

Abstract

This paper evaluates the uses and significance of oríkì of Àláàfin Òyó, a traditional Yoruba praise poetry associated with the royal lineage of Oyo. Using the theoretical framework of speech act theory as developed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), the study investigates the linguistic and performative dimensions of the oríkì, focusing specifically on how meaning and intention are encoded and interpreted in the royal chants. Through close textual and contextual analysis, the research reveals that each utterance delivered by the chanters of the Àláàfin can be systematically classified under one of Searle's major categories of speech acts. The findings further reveal that within each major speech act category lies a range of sub-acts, distinguishable by their felicity conditions and contextual appropriateness. These sub-acts serve unique pragmatic functions and contribute to the overall communicative intent of the performance. The study underscores the deliberate use of various illocutionary forces by the chanters to convey respect, authority, history, and identity. It concludes by proposing that speech act theory offers a robust analytical tool for examining Yoruba royal chants, particularly in understanding how linguistic form intersects with cultural and performative meaning.

Key words: Speech act, performative, illocutionary act, contextual, royal chant, oral traditions.

1. Introduction

The oríkì, a cornerstone of Yorùbá oral literature, serves as a vital repository of historical memory and a powerful medium for asserting identity and social standing. Among these praise poems, those dedicated to the Àláàfin of Òyó hold a position of particular cultural prominence, reflecting his esteemed status within the Yoruba sociopolitical and spiritual hierarchy. These royal chants perform a function far more complex than mere panegyric; they are sophisticated communicative acts designed to reinforce authority, chronicle ancestral lineage, and invoke a profound sense of social cohesion. Despite their undeniable significance, the intricate linguistic mechanisms that underpin these performances remain underexplored through the lens of modern pragmatic theory.

This study seeks to address this gap by employing the analytical framework of Speech Act Theory, as pioneered by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). This theoretical approach, which categorizes utterances based on their functional intent, such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives provides a potent lens for deconstructing the layered performative meanings embedded within the Àláàfin's oríkì. The research moves beyond a literal interpretation of the poetry to investigate how language is used not just to describe but to "do", to enact social roles, construct political identities, and mediate culturally significant interactions.

By applying this pragmatic analysis, the paper demonstrates the dynamic interplay between language and action within a traditional African oral genre. It ultimately argues that the oríkì of the Àláàfin constitutes a complex series of performative speech acts that are central to the maintenance of cultural and political authority. In doing so, this investigation makes a dual contribution, offering fresh insights into the pragmatic depth of Yoruba royal poetry while

also enriching the field of linguistics by illustrating how contemporary theory can illuminate traditional forms of expressive communication.

2. Review of Previous Literature

There are several studies on *oríkì* in Yorùbá. They include Lasebikan (1958), Beier and Gbàdàmósí (1959), Mosobalaje (2007), Ogunyemi (2015), Oladejo (2018), Ogunyemi (2020), Ogunniyi (2022), Oladipo (2022), Olafunke & Adedeji (2024), and Aliu et al (2025). According to Lasebikan (1958), *oríkì* encompasses virtually everything about a person because “it tells where a person originates from, how powerful his ancestors were, how wealth they were, and all the noble things they had done”. All the studies cited above have examined different aspects of *oríkì* as it relates to different individuals, families and societies. However, none of the previous studies has examined the *oríkì* of the Alaaḡin of Oyo, traditional ruler that symbolises the Yorùbá culture and tradition. This present study intends to fill this gap by investigating the linguistic and performative dimensions of the Alaaḡin’s *oríkì*, focusing specifically on how meaning and intention are encoded and interpreted in the royal chants.

3. Methodology

This study employs a textual analysis approach, utilizing data gathered from primary sources, including the wives of the Alaaḡin, as well as secondary sources such as books and journals, in accordance with the study's objectives. Consequently, the research adopts an analytical design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods. As Kothari (2004) explains, analytical research involves the critical evaluation and interpretation of existing information to test hypotheses and elucidate relationships. This approach facilitates an in-depth examination of available materials to explain the phenomenon under investigation.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study comprise a corpus of linguistic units, words, phrases, and sentences - extracted from the *oríkì* of the Alaaḡin. The research employs a systematic content analysis methodology. As Mouton (2001) establishes, content analysis involves the rigorous examination of communicative materials, whether spoken or printed, to identify patterns and themes. This process entailed a close reading of *oríkì* texts and transcripts, with annotations made to identify and isolate utterances exemplifying Searle’s taxonomy of speech acts.

This study utilizes a mixed-methods analytical research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive examination of the data. The qualitative dimension was applied to interpret the nuanced pragmatic functions and illocutionary forces of the identified utterances. This aligns with Dornyei’s (2007, p. 24) conception of qualitative research as involving “data collection procedures that result primarily in open-ended, non-numerical data which is then analysed primarily by non-statistical methods.” Content analysis served as the primary tool for this qualitative interpretation.

Conversely, the quantitative method was employed to conduct a frequency analysis of the classified speech acts. This involved calculating the raw counts and proportional distribution of each speech act type within the corpus. This numerical data allows for objective conclusions to be drawn regarding the most and least prevalent categories of illocutionary acts, revealing the predominant communicative strategies within the *oríkì* tradition.

5. Speech Acts in the *Oríkì* of Alaaḡin

The speech acts used in the *oríkì* Alaaḡin are heavily loaded with meaning. The analysis of these speech acts reveals to us the intentions of the chanters as well as the kings intentions and

therefore is of great significance. Searle (1969) came up with five basic kinds of speech act that one can perform in speaking depending on what the speaker's purpose is in expressing the proposition. He classified speech acts into five categories of representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressive, and declarations. First and foremost, representatives or assertives are those kinds of speech acts that the utterances commit the speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. These are speech acts which state what the speaker believes to be the case or not. This class includes stating, suggesting, criticizing, replying, concluding, predicting, denying, disagreeing, reporting, describing, claiming, hypothesising, insisting and predicting (Cutting, 2008, p.14). The acts are used by the speaker to represent a state of affairs. The representative speech act can be illustrated using the following examples:

- (i) *O k'ará Ìjagà teégúnteégún* 'You took the Ìjagà people and their Masquerades'

This extract from the chant is directed at the Aláàfin, informing the audience of his accomplishment of conquering the people of Ìjagà and their masquerades, which was unknown to the people. A representative act of "informing" is performed. The chanter tells the truth about the incident while the audience is being informed.

- (ii) *Ó gòkè Òwinnì, Ó yìnbón àgbáánlá* 'He climbed up the Owinni hill, he shot the loudest gun'

In sample 2, the chanter tells the audience about Aláàfin, informing them about what he did at a place called Òwinnì, a small village near Òyó town; reporting what Aláàfin did and what happened. The illocutionary acts of both 'informing' and 'reporting' are enacted.

The examples above illustrate the speaker who represents the world she believe it is. In the two samples above the speaker states her belief and describes her opinion on what happened during the war in Owinni as her belief. In using a representative speech act, the speaker makes words fit the world.

Secondly, according to Searle (1969) directives are those kinds of speech act that speakers use to get someone else to do something, that is illocutionary acts designed to get the addressee to do something such as requesting, questioning, commanding, ordering, and suggesting. It intends to produce some effects through action on the hearer. When speakers utter a directive, they attempt to get the listener to do something such as; ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, and recommending. Therefore, the speaker is trying to get the listener to carry out some action (Yule, 1996). This act represents what the speaker wants. An example in oríkì of Aláàfin is when the chanter say; *Sún mọhìn-in* – Move here! The sentence contains a directive speech act. The speaker in this case the chanter gives a command to the hearer, the Aláàfin, to move nearer. This speech act embodies an effort to direct the hearer towards the speaker's goal. Another type of speech acts are commissives. Searle (1969) explains that commissives are the utterances that commit the speaker to some future course of action or illocutionary acts that commit the speaker to do something. Commissives also express the speaker's psychological attitude towards the state of affairs such as promising, threatening, offering, refusal and pledges. By uttering commissives, the speaker is committing himself or herself to some future course of action. Some examples are promising, vowing, offering, threatening, and refusing. Commissives express what the speaker intends. Using the following examples:

<i>Ẹni ó k'òpẹ Ọ̀wìnnì</i>	'Whoever harvests palm fruits in Ọ̀wìnnì'
<i>Àdió ní, n ní ó b'ìjà wá</i>	'Adio said he will challenge him to a duel'
<i>Ẹni ó k'álá ará Aawé</i>	'Whoever who plucks the okra of Aáwé'
<i>Olúwarẹ ní ń wáápon</i>	'That person is inviting trouble'

In the above examples, the chanter commits to the future action of what the king will do if anyone should harvest palm fruits and okro from his farm. It is a threat, a vow, and a promise as well, which means they applied commissive speech acts.

Expressive on the other hand, are those kinds of speech acts that the utterances express a psychological state that is illocutionary act that undertake to represent a state of affairs. They state what the speaker feels such as, thanking, apologizing, welcoming, congratulating (Searle, 1969, 1975). They have the function of expressing, or making known, the speaker's psychological attitude towards a state of affairs. These speech acts express the speaker's inner state which says nothing about the world. Some of the examples are thanking, congratulating, pardoning, blaming, praising and condoling. These psychological states can be statements of pleasure, pain, likes, dislikes, joy, or sorrow which are experienced by the speaker. Example:

Olújídé, o lékan, o jùwón lẹ 'Olújídé, you have excelled, triumphed over them'.

This is an expression of the state of state of mind of the speaker while addressing the king and appreciating his position as well as confessing to him that he is more powerful than the other kings. The chanter in the above example expresses her psychological state of praising.

Therefore, expressives are speech acts which express the feelings and attitudes of the speaker. Finally, declarations are those kinds of speech act that the utterances effect immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs and which tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions, that is illocutionary acts that bring about the state of affairs they refer to such as declaring war, firing from employment, christening, excommunicating (Yule, 1996). In order to perform a declaration appropriately, the speaker has to have a special institutional role in a specific context. These acts are normally performed by someone who is especially authorized to do so within some institutional framework such as a judge sentencing offenders. When a speaker utters a declaration, his/her words bring about a new state of affairs. Example:

Digbòlù Àkànbí ń sọkọ ará Èjìgbò 'Digbolu Akanbi is the master of the Ejigbo folks'

Searle's (1969) five categories of speech acts, representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, offer a powerful lens for understanding how language functions as action. This framework is particularly illuminating for analysing the Oríkì of Alááfin, moving our understanding beyond mere praise poetry to a dynamic performance where words actively shape reality. The chanters do not simply describe; they act. Their utterances serve to assert truths, express deep psychological states, commit to future actions, direct the behavior of listeners (and the Alááfin himself), and, most profoundly, bring about new institutional and spiritual realities through the declarative power of the performance itself. As Yule (1996) aptly notes, "The usefulness of speech act analysis is in illustrating the kinds of things we can do with words and identifying some of the conventional utterance forms we use to perform specific functions" (p.58). This taxonomy is thus essential for uncovering the full communicative intention and social power embedded within the chanter's discourse.

However, for these speech acts to achieve their intended effect, or illocutionary force, they must meet specific "felicity conditions" (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). These conditions

are the rules that govern successful linguistic performance. First, the propositional content condition defines the literal meaning of the utterance. Second, the preparatory condition requires the context to be appropriate and the speaker to have the authority to perform the act. Third, the sincerity condition demands that the speaker's internal state - their beliefs, intentions, and feelings, aligns with the act. Finally, the essential condition defines the utterance as the very enactment of the action, which commits speakers to undertake the actions expressed by their performative utterances.

Therefore, the five Searle's category of illocutionary speech acts of representative or assertive, commissives, directives, expressive and declarations represent the five different functions or uses of speech acts in oríkì Aláàfin. That is, when chanters perform the Oríkì they are doing one or more of the following: asserting, commissing, directing, expressing, or declaring. Assertives or representatives, are speech acts which have a truth value that state what the chanter believes to be the case, or not. In using an assertive, the chanter makes words fit the world. Directives on the other hand, are acts that attempt to get the hearer to do something. They express what the speaker wants such as requesting, ordering, advising, asking, and warning. Commissives are those which commit the speaker to some future course of action. These acts express the intention of the speaker such as promising, refusing, swearing, threatening. Expressives reveal the psychological state of the speaker such as pleasure, pain, likes, joy or sorrow. This group includes apologizing, praising, complimenting. Declarations are those that change the world via their utterances such as declaring, conferring, blessing and baptizing.

6. Results

Table 1: Breakdown of Speech Acts in the Ràrà of Aláàfin of Òyó

SA	Representative	Directive	Expressive	Commissive	Declaration	Total
Frequency	187	44	56	19	71	377
Percentage	49.6%	11.7%	14.9%	5%	18.8%	100%

From Table 1 it is evident that the representative speech act has the highest frequency of occurrence in the oríkì of Alaaafin with 187 lines out of the total 377lines representing 49.6%. The declarative speech acts come second with 71 lines representing 18.8% of the total 377 lines of oriki whereas the expressive speech act comes third in terms of frequency with 56 lines representing 14.9%. In the fourth position is the directive speech act with 44 lines representing 11.7% of the total 377 lines of oriki of Aláàfin. Finally, the commissive speech act has the least frequency with 19 lines representing 35% out of the total 377 lines in the overall oriki of Aláàfin.

Table .2: Breakdown of Representative Speech Acts in The Ràrà of Aláàfin Òyó

Illocutionary Force	Frequency	Percentage
Reporting	9	4.81%
Affirming	15	8.02%
Describing	32	17.11%
Disclosing	1	0.53%
Informing	44	23.52%
Confirming	1	0.53%
Stating	30	16.04%
Hypothesizing	8	4.30%

Predicting	1	0.53%
Boasting	8	4.30%
Admitting	6	3.20%
Asserting	9	4.81%
Demanding	2	1.1%
Lamenting	4	2.14%
Claiming	6	3.20%
Narrating	1	0.53%
Telling	1	0.53%
Confessing	7	3.74%
Assuming	1	0.53%
Denying	1	0.53%
Total	187	100%

As each major speech act category encompasses various sub-acts or illocutionary forces that specify the utterance's function within a given context, the analysis reveals the diverse pragmatic roles of the representative speech act within the *ràrà* of *Alààfin*. As detailed in **Table 2**, these sub-acts include reporting, affirming, describing, disclosing, informing, confirming, stating, hypothesising, predicting, boasting, admitting, asserting, demanding, lamenting, claiming, narrating, telling, confessing, assuming, and denying.

A quantitative analysis of these 187 utterances shows a clear distribution in frequency. The illocutionary force of “informing” is the most prevalent, with 44 occurrences, accounting for 23.52% of the total chants. This is followed by “describing” (32 occurrences, 17.11%), “stating”(30 occurrences, 16.04%), and “affirming”(15 occurrences, 8.02%).The forces of “reporting”, “boasting, and “hypothesising” each appear 9, 8, and 8 times, representing 4.81%, 4.3%, and 4.3% of the corpus, respectively. “Confessing” (7 occurrences, 3.74%), “admitting” (6 occurrences, 3.20%), and “claiming” (6 occurrences, 3.20%) are the next most frequent. Forces with lower frequencies include “lamenting” (4 occurrences, 2.1%) and “demanding” (2 occurrences, 1.1%). The illocutionary forces with the least frequency, each appearing only once (0.53% of the total), are “assuming”, “confirming”, “disclosing”, “denying”, “predicting”, “narrating”, and “telling”.

Table 3: Breakdown of Directive Speech Acts in The *Ràrà* of *Alààfin* Oyo

Illocutionary Force	Frequency	Percentage
Naming	45	63.4%
Declaring	4	5.6%
Conquering	5	7.0%
Demising	8	11.3%
Announcing	7	9.9%
Appointing	2	2.8%
Total	71	100%

The data analysis **table 3** indicates that the declaration speech acts are the second performed in the *ràrà* *Alààfin*. Chanter of *oríkì* of *Alaafin* used this speech acts for the purpose of naming, declaring, conquering, demising, announcing and appointing. Information in Table 3 shows the breakdown of illocutionary forces of declaration speech acts in the chants. From the table, it is

evident that the illocutionary force of “naming” has the highest frequency of occurrence of 45lines which represents a total of 63.4% of the total chant of 71lines. Illocutionary forces of “demising” and “announcing” come next with 8&7 times of occurrences which represents 11.3% and 9.9% respectively. “Conquering” and “declaring” come next with 5 &4 times of occurrences representing 7.0% and 5.6%. the least under this category is “appointing” illocutionary force which occurs in 2times of 2.8% of the declaration speech act.

Table 4: Breakdown of Expressive Speech Acts in The Ràrà of Alaafin

Illocutionary Force	Frequency	Percentage
Welcoming	2	3.6%
Praising	47	83.9%
Dislike	2	3.6%
Confessing	5	8.9%
Total	56	100%

The findings detailed in **Table 4** present the frequency distribution of illocutionary forces associated with expressive speech acts within the ràrà Aláàfin of Òyó. The data indicate that the illocutionary force of “praising” is the most prevalent, occurring 47 times, which constitutes 83.9% of the total 56 recorded chants. The illocutionary force of “confessing” ranks second in frequency, with 5 instances, accounting for 8.9% of the total. The forces of “welcoming” and “dislike” are the least frequent, each occurring twice and representing 3.6% of the 56 expressive speech act utterances.

Table 5: Breakdown of Directive Speech Acts in The Ràrà of Aláàfin

Illocutionary Force	Frequency	Percentage
Ordering	9	20.5%
Rhetoric	7	15.9%
Commanding	3	6.8%
Warning	19	43.2%
Directing	3	6.8%
Beseeching	1	2.3%
Supplicating	2	4.5%
Total	44	100%

The analysis of the chants in the ràrà of Alaafin show that the chanters use the directive speech acts in their chants for the purposes of ordering, rhetoric questioning, commanding, warning, directing, beseeching, and supplicating. The illocutionary force of warning has the highest frequency with 19 lines of occurrences representing 43.2% of the total 44 lines of chants of directive speech act in the oríkì of Alaafin as the information in table 5 shows. The illocutionary forces of ordering and rhetoric have the second highest frequency with 9 &7 lines of chants each representing 20.5% and 15.9% respectively of the total 44 lines. Commanding and directing illocutionary forces have 3 instances of occurrences each representing 6.8% individually, whereas the illocutionary forces of supplicating has 2 instances of occurrences representing 4.5%. The illocutionary forces with the least frequency of occurrence is beseeching with 1 instance of occurrence representing 2.3%.

Table 6: Breakdown of Commissive Speech Acts in The Ràrà of Aláàfin

Illocutionary Force	Frequency	Percentage
Threatening	7	36.8%
Consenting	1	5.3%
Promising	2	10.5%
Assuring	3	15.8%
Guaranteeing	6	31.6%
Total	19	100%

The study also found that the chanters in the oríkì of Aláàfin use commissives in their chanting of the oríkì. As **Table 6** indicates, the data analysis indicates that there are five illocutionary forces of commissive speech acts in the oríkì. The data shows that of the five, the illocutionary forces of threatening have the highest frequency with 7 instances representing 36.8%. The act of guaranteeing has the second highest frequency at 6 instances of occurrences representing 31.6% of the total 19 lines of chants. The illocutionary forces of assuring, and promising have 3 & 2 occurrences representing 15.8% and 10.5% each while consenting illocutionary force has the least of 1 time with 5.3% of the total 19 lines of chants in commissive illocutionary acts.

7. Discussion

The analysis of the Oríkì of Aláàfin reveals that the chanters' speech acts could be analysed within the framework of Searle's five major categories of speech acts, namely representatives, directives, expressive, commissives and declarations. In addition, the findings from the study show that each of the major categories of speech act contains a wide range of other sub acts or illocutionary forces determined by the felicity conditions of the utterance. The different illocutionary forces give the utterances the different uses or functions in a particular speech situation in the oríkì. In the sample oríkì of Aláàfin, 377 excerpts were selected for analysis of their pragmatic speech act interpretations and significance. The analysis of the data found five major categories of speech acts with a total of forty-two (42) sub acts or illocutionary forces as shown in table 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 respectively. Therefore, chanters of the oríkì of Aláàfin through their utterances express actual state of affairs, express some psychological state, feelings or attitude about a given state of affairs, commit themselves to the doing of some action in the future, attempt to get their listener carry out an action and finally bring about some state of affairs usually of an institutional sort by virtue of the Aláàfin itself.

8. Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to analyse the uses and significance of speech acts within Ràrà of Aláàfin from 1835 to 2022. This study establishes that each category of speech act present in the oríkì plays a distinct and significant role in the context of the chants. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that chanters employ "representative speech acts" to assert factual claims, beliefs, and actual states of affairs they hold to be true. In other words, through representatives, they represent the world as they believe it to be, using these utterances to assert and justify their actions, beliefs, and assumptions. "Expressive speech acts" are used to convey the psychological states, feelings, or attitudes of the chanters, such as praising, pitying, greeting, apologizing, and expressing likes or dislikes. Through these expressions, the inner feelings and psychological condition of the speaker are communicated. "Directives" are utilized by the chanters to prompt action from their listeners via ordering, requesting, asking, or warning. "Commissives", on the other hand, serve to express the intentions of the chanters

by committing themselves, or their hearer, to future actions, such as promising, threatening, consenting, assuring, or guaranteeing.

Finally, “declarations” are employed to effect immediate changes in the state of affairs. In the oríkì under examination, these include acts such as naming, declaring, conquering, demising, announcing, and appointing. As corroborated by the data analysis, each type of speech act serves a specific communicative function and carries particular significance within the speech situation. Thus, the chanters strategically deploy these varied speech acts to convey intended meanings and achieve their communicative goals.

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