

LANGUAGE AND MUSIC: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF SELECTED SONGS OF FELA ANIKULAPO-KUTI

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Abstract

Music (or songs) is a fundamental manifestation of language use because it has the quality of portraying and reflecting society, as well as triggering discussions and reactions from listeners. In making up their lyrics, musical artists exhibit their pragmatic intents explicitly and implicitly. This aids listeners in decoding their message vis-à-vis the context of the musical rendition. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, in his songs, exhibited his understanding of this phenomenon. Thus, he employed the available linguistic repertoire to pass his messages pragmatically, further highlighting how language in songs can influence, resist, and act. However, there is a dearth of research on the pragmatic features of his songs. Hence, the specific objectives of this paper are to highlight the speech acts performed by Fela in the selected songs, how his utterances in the songs convey meanings in relation to context, and the forms of speech acts performed. To achieve this, Searle's (1969) speech act theory is adopted as the theoretical framework to enable the researchers to analyse Fela's lyrics, not just as poetic or musical expressions, but as actions entrenched in a social and political struggle. Similarly, the qualitative content analysis is adopted as the research method to interpret the meanings and intentions inherent in the Fela's lyrics; the selection of songs is based on relevance to key pragmatic functions, and for the literature review, related materials were retrieved from the Internet and the library. The analysis reveals that Fela's songs challenge authority, conscientize listeners, and call for mass mobilisation for resistance. Through the lens of Searle's Speech Theory, this emphasises the utilitarian function of language as a communicative tool for social change.

Keywords: Language, Music (song), Pragmatics and Speech Acts.

Introduction

Music is one of the most prominent artistic forms that is brought to life through language. Stored up in language as used in the production of songs are pragmatic features that add up to meaning making. Though there are many views of the concept of language, the consensus is that language is a medium of communication and information. Ewelu (2008, p. 34) states that language involves natural signs, sounds, and conventional symbols like words, gestures, signs, and body language/movements, etc, which are indispensable in information. The concern of this study is not to focus on what language is or is not. However, the reaffirmation that language is about communication and information substantiates the claim of the affinity between music and language, especially as music deploys lyrics and sounds for communication purposes. Due to its expressiveness, song has, over time, proven to be an essential tool of human communication and has performed a plethora of functions beyond entertainment.

Songs belong to the poetic genre. It can be defined as a composition made up of lyrics and music, with the intent of the lyric being sung, for the purpose of producing a passionate feeling or emotion in relation to a particular matter. Ransom (2015) asserts that for ages, songs have been known as an effective way of communicating to the masses, and lyrics have played a significant role in delivering this communication. MacDonald, Kreutz & Mitchell (2012) posit that music is ubiquitous. Each lyric carries a message. Song is part of a society. In every society, there are people who feel the injustice and evil perpetrated in the society and feel that the only way to voice out is by singing about such injustice and evil. Every song has a theme or subject matter that relates to its audience.

As an aspect of language, music can be studied using pragmatic approaches such as speech act, implicatures, deixis, amongst others.

This is because many times musicians, just like most creative artists, make use of language in peculiar ways to create aesthetic effects and achieve meaning. In doing this, they violate the norms of language for a particular effect, but their intended meaning is not lost. Expressions of their feelings, worldviews and attitudes with language are meant to achieve certain ends. These expressions are made to perform certain acts. These acts are known as speech acts, and they could be an appeal, coercion, permission, promise, assertion, directives, amongst others. It is in the light of this that this study is set to investigate certain speech acts in the selected songs of Fela by analysing excerpts of the lyrics.

Fela's Biography

Fela Anikulápo Kuti was a Nigerian multi-instrumentalist, musician, political activist, and Pan-Africanist. His parents are Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, an anti-colonial activist, and Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, an Anglican minister, school principal, and the first president of the Nigeria Union of Teachers (NUT). After his secondary education, he left for London in 1958, where he studied music at the Trinity College of Music.

He returned to Nigeria in 1963, where he trained as a radio producer with the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. After a while, he moved to Ghana in search of 'musical direction'. He came up with a style of music which he called Afrobeat, a combination of African and Western musical elements. While on a ten-month tour of the United States of America, he met Sandra Smith of the Black Panther Party, who introduced him to the Black Panther Movement. This experience heavily influenced his music and political views.

Fela's songs were popular among the Nigerian public and Africans in general. Despite his popularity, his music drew the ire of the Nigerian ruling class, and raids on the Kalakuta Republic were frequent. Notable amongst these raids was in 1977 after he had released the album *Zombie* in which he criticised the Nigerian soldiers. During the raid, Kuti

was severely beaten, and his elderly mother was fatally injured after being thrown out through the window of a two-storey building.

Fela's music is a vivid reflection and representation of man's diverse expression in the Nigerian society, especially during the periods of the various military regimes in the country. These periods epitomise and punctuate a time when human rights abuses, mindless looting of the public treasury, suffering and brutalising at its very peak. In his music, Fela apologetically questions the continuous suffering and brutalisation of the masses and the abysmal looting and expropriation of national wealth by those in power. After several detentions by different military governments in Nigeria, Kuti reportedly died on 2 August 1997, of complications related to AIDS. (Schoofs 1999).

Studies in Fela's Songs

The songs of Fela have been analysed critically and extensively from both linguistic and literary points of view. For instance, from a linguistic perspective, Ademosu (2020) studies Fela's expression of meaning in 'Lady' from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. He examined Fela's use of language to explicate the power play and 'struggle between the old traditions and the newly intervening values or ideologies...an ideology borne of the influx of Westernisation at the time'. (Ademosu 2020:18). In the same vein, Fadipe (2014) adopted Van Dijk's Social Cognitive Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the interaction between texts and inter-textuality in 'Yellow Fever', and to explore the connection between discourse and social (gender) inequality in relation to women.

From a literary perspective, Mgbojirikwe (2016), using a Marxist framework, offers insights into Fela's songs in creating awareness of the impact of corruption, mismanagement, poverty, and unemployment in Nigerian society. In his study, he reveals Fela's revolutionary tendencies in calling on the oppressed masses to return to their senses and principles of self-pride, self-reliance, fearlessness, and decency that is

deeply rooted in the traditional norms of Africa. Similarly, Ayu (1985) examines Fela's Afrobeat music from a Marxist perspective. He classifies Fela and his ideological lifestyle as oppositional within a dehumanising class-conscious society. In Ogunde's (1998) opinion, Fela is a voice against capitalism and the 'powers that be' in society. According to him, Fela was 'adept at popularising the most abstract topics of transnational processes and relations into bits that were digestible by the bulk proletariat and lumpen-proletariat audience' (Kassim, 2016). In the submission of Olaniyan (2004), Fela's music, ideas, and lifestyle have strongly influenced the youths' impatient and rebellious ideas that are completely against the Nigerian state. He had, through his songs of condemnation, taught young people to see the country as fundamentally illegitimate, selfish, dictatorial, and ultimately un-African. In the same vein, Ogidan (2011) shares Olaniyan's (2004) view on Fela being an iconic enigma who was at the forefront of real and loud political activism in Nigeria.

Olorunyomi's (2003) explores the postcolonial ideology of subversion that defines the African world in general and Nigeria, as projected by Fela in his songs. In this study, Olorunyomi projects how Fela laments the deplorable state of the economy, security and culture of the African continent as engendered by her leaders. Olorunyomi (2005) points out the underlying philosophy and ideology that influenced Fela's music. He called this 'Felasophy'. In doing this, he describes Fela as a man who must have drawn his inspiration from the activism and works of a Martinique born revolutionist, Frantz Fanon, whose society was replete with similar social maladies found in Fela's Nigeria. Olorunyomi further argues that Fela's songs and lifestyle are such that depict him as one who lived within the limitations of the humanism and communism ideologies, which were not found in the parlance of the Nigerian system of government. Still within the context of postcolonial studies, Onyebadi (2018) examines how Fela's criticised people who were still entrapped in colonial mentality.

Oikelome (2009) investigates the stylistic elements employed by Fela during the highlife jazz era. In the study, Oikolome classifies Fela's music into four artistic periods, and analyses the structural elements of the music in the period under study (the 1960s). He concludes that the stylistic components of the music emerged mainly from highlife with the fusion of Western idioms like jazz, blues, soul, funk, and Afro-Latin music. Dosunmu (2011) can mainly be described as a stylo-ideological description of Fela's Afrobeat music genre. In this study, the author notes Fela is driven by the ideological dictum 'Music is the Weapon of the Future', hence his deployment of his songs to lampoon and berate the many vices that characterise the Nigerian polity.

In light of the above examination of works on Fela's songs, it can be said that most of the works seem to focus more on the literary merits, with key attention being paid to their thematic and stylistic features. Thus, this study is significantly different in that it investigates how Fela employed linguistic tools to pass his message and the speech acts embellished in the selected songs at the time of their rendition.

Theoretical Framework: Searle's Speech Act Theory

Searle's Speech Act Theory was propounded in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* in 1969. According to Adegbija (1982), Searle's theory is more powerful than Austin's theory because he combines important elements of Grice's intentional theory of meaning with Austin's conventional theory of speech acts. Searle (1975) set up the following classification of illocutionary speech acts:

1. **Representatives:** Speech Acts that commit a speaker to the truth or falsity of the expressed proposition, e.g., reciting a creed.
2. **Directives:** Speech Acts that cause the hearer to take a particular action, e.g, requests, commands, and advice.
3. **Commissives:** Speech Acts that commit a speaker to some future actions, e.g., promises and oaths.

4. **Expressives:** Speech Acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotion towards the proposition e.g., congratulations, excuses, and thanks.
5. **Declaratives:** Speech Acts that change the reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration, e.g., baptising someone, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife.

Searle argues that the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistically and non-linguistically. Saying something and meaning it, he further noted, is not a matter of an intention to perform a perlocutionary act as Grice maintains, but a matter of intending to perform an illocutionary act. The effect of an illocutionary act on the hearer consists in the hearer's understanding of the speaker's utterance.

Research Methodology

This research adopts qualitative content analysis to interpret the meanings and intentions inherent in Fela's lyrics. A purposive random selection technique is adopted for the sample representatives of this paper. The selection of songs is based on their relevance to key pragmatic functions and relatedness to the objectives of the work. The data were retrieved from the Internet. Each selected song is presented and analysed employing the speech act tools of Searle (1975).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Here is an analysis of the speech act features of selected extracts from some songs of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. The excerpts are presented with a careful examination of the pragmatic implications of the speech acts employed.

Data 1: 'Yellow Fever'

Context: By the time Fela released 'Yellow Fever' in 1971, the culture of skin bleaching had gained prominence among many blacks. Using Nigerian pidgin English as his medium of communication, he identified the different types of fevers: malaria, jaundice, hay, influenza, inflation, freedom, and yellow. He further divided yellow fever into original and artificial. Fela then chronicled the different symptoms of the original and metaphorically equated skin bleaching as artificial 'yellow fever'. He also described the signs of artificial 'yellow fever' as well as the damaging effects on the skin. He called bleaching 'a stupid thing, yeye thing, ugly thing, foolish thing'. Indeed, haters of the bleaching culture ridiculed such people and called them yellow pawpaw, Coca Cola leg, among other names.

Locutionary act:

Yellow fever nko? (You say)
 Original and artificial, he dey
 Yellow fever nko? (You say)
 One more
 Original and artificial, he dey
 Bombombom, tell me now
 Original catch you
 Your eye go yellow
 Your yansh go yellow
 Your face go yellow
 Your body go weak
 I say but later if you no die inside
 The yellow go fade away
 Artificial catch you
 You be man or woman
 Na you go catch am yourself
 Na your money go do am for you
 You go yellow pass, yellow
 You go catch moustache for face

You go get your double colour

Illocutionary act: The speaker is directly stating (representative) the consequences of skin bleaching and his expressing his disdain for skin bleaching.

Perlocutionary act: Shame on the part of those engaging in skin bleaching.

An understanding of the context shows that the speaker (Fela) describes the psychological attachment and inferiority complex of African people to the glorified Western race and culture. To be like the white, some African people destroy their God-given personalities through skin bleaching, hair singeing, imitation of a foreign accent, and dressing. The speaker also describes *Yellow fever* as 'original and artificial'. He does so paradoxically to emphasize the dual effects of skin bleaching. While *Yellow* is used to depict skin pigmentation, *Fever* is used to depict the effect of bleaching. For clarity, skin bleaching is the use of cosmetic products to reduce melanin in the skin (Charles, 2011). Beyond the observable appearance, skin bleaching represents attempts to approximate the white ideal and consequently gain access to both humanity and social status historically reserved for the whites. The phenomenon represents the peak of identity crisis and social contest instigated by the construction of white supremacy through colonial rule in Africa. The inspiration to discuss this phenomenon by Fela cannot be far from the prevalence of the phenomenon in Africa during the seventies and eighties.

Data 2: 'Gentleman'

Context: This is a 1973 studio album by Fela. The album's title track is his commentary on the colonial mentality of Africans who adhere to European customs and clothing. The lyrics, both humorous and invigorating, are propelled by call-and-response, further highlighting the reciprocal energy Fela was seeking to build.

Locutionary act:

I no be gentleman at all, no!
 Africa hot, I like am so
 You see I know what to wear
 But my friends don't know
 He 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
 He be gentleman
 He go sweat all over
 He go faint right down
 He go smell like shit
 He'll go piss for body, him no go know
 Me I no be gentleman like that

Illocutionary act: The speaker is expressing his disdain for Africans who behave like whites. In his opinion, Africans who dress like whites in spite of the obvious hot weather suffer from sweat and smells. This is a metaphor for the broader consequence of suffering from sticking to European ways passed on by the colonialists, even when they are no longer beneficial.

Perlocutionary act: Shame on the part of those who behave like white people.

In this song, the Speaker uses the first-person perspective a lot: he is speaking of himself, as a man. Verse 2 reads as a declaration of independence: I no be gentleman at all. He sings I be Africa man original, which can be interpreted as, 'I am not the kind of man the British colonizer want me to be, I am an original African'. When he changes narrative perspective in verse 4, he turns to the second person.

By addressing the (male) audience as you, the Speaker is talking to them, not about them. Thus, the speech event comes across as an inclusive talk amongst men.

The song then goes on to describe the behaviour of these gentlemen. Interestingly, it does not do so in relation to women, but in relation to the colonial power. In the first line of verse 4, (Them call you, make you come chop) the ones inviting the man for dinner are the British, and the Speaker ridicules how the invited gentleman, out of modesty, does not eat enough and ends up hungry. Here, food can be seen as a metaphor for much more: if you are too modest and don't take what you need, you'll end up impoverished and weak.

The narrator turns to his friends, who have changed into gentlemen in the last verse. The use of the word 'friend' creates an intimate atmosphere in which the following statements do not come across as harsh as they could have. It starts innocently with a detailed description of what a gentleman dress like. But then the narrator becomes vulgar, stating that because of the overdressing gentlemen smell like shit and piss themselves. It cannot be surprising that the Speaker concludes the song by reassuring his audience that he is not such a gentleman.

Data 3: 'Sorrow Tears and Blood'

Context: The period between 1970 and 1997 in Nigeria was a military era, and Fela was one musician who used his songs to constantly confront it, mobilising people to rise against the system. In the song, 'Sorrows, Tears and Blood', Fela specifically addresses the issues of police and army brutality which, as it seems, help to create and perpetuate the culture of violence and recklessness even as the nation struggles to acculturate democratic norms into the fabric of national life. In the song, Fela makes obvious the confusion and fear that is the imprint of the military era in Nigerian politics. It is a period characterised by sorrows, tears and blood. Looking at the social and

political context of its release, one would say Fela composed it when he sensed that the people of Nigeria were not prepared to confront their unrepentantly corrupt government. It was from this point that Fela became confrontational in his songs, while also making frantic efforts to sensitise the citizens and incite them towards staging a popular revolt against the military government.

Locutionary act:

Everybody run, run, run/everybody run, run, run
 Everybody scatter scatter/everybody scatter scatter
 Some people lost some bread/some people lost some food
 Someone nearly die/someone nearly died
 Someone just die/ someone just died
 Police dey come, army dey come/police is coming, army is coming
 Confusion everywhere/there is confusion everywhere
 Seven minutes later/seven minutes later
 All don cool down, brother/everything is calm, brother
 Police don go away, army don disappear/police has gone
 away, army has disappeared
 Dem leave sorrows, tears and blood/they left sorrows, tears and blood
 Dem regular trademark/their regular trademark

So policeman go slap your face, So,
 You no go talk!
 Army man go whip your yansh
 you go dey look like monkey
 Rhodesia dem do dem own
 Our leaders dey yap for nothing
 South Africa dem do dem own...

Illocutionary acts:

Indirect representative: The speaker is implying that men of the Nigerian Army periodically carry out acts of unprovoked violence against the civilian populations.

Direct expressive: He is expressing his pain as a sufferer of the actions of the security agencies.

Perlocutionary act: Anger and sadness on the part of listeners.

From the above excerpts, the speaker can be understood within the context of the civil-military relationship in his society (i.e., Nigeria), which consisted of incessant violence meted out on the civilian populace by the military men. It is likely that the Speaker had a first-hand experience of such violence because he intimates in verse 1 that there is a sudden run for safety because of the raid by the security operatives. In the course of this confusion, people lose their means of survival (i.e., bread), some lose their lives, and some get injured, causing the victims to be in sorrow at the end of the raid, which, according to the speaker, is the trademark of their uninvited presence.

Also, it appears from the above that the speaker observes that due to the fears of the known and unknown, his audience (the African people, especially Nigerians), condone repression from the state and its agents, and then groan helplessly in sorrow, tears, and blood. He explains how this happened in Nigeria, and at the same time, attempts to conscientize the people about the government's crookedness and tolerance, giving examples of countries such as South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) that had successfully resisted and protested such ill-treatment.

Discussion

From the foregoing, the purpose of communication cannot be achieved if the intended meaning in a speech is not comprehensible by a listener or reader based on context, because context plays a very important role in the use of language and its meaning. As seen in the selected songs of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, there is an extensive use of speech acts by the speaker (Fela). Many unstated facts in the illocutionary acts were left to the listeners to interpret. This deliberate

attitude of not overtly stating some information when necessary is because the speaker (Fela) was probably aware of the mutual intelligibility among the interlocutors since they were all operating in the same linguistic and social context. Assumptions in the analysed data are good examples of pragmatics. As a musician, Fela used presuppositions for the purpose of economising his words to avoid verbosity, as smooth communication will be difficult if he did not presuppose.

The main goal of any speaker or writer is to make his/her listener or reader to understand his/her idea. Likewise, Fela, using his linguistic competence, tries to make his audience understand his message in the songs he sang. This is in line with Barret's opinion that "every communication is a social act, and every social act is potentially persuasive" (Barron 2003:257). It is, however, unfortunate that the intentions behind some of the encoders' illocutionary acts were misconstrued by some of the listeners, probably because of their biased point of view.

The purpose of communication cannot be achieved if the intended meaning in a speech is not comprehensible by a listener or reader based on context, because context plays a very important role in the use of language and its meaning. As seen in the selected songs of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, meanings were deduced based on the context in which the songs were released. This implies that in pragmatics, language use is interpreted in context, with all the sociological factors that are at play. The language is simple; however, the contextual meaning was the primary focus of this study and it was achieved use the speech act theory.

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