

Conversational Perspectives in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"

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Abstract

The paper titled Conversational Perspectives in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" was undertaken to determine the conversational style deployed in a dialogue between Mr. Brown, a representative of the colonial masters, and Akunna, one of the elders in Umuofia. J. L. Austine and J. Searle Speech Act Theory, and H. P. Grice Conversational Implicature Theory were used to analyze the text. It was found out that two major illocutionary speech functions of Representative and Directive were prominent in the conversation. The conversation also revealed some perlocutionary acts. With Grice's Implicature Theory, the conversation yielded a maxim of quality. It was found that with perlocutionary act, layers of hidden meanings were revealed, leading to a wider level of understanding of the text.

Keywords: Illocutionary; Perlocutionary act; Conversation; Representative; Directive.

1. Introduction

In any oral conversation, the interactants must use words to sustain the exchange. Words are therefore used to do several things in communication. According to (Austin, 1962), language is not just a string of words; rather, language is used to do things. When people speak, they are usually attempting to do something with their words; they are sometimes complaining, other times criticizing, complimenting, requesting and so on. However, the link between language and action is not always clear.

The view of language as a social action is very clearly captured in the speech act theory (Austin, 1962). Germane to this approach is the concept that language use involves the simultaneous performance of multiple acts. At one level, a speaker is performing an action by saying something, and at another level, the particular speech is performing a specific speech act. Therefore, it is possible for utterances to have the same propositional meaning but performs different speech acts. Consider the following utterances;

- I predict you will buy a car
- Will you buy a car?
- Please try and buy a car

The propositional meaning (that the addressee will buy a car is the same for all three utterances). Yet, they have different performative value. The first has the force of a prediction, the second a question, and the third a request. So as we interact with one another, we exchange words that will carry multiple meanings, which may have to be understood by the listener(s). In any conversation, the role of a speaker/listener changes simultaneously. The speaker becomes the listener when the listener takes turn to respond. The perlocutionary act on the learner will therefore determine the success or failure of any illocutionary act. This paper will attempt to relate this to the text used for the analysis.

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The story of the novel through which the text for the analysis was picked, is woven around the world views of two peoples, the African on the one hand, and the white missionaries on the other hand. The story details the cultural, traditional, and religious lives of the people of Umuafia and its sister clans on one segment of the novel, and then introduces the coming of the missionaries, white on the other segment, and highlighting as it were, their own position as they relate with culture, tradition, religion, and even government.

Achebe paints the picture of two different and fast moving trains, running on the same rail track, but in opposite directions and approaching the same destination, and it was just a matter of time for a collision to occur. The analysis seeks to pick out an epic conversation between the representative of the people of Umuafia, Akunna, and Mr. Brown who represents the white missionaries. This interaction symbolizes the epic clash of the two worlds, as both met to express their positions on culture, on tradition and on religion.

The conversation will be analyzed using the Speech Act Theory by (J. L Austin, 1962) and (J. Searle, 1969) and the conversational implicature theory by (H.P. Grice, 1975). The direction of this paper is not to deconstruct the story, but to analyze a portion of the work in relation to its conversational value.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The Speech Act Theory by (J. L Austin, 1962) and (J. Searle, 1969).

Speech acts refer to the language performed by interactants. (Austin, 1962) identifies three main types of speech acts: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. When we speak, we engage in a locutionary act. We speak with an intention in mind. The intent is the illocutionary act, and what the hearer makes out of what he hears is the perlocutionary act. According to (Austin, 1962), locutionary act has a phonetic component; the illocutionary act is a non-linguistic act (which may relate to questioning, requesting, promoting, apologizing etc.), while the perlocutionary act settles with the perception of the hearer.

(Searle, 1962) however, took the theory further by providing the condition in which speech acts will be effectively performed. He gave the condition as; propositional content rules, preparatory rules, sincerity rules, and essential rules.

Conversational Implicature theory by (H. P. Grice, 1975) extended the speech act theory by identifying underlying rules which govern the management of our conversations. Grice introduced the concept of “Implicature” which he referred to as the extra meaning that participants share in a conversation. The fundamental proposition that a conversation depends on the participants' co-operation during a conversation is the bedrock of Grice's theoretic conceptualization of co-operative principle. Since conversation is a rational and co-operative activity, Grice propounded that there are guidelines governing this activity.

The co-operative principle has four maxims: the maxim of quantity; of quality, of relation and of manner. For quantity, one is not required to make one's contribution more informative than required; for quality, you do not say what you believe is false; for relation, the conversation must be relevant, (no extraneous information should be introduced), and for manner, the interactants must avoid ambiguity, or obscurantism.

The two theories will be relevant and useful in understanding the dimension of meanings that may be found in the text to be analyzed. On one hand, speech act will help to explain how speakers intend a particular illocutionary act and how hearers recognize such an act, as well as the effect of such an utterance may have on them in a conversation. On the other hand, Grice's theory of Implicature will help account for the implicit meanings of utterances in the model text.

1.2. A background review of the story

The story in 'Things Fall Apart' encapsulates the deep and rich cultural and religious heritage of an African society. Through the reliable eyes of the narrator, Achebe is able to take us through the different psychological and spiritual dimensions of his characters, making them showcase the rich values of their people. With this, our senses of taste, sight and touch are activated. Through the characters of Okonkwo, Obierika, and Uchendu, Achebe is able to weave his story using colourful words and proverbs to paint clear pictures of the ways of life of the people of Umuafia. The narrator tells us that “among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten”. (p.16).

Artfully, Achebe narrates the cultural practices of the people in Agriculture, kinship, marriage, caste system, issue of twin, and all the strings that bind a people together. He also reveals the political architecture of the people, represented by the High title, the chief priest and the elders. It highlights a well-structured society with clearly recognized lines of

authority. This structure also emphasizes the judicial system which is represented by the “egwuguru” of the clans. These representatives adjudicate the law, and everyone respects and accepts their pronouncements.

The issue of religion is addressed adequately, showcasing the position of the people as it concerns God. The “oracle of the Hills; and Chika, the representative of the gods, reveal the perception of God for the people of Umuafia. The belief in reincarnation is very strong. This is captured through an “Ogbanje”. – (a child who keeps reincarnating after death to exert pain on the mother, who may have wronged the child in some past life). Religion is also seen as a personal thing, not a group affair. One installs a personal symbol at home as his god: and gives respect and worships it as his personal god. (p.12)

The people are held together by these organized structures. Through the detailed processes of the planting season, to the polygamous structure of marriage, to the festival rites, the political and hierarchical structure of government, the judicial system and the religious tradition of the people, a picture of a very organized and stable society is created. This is against the backdrop of Conrad’s heart of Darkness (1899) which saw Africa as a land of “grunting savages and cannibals with no language or cultural and historical links to their physical environment”, (p.1).

Achebe succeeds in creating a stable and viable society before the arrival of the white missionaries, who came with their different culture, political structure, and religious belief. In the conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo, the summary of the conflict was laid bare:

Okonkwo: Does the white man understand our custom about land?

Obierika: How can he, when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart, (p.141).

From the conversation, Achebe situates the success of the missionaries on religion. Through religion, the missionaries are able to subtly divide the people, and turn them against one another, thereby creating a weakness in and among the things that hitherto held them together as a people.

By using the third person narrative style, the narrator allows the reader to enter into the minds of the characters and also into the deep labyrinth of the culture, tradition, political system and the religious beliefs of the people. Conversations and dialogues are few and far between and when they do, they appear in few lines.

However, Achebe finally pitched the two representatives of both cultures together to engage in a long conversation. The conversation takes place between Akunna and Mr. Brown. Akunna, represents the people of Umuofia, while Mr. Brown, represents the white missionaries. The following is the text used for the analysis.

1.3. Text

1. You say that there is one Supreme God who
2. Made heaven and earth; said Akunna on one of
3. Mr. Brown’s visits
4. “We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He
5. Made all the world and the other gods.
6. “There are no other gods; said Mr. Brown. Chukwu
7. Is the only God and all others are false”. You
8. Carve a piece of wood – like that one; and you
9. Call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.
10. ‘Yes’, said Akunna, it is indeed a piece of wood
11. The tree from which it came was made by
12. Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But
13. He made them for His messengers so that
14. We could approach Him through them. It is
15. Like yourself. You are the head of your Church

16. 'No, protested Mr. Brown. "The head of my
17. Church is God Himself."
18. 'I know', said Akunna', but there must be
19. A head in this world among men. "Somebody
20. Like yourself you must be the head there".
21. 'The head of my Church in that sense is in England'
22. That is exactly what I am saying. The head
23. Of your Church is in your country.
24. He has sent you here as his messenger.
25. And you have also appointed your messengers
26. and servants. Or let me take another example,
27. the District Commissioner. He is sent by your King!
28. 'They have a queen' said the interpreter
29. On his own account
30. 'Your queen sends her messenger, the District
31. Commissioner. He finds that he cannot do the
32. work alone and so he appoints 'Kotma' to help
33. him. It is the same with God, or Chukwu.
34. He appoints the smaller gods to help Him
35. because His work is too great for one person;
36. 'You should not think of him as a person;
37. Said Mr. Brown. It is because you do so
38. that you imagine He must need helpers.
39. And the worst thing about it is that
40. You give all the worship, to the false
41. gods you have created!
42. "That is not so, We make sacrifices to
43. The little gods, but when they fail and
44. There is no one else to turn to we go to
45. Chukwu. It is right to do so. We approach
46. a great man through his servants. But when
47. his servants fail to help us, then we go to
48. the last source of hope. We appear to pay
49. greater attention to the little gods but
50. that is not so. We worry them more
51. because we are afraid to worry their
52. master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu
53. was the overlord and this is why many of
54. them gave their children the name Chukwuka
55. "Chukwu is Supreme"
56. 'You said one interesting thing; said Mr. Brown
57. You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion Chukwu
58. Is a loving father and need not be feared by
59. Those who do His will
60. 'But we must fear Him when we are not doing
61. His will' said Akunna. And who is to tell His
62. Will? It is too great to be known? (p.144).

2. Analysis of the Text

Line 1 – The illocutionary act here is a question. However, it seems to be a rhetorical question where an answer is already available.

The perlocutionary act suggests that Akunna may just be sarcastic because he does not believe the God he believes in is the same worshiped by the whites. By saying what he believes is not completely true, Akunna violates the maxim of quality.

Line 6 – There are no other gods.... Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood... and you call it a god. Illocutionary act is used here to convince Akunna that a god carved on a piece of wood is not a god. The perlocutionary act expresses a degree of religious arrogance, or religious superiority, perhaps indicating that the god of the Africans is inferior to the god of the whites. This view permeates the issue of religion, and it is not just by the Whites and the Africans, but also among different religious faiths in modern societies.

Mr. Brown insists that the wood is still a piece of wood, not a god. The implicit meaning derives here is that Mr. Brown displays a superior knowledge about God, and how God looks like, but he seems to overlook the fact that the totality of a people's belief, determines to a large extent, what works for them.

Line 10-12 – Yes said Akunna, "It is indeed a piece of wood. Therefore, from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were.

The illocutionary act performed here is stating a fact as he knows. The perlocutionary act implies that all life forms are symbols of God, since God created them. And by respecting an aspect of any form of life, one is worshipping and connecting with 'Chukwu' which is God. It may also go to show that Africans recognize the fact that God cannot be accessed directly by people, but rather through intermediaries.

Line 13: But he made them for his messengers so that we could approach Him through them.

Akunna goes ahead to unveil to Mr. Brown the position of the 'piece of wood'. He likens it to a messenger. The perlocutionary act suggests that one could pass through the piece of wood to see God.

Line 16: 'No, protested Mr. Brown. The head of my church is God Himself.

Illocutionary act performed here is to provide information.

Line 24: He has sent you here as his messenger. Akunna continually attempts to equate the gods of Africa to that of the white man by suggesting that both religions have representatives or messengers that act as coordinators for both worlds.

Lines 30-35 – The submission of Akunna here suggests that God is like man, and as a man, he will be tired from the works that he has to do, and so he appoints mediators. This violates the maxim of quality because this is not true. God is not like a human being who gets tired from daily activities.

Lines 36-38 --- "You should not think of him as a person". Said Mr. Brown. It is because you do so that you imagine he must need helpers.

The perlocutionary dimension shows that Mr. Brown's religion does not look at God as a human being, that rather, God is more encompassing, an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent being who does not need a helper. This violates the maxim of quality because as encompassing as God is, there are still helpers in the Christian religion. Mr. Brown only said that to justify his religious superiority over African beliefs.

Lines 42-44-- "That is not so. We make sacrifices to the little gods.

Akunna tries to equate the little gods represented by the woods, to the prophets in the Christian religion. In Akunna's eyes his religion is respectful because it seeks to worry the small gods more, allowing 'the great man' to rest. The perlocutionary act here indicates that the African religion gives God (great man) certain attributes of a human being, by feeling that the "great man" needs rest, and does not need to be disturbed.

Lines 50-51..."we worry them more because we are afraid to worry their master".

The perlocutionary act here suggests that God should be feared, and because of this, emphasis should be given to the "smaller gods" or God's messengers.

Lines 56-59... Mr. Brown said, “In my religion, “Chukwu” is a loving father and need not be feared by those who do His will.”

This marks the difference between the religious beliefs of the people of Umuofia and the religion of the white missionaries. The God of the white missionaries is a loving God, one who needs to be loved and respected while that of the Africans is a God who is to be feared and revered.

Through the two characters, Mr. Brown and Akunna, Achebe has been able to cast light as it were, on the views of both worlds regarding religion and the perceptions of God. It is hard to hear the voice of Achebe from the conversations. What he does is to present the situations as they are, allowing readers to make their perlocutionary meanings. Through the conversations, one can come to the conclusion that African perception of God borders on fear, suspicion, and reference, while the missionaries see God as a loving father who needs to be embraced, relished and loved.

2.1. Classification of speech acts

There are five basic types of speech act utterance that one can perform in speaking which are promoted by (Searle in Levinson, 1983, p.240), they are representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives.

Representative Act (Assertive): Assertives or representatives are such utterances which commit the hearer to the truth of the expressed proposition. It is an illocutionary act which states the facts. The class includes: asserting, concluding, affirming, believing, denying, etc.

Directive Act: According to (Kiuk and Ghoszali, 2020) directives are attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something. It is an illocutionary force that gets things done by the addressee. The class includes; ordering, requesting, asking, begging, commanding, insisting, etc.

Commissive Act: Commissives commit the speaker to some future course of action. The class includes; offering, swearing, promising, undertaking etc.

Expressive Act: Expressives express a psychological or mental state of the speaker. The class includes: congratulating, apologizing, appreciating, regretting, welcoming, etc.

Declarative Act: Declaratives effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions. In declaration, the speaker alters the external status or condition of an object or situation, solely by making the utterance.

The types of illocutionary acts found in the text are representative, directive and commissive. There are five functions of Representative in 13 utterances, four functions of directive in 10 utterances, and 1 commissive in one utterance.

Table 1 Data of types and functions of speech act used in the text.

No	Types	Function	Number
1	Representative	Asserting	2
		Concluding	1
		Affirming	6
		Believing	2
		Denying	2
2	Directive	Ordering	1
		Requesting	2
		Asking	6
		Insisting	1
3	Commissive	Undertaking	1

2.1.1. Representative

(Yule, 1996, p53) talks about the truthfulness of the utterance. They are utterances that perform something. Below are a few examples of the utterances.

Line	Utterance
4 (Affirming)	We also believe in him and call Him Chukwu
6 (Asserding)	There are no other gods.
7 (Asserting)	Chukwu is the only God and all others are false.
10(Believing)	Yes, said Akunna, it is indeed a piece of wood.

2.1.2. Directive

Directives perform the act of asking, questioning, suggesting, ordering, etc. Below is the data on the Directive.

Line	Utterance
1(Asking)	You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth?
61 (Asking)	... and who is to tell His will?
1 (Ordering)	No, Protested Mr. Brown, the head of my Church is God himself
18 (Requesting)	I know, said Akunna, but, there must be a head in this world among men.

2.1.3. Commissive

54 (offering)	Why many of them gave their children the same Chukwuka. "Chukwu is supreme".
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3. Conclusion

In any conversation, there must be certain illocutionary acts that will perform various functions. This is what drives a conversation and beneath some utterances, there are perlocutionary acts that lie in the domain of the speaker/reader.

In this article, we have been able to see beyond the literal meaning of the utterances using the instruments provided by Austin, Searle speech acts and Grice's Implicature. We were also able to determine the illocutionary acts of the interactants in the text, as well as identify some functions of the illocutionary utterances of the interactants. It is established through the text that both cultures recognize the presence of God. "You said one interesting thing, said Mr. Brown. "You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion, Chukwu is a loving father and need not be feared by those who do His will" (p.144).

The point of difference is that of the "messenger", or the channel through which people access "Chukwu". This difference comes naturally because of the diversity inherent in nature. People's views, identity and nature are distinctively different, and this difference shows in the lives of a people.

Therefore, any attempt to suggest that one's religion is superior to another should be seen as religious arrogance or religious intolerance because one cannot by just a wave of the hand, wipe away h/her identity or world views.

This is the state of confusion the text tries to establish through religion and by extension, African cultures and traditions. This inability of Africans to project and practice their distinct religion, culture, tradition and political system, those things, according to Obierika (p.144) that should bind us together, are largely the reason things have fallen apart in Africa.

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