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PRAGMATIC CONSTRAINTS IN STYLISTIC STUDIES: A STUDY OF CONTEXT DEPENDENT CHOICES IN SELECTED NIGERIAN COMPLIMENTS

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Abstract

Effectiveness of language use is principally measured by its communicativeness. In many cases where a foreign language is employed as the vehicle of expressing indigenous socio-cultural experiences, there is bound to be a marked drift in how words are used and what they are used to mean. The paper re-affirms the centrality of pragmatic apparatuses in decoding meaning in the true likeness of the speaker's intention using four popular 'Nigerianised' English compliments as reference points. This exercise espouses the symbiotic relationship between pragmatics and stylistics as linguistic disciplines. Ultimately, it is revealed that the mode of text delivery is a major force to reckon with in meaning negotiation processes, most especially at the tertiary level of socio-cultural motivation and implication of discourse.

Introduction

The English Language became firmly rooted in Nigeria around the 16th century with the advent of the early British expansionists. The consequent colonialism popularized the English language as a tool of instilling 'nationalism' in a state which has over 400 ethnic nationalities. Owing to this felt need of national integration, English remains the second language as well as official language in Nigeria whose use cuts across the various facets of life.

Just as sociolinguists view language as an instrument of cultural expression, it was necessary to indigenize, naturalize and nationalize English as a Second Language (ESL), so that it stands as an appropriate vehicle of our cultural expression in Nigeria. It is in light of this background that peculiarly Nigerian compliments evolved.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics developed as a reaction to the purely formalist approach to language (Adegbija, 1999, p.189). To pragmaticians like Austin (1962), Searle (1969) and Grice (1975), the occasion of an utterance is influential in the understanding of linguistic signs employed by the speaker. Adegbija (1999, p.189) quotes Stalnaker (1972, p.383) who synthesizes the various definitions of pragmatics as "the study of linguistic acts and the context in which they are performed".

In other words, pragmatics is used to refer to a field of language study which takes cognizance of the totality of the contextual variables like intentions, speech acts, mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs), world knowledge, presupposition, implicatures, inference and/or context (whether sociological, psychological, linguistic or socio-cosmological). Such a consideration allows for one to negotiate and attach meanings to utterances in relation to what a user employs language to mean in a given communicative circumstance. Hence, pragmatics is a linguistic discipline which accounts for how meanings of utterances are generated in relation to the circumstance surrounding the use.

Stylistics

On the other hand, stylistics emerged as a reaction to the subjective, imprecise and impressionistic approach to literary studies. It is an attempt to put literary criticism on a scientific basis (Fish, 1981, p.53). Unlike the impressionistic critics, stylisticians tend to substitute the traditional mode of language analysis with clear, though rigorous, and empirical mode of linguistic consideration which offers the possibility of moving from the level of formal description of substance to functional and interpretative levels as constrained by the socio-pragmatic situation.

Therefore, stylistics stands out as a language discipline which investigates into the linguistic choices made by a language user on an occasion of use, thereby providing an empirical basis for textual description and interpretation.

Pragmatic Consideration in Stylistics

It should be understood that texts, which are of stylistic interest, arise in certain social situations to fulfil certain purpose(s) by the speaker or the writer. Hence, the selection a language user makes goes a long way in reflecting the contextual variables (e.g. intention, mutual contextual beliefs, presupposition, implicatures, etc.) which predetermine the style with which an utterance is adorned. In Lawal's (1997, p.136) words:

It may not be out of the way to say that pragma-stylistics is derivable from the pragmatics of discourse which deals with the systemic relations between structures of a text and its context.

The implication here is that the pragmatic context of a language text is a pivot on which the selection of certain formal features and their corresponding meaning negotiation strategies are hinged.

As maintained by Leech and Short (1981, p.290), there are textual instances which require "PRAGMATIC interpretive strategies". They add that:

The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning

which is derived not from the formal properties of words and construction (i.e. Syntax), but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.
(p. 290)

The occasion of an utterance is instrumental in shedding light on the 'psychological setting' (Coulthard, 1993, p.50) or what may be referred to as the emotional predisposition of the language user. This affects his choice of idiosyncratic forms. At the same time, it influences his degree of deviation from the 'standard/conventional' forms in his attempt to paint a picture of his emotion within the limits of the language text he selects. This background offers stylisticians access to invaluable information that allows them to progress from mere assessment of formal features of selected forms and patterns to a scientific explanation and interpretation of texts. This view is also shared by Fish (1981, p.70) in his proposition of "affective stylistics".

Similarly, depending on the degree of formality which characterizes the occasion of an utterance; whether formal or informal/intimate, casual or frozen, a language user adopts a given pattern which peculiarly fits into given occasion of an utterance. This notion is foregrounded in Ajileye and Ajileye (1997, p.196) when they submit that the aim of stylistics is "analyzing language habits with the purpose of identifying those features which are restricted to certain individuals' use of language in certain kinds of social contexts". At this juncture therefore, the pragmatic notion of discourse participants comes to the fore. All these boil down to a simple fact; that for a stylistician to arrive at an adequate and accurate interpretation of text, the context of use should be properly dissected.

As the case may be, a necessary pragmatic condition which should be satisfied in communication generally is that of appropriateness of utterance. Ayodabo (1997, p.136) adds that "Stylistic variations define the degree of effectiveness of an utterance in relation to the hearers, at the perlocutionary level".

This means that a language user must satisfy the appropriate need of the hearer for an effective speech act to be performed. Hence, for the much-desired effectiveness of a language text in stylistic investigations, the appropriateness of the utterance, which is of pragmatic concern, stands out as a basic prerequisite.

Also, the notions of pragmatic world knowledge and mutual contextual beliefs (Bach and Harnish, 1979, p.4) place a high premium on using a language text to present a distinctive shade of meaning in the face of limitless possibilities offered by the grammar of a language. It is pertinent to reinstate that stylistics without a due consideration of context, whether cosmological, socio-cultural, psychological or linguistic, is a worthless adventure. This is because the prowess of any stylistic endeavour lies in its empirically descriptive and interpretative potential of analyzing distinctive features in a language text. One therefore wonders whether effective negotiation of meaning can take place independent of context.

To shed more lights on the foregoing, the totality of the contextual variables like presuppositions, implicatures and inferences serves as the linking bridge between the actual message and the chosen medium. This is because the choices made by a language user on a given occasion are not only to convey a meaning but to reveal his state of mind in relation to discursal goal, world view and certain presumptions resident in the mind of the speaker. The point of interest here is that a thorough investigation of these choices requires a pragmatic consideration of the totality of factors which directly impact on the medium or linguistic choices made in relation to the provisions in the context.

Pragmaticians hold a consensus that meanings can best be decoded in the context of language use. So, if an adequate interpretation of a text which is open to objective verification is desirable, it is imperative that a measure of attention is paid to the circumstance which surrounds the use into which language has been put in a particular way, textually and co-textually. For instance, Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) deny the primacy and existence of context-free utterances. They are of the opinion that all utterances are to be understood as instances of purposeful human action, which merely require language for their performance. Searle adds that propositional acts do not occur alone. Every utterance

possesses illocutionary force and no utterance can be properly analyzed without a reference to intention and context. For example, "I will come" may mean a promise, threat, prediction or warning depending on the context. So, for a stylistician to arrive at accurate description and correct interpretation of a language text as this, the occasion of the utterance provides the clue.

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that the contributions of pragmatics to an in-depth investigation of 'style' cannot be over-emphasized. This is because, as embedded in what stylistics entails, context plays a crucial role in situating meanings of utterances on the platform where scientific interpretation of texts can be based. This is probably why 'pragma-stylistics' seems to have gained the special interest of contemporary stylisticians. In the following section, we shall be examining how the linguistic choices in selected Nigerian English compliments have been constrained by context.

Selected Nigerian Compliments

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2000, p.229) defines compliments as "a remark that expresses praise or admiration...greetings, especially when used to express praise and admiration". According to *Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms* (1973, p.170), compliment denotes flattery, courteous praise addressed directly to a person to commend him either sincerely or formally.

Holmes (1986, p.485) cited in Mustapha (2012) says "a complement is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possessions, characteristics, skills, etc) which is positively valued by the speaker". Mustapha (2012, p.223) says, Holmes's definition underlines two major concepts:

- a. It implies that a compliment is a speech act -an expression that performs an act (offers verbal gifts and attributes credit to the recipient thus, making the addressee feel good).
- b. It introduces a feature of cultural acceptability of the topics of praise to both interactants.

Mustapha (2012, p.228) explains that compliments are culture specific in terms of what is termed a compliment and what can be a praise. Holmes (1986) however noted that not all positive statements and praises are compliments; thus, compliments form

a sub-set of praise and admiration, which share many things in common with others.

The Art of Compliments

Marano (2004) says compliments are one of the most extraordinary components of social life. They derive from taking notice of praiseworthy situations and effects. As a psychologist, Marano says, if given right, compliments create so much positive energy that they make things happen as if they were magic. She is of the view that once praiseworthy situations are noticed, the awareness needs to be spoken. In other words, she says, the compliment needs to be put forth into the world in spoken form. Marano said, psychologically, people benefit from being the objects of compliments; but we also benefit being givers of them. On the other hand, recipients of compliments benefit from knowing that we notice and value them. It is against that background that she posits as follows:

- i. Compliments are little gifts of love.
- ii. They are not asked for or demanded
- iii. They tell a person, they are worthy of notice
- iv. Compliments are powerful gifts.

In an attempt to highlight features of compliments and how they work, Marano (2004) explains that; compliments work only if they are sincere reflections of what we think and if they are given freely and not coerced. A forced compliment makes the speaker untrustworthy; it raises suspicions about motives. The situation can therefore undermine the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. It is the scholar's view, to which we concur, that compliments are best received with a smile; and the art of receiving a compliment teaches us an important lesson about life.

Having considered what compliment entails, one discovers that it is an important phenomenon which facilitates interpersonal discourse. In Nigeria however, due to geographical disparity and cultural influences, most of the 'made in English' compliments have been adopted and adapted in the expression of indigenous sensibilities. This makes such uses to reflect Nigerian idiosyncratic features at the level of meaning depending on the context of discourse. Hence, our attempt in this essay is to show how the contexts of selected Nigerian compliments have influenced the word choices and patterns in relation to the intended meaning and

acts on which stylistic investigation is based.

The following analysis features the motives of this theoretical paper which tries to explore the borderline between stylistics and pragmatics as two different levels of linguistics. The study unveils how stylistics influences the way we interpret the Nigerian compliments which are intended to perform a pragmatic function. The study therefore, is an exploration into how one field encroaches into another.

Some selected compliments which have been reshaped by "Nigerian pragmatics", and which constitute our data in this paper are presented as follow:

Datum 1:	Well done
Datum 2:	-Tion sir
Datum 3:	Morn sir
Datum 4:	You are the sun in the moon today
Datum 5:	Your hairdo arrests me

Well Done

This is a complimentary utterance which displays the user's adherence to polite principle (PP) in interpersonal discourse. The utterance expresses the speaker's appreciation that he is aware of the addressee's effort even if the benefit of the effort is self-directed. Essentially, the expression ought to be used to commend someone who has successfully completed a given task. In the Nigerian situation however, the meaning of 'well done' is further extended where the speaker may wish to sound ironical. For instance, a mother who sees a grown-up boy playing with sand may rebuke him to stop doing so by merely uttering – "well done" – an indirect speech act. In another instance, the expression could be directed to someone sitting down idling. It is the context of speech which gives an accurate insight into what the expression can mean on a particular occasion of an utterance.

So, for the effectiveness of language use to replicate the intention behind the speech act, the available presupposition and world knowledge of the various uses into which the expression can be put to mean a thing, as distinct from other possibilities, are crucial. This means that a stylistician, who is interested in investigating the effectiveness of the compliment – well done – in relation to appropriateness of use and for sound empirical

interpretation, engages himself in a serious task of identifying the following from the available information surrounding the use:

Participants: This can be peers, a wife to her husband or vice-versa, a boss to a subordinate, a parent to a child, or when the speaker, who can be anyone of any status, intends to interrupt or put an end to idle talk engaged in by the addressee(s).

Illocutionary act: When 'well done' is used to commend somebody's positive effort, the act performed under such a circumstance is expressive. In the alternative, if the expression is rendered to check someone's unethical behaviour, the act performed will be that of directive as it unequivocally warns the addressee to desist from a certain course of action. The illocutionary intention therefore, may be to encourage and boost the morale of the addressee on the one hand or to discourage him from a course of action on the other.

The implication is that the perlocutionary effect which will be generated on hearing the utterance is context determined. For instance, a feeling of being appreciated or a feeling of success in getting the attention of the speaker may be created on the part of the addressee. Alternatively, the effect of the act on the addressee may likely sustain a feeling of self-abuse by making himself liable to embarrassment. The interpretation of the intended possibility rests on the occasion in which the compliment is rendered. Hence, the effectiveness of the utterance to elicit a desired effect rests on the textual pattern or choice in relation to appropriateness on the platform which mediates between and among the field, the mode and the tenor of discourse of the compliment.

In stylistic studies, the identification of language functions in a text is crucial. Fish (1981, p.60), citing Halliday, presents Karl Buhler's tripartite categorization of language functions as:

- (i) The ideational function – the expression of content
- (ii) The interpersonal function – the expression of speaker's attitudes, evaluation and the relationship the attitudes depict between the speaker and the hearer.
- (iii) Textual function – this relates to the link a text makes with the structures within itself and the extralinguistic situation.

Thus, one wonders whether there is a possibility of associating meaning with a particular text for the purpose of effective and

meaningful stylistic investigation independent of the context. As long as the compliment – **well done** – owes a serious allegiance to these principal functions of language texts, its effectiveness as a choice the speaker makes largely depends on the appropriateness of the context in which it has been deployed for use on a textual occasion, whether marked or unmarked.

-Tion Sir

This is a clipped salutation associated with the military setting. Its original version is 'attention sir' or in its elaborate form, 'I'm at attention to pay my regards to you sir'. This form of compliment has become conventionally established in Nigerian English as the most acceptable way of greeting a superior officer in the military. It should be recalled, at this point, that the 'pragmatics' of the military does not require unnecessary acquaintances and, consequently, it spares no time for extensive complimentary discourse. The time constraint and the world view that the schedule of the military is 'tight' feature as limiting factors.

"-Tion sir" is usually accompanied with paralinguistic expressions like standing erect with the head raised at 'attention'. This non-verbal aspect of the compliment preconditions a situation of structural ellipsis. From another perspective, it is a case of substitution where a morpheme "Tion" is employed to replace "I salute you", "Good day" or "My regards to you", as the case may be.

It is possible that the stylistic effect of the compliment is attention arresting and emotion captivating without necessarily losing the aesthetics and brevity of military language. It is worthy of note that an intrinsic appreciation of the effectiveness of the medium, or rather mode of discourse, rests on the cognizance given to the physical context. Other pragmatic variables on which textual description and interpretation are predicted here are identified as follows. This is done with due consideration of the roles they play in the analysis of the text.

Participants: A soldier or policeman to a superior officer.

Illocutionary act: The inherent speech act in the compliment is assertive. The speaker performs the act of stating and, at the same time, confirming his loyalty and obedience to a superior officer. Such loyalty and absolute obedience constitute virtue in the military as a field of discourse; they stand out as factors, which determine the

felicity condition of the act being performed. At the perlocutionary level, the addressee nurses a feeling of being esteemed, dignified and acknowledged – the satisfaction of being a superior officer.

The illocutionary intention behind this act is context dependent too. It could be to announce the presence of a superior officer, to acknowledge his presence or that the speaker is awaiting further instructions from the superior officer. To determine the exact intention behind an ambiguous compliment as this, an inferential procedure which exploits the various avenues of decoding meaning is a *sine-qua-non*.

From the foregoing, one begins to see the affinity which 'coheres' text with context of use. And as exploration continues, it becomes more vivid that just as language is a vehicle of culture, text is a vehicle with which context is expressed. Hence, "-Tion" in all its ramifications stands out as a stylistically marked and effective language in the military domain owing to the pragmatic constraints placed on the choice of the elements, which make up the compliment as a language text.

Morn sir

Similar to "-Tion sir", explained above, Morn sir is also a clipped form of 'Good morning sir'. It is also a military and Para-military register signifying greetings between the addresser and the addressee (usually between the junior and senior officers). The stylistic effect of the complement is attention arresting and emotion enchanting going by the physical context or mode of discourse. Another interesting pragmatic interpretation of the expression is that while the head-word "morning" a particular period of the day, in Nigerian military or Para-military jargon, it implies greetings among the security forces irrespective of the period of the day. Like "Tion sir", this compliment is also accompanied by paralinguistic actions such as standing ovation with the hands firmly placed at attention while uttering "Morn sir" as a way of greeting the superior officer to denote morning, afternoon or evening greetings. Hence, other pragmatic variables similar to the aforementioned compliment are identified as follows:

Participants: A soldier, policeman or other related security personnel to a superior officer.

Illocutionary act: The nature of the speech act is assertive as

the intention of the speaker in the utterance is to convey his loyalty to his senior officer as well as signify the appearance or arrival of the officer in question. Such loyalty signifies obedience from the junior to senior officers. The assertion is usually done while the addresser is at "attention" position (similar to "–Tion sir").

Perlocutionary act: The effect of the speaker's utterance on the addressee in the context of utterance can be noted from the addressee's action of responding by using the word(s); "easy-easy", meaning, the officers should now be at ease as their compliments have been answered (or received).

You are the Sun in the Moon Today

A compliment as this, whatever is the subject of discussion, flouts the maxim of relation as identified by H. P. Grice (1975). Hence, it is a conversationally generated kind of implicature, which can be understood through a pragmatic inferencing procedure. The speaker metaphorically employs the image of the sun and that of the moon as marked mode of expressing a sensibility. He hammers on the world knowledge of the addressee and relevant pragmatic presuppositions. The addressee goes ahead to infer radiance and elegance as intended meaning of the sun and the moon respectively based on the MCB of what two celestial bodies stand for.

The addressee invariably decodes that he/she is acknowledge to have been endowed with a very rare beauty. So, the addressee needs to understand the context and presupposition of discourse to be able to decode the exact import of the compliment.

On the part of a stylistician who is interested in the investigation of the effectiveness of the text, he is required to deploy his understanding of pragmatics to be able to scientifically account for the choice of the metaphorical images of the sun and the moon in relation to the theme of discourse.

Participants: Lovers, admirers, a parent to a child or a comment on someone's appearance made by just anybody.

Illocutionary act: The intention behind the speech act may be to flatter, to praise, to seduce, to encourage or to acknowledge the beauty of a hitherto shabby and dirty person. Looking at these possibilities of intention, the speech act could be assertive, expressive or directive depending on the context.

"You are the sun in the moon today", among others has the

following denotative variants:

- You are looking cute
- You are looking sweet
- You are exceedingly beautiful/handsome
- Unlike in the past, you are now looking fine.

The use of this compliment is most common among the elites. It is a demonstration of a mastery of figurative use of language. This is because it is possible that the compliment sounds nonsensical to those who have no access to the context, whether sociological/social or psychological. To such people, the choice of words is illogical and has no sound basis for meaning negotiation. It is quite essential therefore for a style analyst to discover and ascertain the interpersonal relationship between the interlocutors for him to determine how effective the structure of the compliment is. In doing so, he is putting his knowledge of pragmatics to task.

Your Hairdo Arrests Me

The lexeme – ‘hairdo’ crept into ‘Nigerian English’ through a neological process. Its meaning can best be appreciated in a socio-cultural setting of a country like Nigeria – where plaiting of hair by women especially, and ‘cutting of heads’ by men form a crucial means through which peoples’ cultural values are expressed. In the native English context, the import of the word – hairdo – is simply women’s hair-cut. In Nigeria however, the meaning of the word has been extended to refer to all forms of hair-styling or hair-cut irrespective of sex.

In an attempt to analyze the effectiveness of the text therefore, with special reference to marked collocates, i.e. ‘hairdo’ and ‘arrests’, one encounters a meaning negotiation problem if context is suspended from the linguistic description and the explanation of the word choices. The pragmatic modules which constrain the interpretation of the compliment, as an effective language text, are employed in the analysis of the compliment as follows:

Participants: Admirer and the addressee irrespective of sex. Lovers use it. A father or mother may use it on his/her child and vice-versa. Friends use it among themselves too.

Illocutionary act: Both expressive and assertive are speech acts which can be linked to the utterance depending on the compliment in the first place. The expression carries along with

it an illocutionary force of the speaker wanting to elicit a feeling of excitement in the addressee. At the perlocutionary level, the act becomes felicitous if truly the addressee is excited, feels elated or dignified. The act may be non-felicitous however, if the addressee feels flattered and responds negatively.

Nigerians use this compliment to acknowledge the beauty of a person's hair-style. The possible entailments of the utterance among others include:

- Your hairstyle is attractive
- Your hairstyle is seductive
- I feel possessed by your hairstyle
- I will like to make my hair like yours

In consonance with Fish's (1981) proposition that interpretive acts should form the basis of description in stylistics, pragmatics stands out as a pivot around which stylistic investigation revolves. Hence, it is the work of a stylistician to fish out which of these variant interpretations is most eligible and appropriate. It is on the basis of this that the effectiveness of the text, in relation to the speech act intention, resident in the mind of the speaker, can be determined.

Conclusion

To sum it up, in analyzing the style of a language text, it is important that a stylistician moves from a level of describing the formal features of language to the realm of interpretation. One therefore finds it difficult to ascertain the possibility of a scientific investigation of 'style' in texts without adequate cognizance being paid to the context.

As exemplified by our data in this study, pragmatic theories altogether offer considerable inputs into the definition, discussion and explanation of 'style' in texts. There is also a general consensus among the sociolinguists that the mode in which something is said is part of what is said (Ayodabo, 1997, p. 137). This seems to conform with Halliday's view as cited in Fish (1981, p.64) that for an adequate analysis of style, the meaning of what is said is not confined to the syntactic structure alone. Rather, it projects to the general understanding of the context of that structure from where a reader is moved to assign it a value. Hence, it is on the basis of this 'assigned value' that a stylistician progresses to a level where he

empirically interprets the text in the most effective way.

Major findings in this study are that the analyses explore the borderline between stylistics and pragmatics as two different fields of linguistics. The paper unveils how stylistics influences the way Nigerian compliments are interpreted which are intended to perform pragmatic function. The study therefore is an exploration of how one field encroaches into another; hence knowledge of stylistics is very vital when one wants to interpret a pragmatic discourse.