows that one needs teeth to chew (and 'teeth' has been modified as teeth*). This lexical modification (teeth*) therefore affects 'swallow', thus:

swallow = allowing a substance pass through the gullet (literal meaning)

swallow* = taking something in without objection (expanded meaning)

swallow** = bearing the consequence of chewing with teeth* (contextual meaning)

With the inferential modulation of child, teeth, lips, chew, and swallow, the reader understands Osofisan's pragmatic strategy at portraying Alatise as one who allows his daughters prostitute for selfish gains, and in the end leaves them to bear the consequences alone. This is one of the anathema that pervaded the Nigerian Second Republic, even down to the Third Republic and presently.

4.2 Socio-Political Anomaly

Alatise's misfortune at the poll is reflected in the proverb:

- (vi) It is when the **wind** blows
that you see the **anus** of a
fowl. (28)

Alatise is a headmaster cum politician. This suggests that he must have leaving comfortably before venturing into politics. In the above proverb, the constituents which deserves meaning modulation are: wind, anus, and fowl.

wind = movement of air across the Earth's surface (literal meaning)

wind* = times of challenges (expanded meaning)

wind** = the Nigerian election (contextual meaning)

anus = the opening at the end of the alimentary canal, through which feaces are expelled from the body (literal meaning)

anus* = the secretive part of humans (expanded meaning)

anus** = Alatise's sudden wretchedness (contextual meaning)

fowl = a chicken (literal meaning)

fowl* = the oppressors in the society (expanded meaning)

fowl** = Alatise's former status, politicians (contextual meaning)

The above semantic modifications show that election in Nigeria is a very sensitive aspect of the politicians' career. This is because it can make or mar them. Having this in mind, it implies that the Nigerian politicians can go to any length to avoid losing at the poll, so as not to find themselves in

Alatise's humiliating position. Thus through the above proverb, Osofisan frowns at the do-or-die nature of elections in Nigeria.

Alatise finally encounters Bicycle whom he initially mistakes for the receptionist. He engages Bicycle on an irrelevant account of his defeat at the poll. He asks if the poor boy is aware of his electoral escapades, and Bicycle replies 'no'. This amuses him, hence the proverb:

- (vii) A **dog** may be well fed on
rice and garri, eti ro-o! but
bones are still its favourite
food. (29)

The lexical constituents- dog, rice and garri, and bones are ad hoc constructions. The reader has to negotiate their meanings around the literal to the modulated meaning in order to arrive at the contextual meaning, thus:

dog = a four legged animal (literal meaning)

dog* = a mentally retarded yes-man (expanded meaning)

dog** = Bicycle (contextual meaning 1)

dog*** = the poor unimformed rural masses (contextual meaning 2)

dog** refers to the context of the play, while dog*** refers to the Nigerian context.

rice and beans = food for humans (literal meaning)

rice and beans* = education/information (contextual meaning)

The reader is able to modulate the above constituent because he knows that Osofisan is not referring to the physical food.

bone = food meant for animals (literal meaning)

bone* = illiteracy; ignorance (contextual meaning)

The reader is also able to arrive at bones* because he knows that Osofisan does not refer to Bicycle as a cannibal. Moreover, no literal animal has been mentioned in the context. Thus, with the help of lexical pragmatics the reader infers that the playwright juxtaposes these constituents to register his displeasure with the oppressed who have refused to get themselves informed, and consequently unshackle themselves from the bondage of the oppressors.

Furthermore, the playwright presents the social injustice that exists between that exists between the rich and the poor. He does this in another of Alatise's proverb, thus:

- (viii) When a **bird** kills a **rat**, he eats it alone; when he kills a bird, he eats it alone; but when his throat scratches, he calls his parents and friends. (35)

The author's meaning undertone is in the modification of the animals in the proverb, and their verbal constituents, thus:

bird = an animal that has feathers (literal meaning)

A bird flies; which is synonymous with an aeroplane which is a means of transportation that only the rich can afford. Thus, a bird transforms to bird* (the rich).

rat = a rodent (literal meaning)

A rat creeps; which is semantically associated with trekking (semantic expansion), and the poor trek, thus:

rat* = the poor (contextual meaning)

To eat alone is to satisfy oneself without a company. To kill is to hunt. To the bird*, kill suggests a positive meaning, while to the rat* kill has a negative sense. When 'throat scratches' is applied to bird*, it means the rich suffering a kind of pain. Also, when the contextual constituents are inserted in the proverb, Osofisan's proposition of social injustice is made explicit.

Using these animal constituents further, Alatise says that:

- (ix) It is ignorance, they say, that makes the **rat** engage the **cat** in a duel. (42)

While retaining rat*, the playwright changes bird for cat. The cat, unlike a bird, is a four-legged animal which is more powerful than the rat, thus:

cat = a four-legged animal (literal meaning)

cat* = a powerful mystical creature (expanded meaning)

cat** = Nigerian political leaders (contextual meaning)

The rat* cannot engage in a duel with cat** because it lacks power. That would be suicidal. To get power, rat* has to acquire education. Once

again, Osofisan advocates the inevitability of education in the fight for liberty. Education is power.

This same oppressor/oppressed dichotomy is pontificated when Alalise says that:

- (x) oh it is the wish of the
cockroach to dance in
public, but, eti ro-o! he has to
remember the **hen**. (61)

'hen' and 'cockroach' are constituents that when modified, the effect of the proverb on the playwright's discourse is clear. A cockroach literally belongs to the insect group, but when brought into the hen context, it acquires the sense of prey. When this meaning is brought into the Nigerian socio-economically stratified society, it suggests the poor, oppressed masses. The cockroach which is the predator, in the Nigerian situation, suggests the rich, capitalist oppressors. When hen and cockroach are substituted for oppressor and oppressed in the above proverb, the reader clearly understands the miserable state of the masses that are denied even their social lives.

5. Conclusion

This essay has looked at Osofisan's deployment of proverbs in *Midnight Hotel* from a pragmatic perspective. Although proverbs are largely metaphorical, this essay upholds that they can be explained using Carston's lexical pragmatics. This paper upholds that the complexity of proverbs lie in the ad hoc constituents. The task therefore is to modulate the semantic scope of these constituents within the contextual ambit of the sentence. The reader is expected to stop at the point where he obtains optimality of relevance. In importing this system to Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, it provides a better, easy, and systematic format to understand the text. The little challenge, therefore, is the process of semantic modulation.

However when proverbs are deployed in a literary text (as it is in *Midnight Hotel*), it is observed that modifying the ad hoc constituents goes a long way to enhancing the reader's interpretation of the playwright's meaning. Thus in Osofisan's *Midnight Hotel*, modulating the lexical constituents in the proverbs deployed is an easy and systematic way of comprehending the playwright's castigation of the moral and socio-political anomalies which have stigmatized the society.

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