Original Research Article

Investigating the Functions of Presupposition in Literary Texts

[1]Maria Jennifer Iyere, [2]Acheoah John Emike*

[1]Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria
[2]Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: Acheoah John Emike (PhD)
Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

Abstract

Literature is textual communication between a writer and his/her audience. It is verbal artistry that plays crucial role in society by awakening the consciousness of society to the vices that pervade it. In doing this, literary writers rely heavily on their knowledge of the phenomena in society, their implications and dynamics in terms of speaker-hearer meaning and interpretation of the writer's thematic concerns. The thrust of this paper is to situate the instrumentality of presupposition in literature. The study hinges on three theoretical frameworks: Traugott's (1989) Theory of Semantic Change, Formalism and Functionalism. The Theory of Semantic Change emphasizes meaning in terms of external and internal factors. Formalism is the application of the formal properties of language (grammar) in the analysis of textual meanings. Functionalism concerns the utilitarian perspective of literature; that is, literature as an instrument of societal reform. This study concludes that presupposition plays crucial roles in literary texts because: it organizes the presentation of themes; it conveys speech acts; it facilitates reference-making; and it helps the audience (readers) interpret themes.

Keywords: literature, theme, pragmatics, presupposition, Traugott's (1989) Theory of Semantic Change, Formalism, Functionalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the fact that literature is an interaction between a writer (novelist, playwright or poet) and his/her audience, themes are carefully selected and conveyed. Literary writings capture Tompkins (2000) seven reasons for writing:

 I.   To Entertain;
 II.   To Foster Artistic Expression;
 III.   To Explore the Functions and Values of Writing;
 IV.   To Stimulate the Imagination;
 V.   To Clarify Thinking;
 VI.   To Search for Identity; And
 VII.   To Learn to Read and Write.

Literature conveys themes through the use of appealing language. This depends on the writer or the genre of a literary text. Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Literary writers are part of society and the trends and practices therein. In this study we explore language (pragmatics) in investigating how literary writers convey themes by depicting society (using presuppositions). In this regard, the language analyst sees beyond the spectrum of the literary writer.

2. Literature Review

In this section of the paper, we examine literature, pragmatics and presupposition as discrete theoretical concepts that are germane to the study.

2.1 Literature

The term "literature" refers to literary works. The basic genres of literature are drama, prose and poetry. The term "genre" is etymologically related to "gender" and "genus". As far back as the early nineteenth century the word has been used in English to mean "a kind of literature". The classification of literature into the three basic genres is based on whether or not a literary work is dialogue, narrative or verse.

2.1.1 Drama

Drama is a play-script. However, scholars hold the view that written drama is play-script while performed drama is play. The Greek word, from which drama emerged, means "deed", "what is done" (performance). Drama is a multi-dimensional experience, written in dialogue. Messages are conveyed by the characters in a play as the dialogue unfolds (expands). Drama originates from ritual. Mike Harris (2007: 252) notes that "drama explores character and ideas through the medium of events generally in the following way: when characters confront obstacles they have to act (or not act) in one way or another. The choice they make reveals them. We think Macbeth is a loyal subordinate but when ambition overcomes the obstacle of his conscience, he kills the king and we realize he's not so loyal after all." The core of drama is "conflict". This view corroborates Mike Harris (2007: 252) who notes that "the more 'story events' in a script, the more obstacles we see a character dealing with and the more various, the more we are likely to understand (or be puzzled by) him, and the more liable we are to ask questions. Obstacles in story events transcend the physical. They may take the form of interpersonal conflicting desires.

Scenes and sequences are elements of drama. Changes in time and space culminate into changes in scenes with the exception of single-room dramas. There must be at least a story event in a scene. Short and long scenes have functions."

There are different types of drama:
I. Tragedy: This type of drama treats serious themes (power, ambition, love, etc.) using literary techniques such as reversion of roles which shows how the fate or experiences of the protagonist generates fear and pity on the audience.
II. Comedy: It presents themes lightly via skillful use of humour.
III. Tragi-comedy: It strikes a balance between tragic and comic elements by using literary devices such as the non-linear plot.
IV. Absurd: This type of drama presents humans as being in a world bereaved of meaning, value and truth. Stage emptiness and disjointed thoughts are some of the strategies deployed. Other types of drama include epic, melodrama and farce.

Elements of drama include: conflict, prologue, soliloquy, denouement, flashback, climax, among others.

2.1.2 Prose

Unlike drama, prose is not written in dialogues. It is narrative. "Realism" is the core of prose. Prose uses ample description of persons, places, ideas, etc. As a genre of literature, prose tells new stories, hence the term "novel" which uses prose form and beauty in the presentation of phenomena. The term originated from the Italian *novella*.

I. Detective Novel: This type of novel dominantly presents crime as a theme. This culminates in murder.
II. Picaresque Novel: Common themes in this type of novel are: the actions of a rogue, scandalous love and morality.
III. Propaganda Novel: This type of novel does not only address economic, socio-political and moral issues in society, but also presents panacea.
IV. Psychological Novel: It concentrates on how the inner feelings of fictional characters determine their reactions as the plot unfolds.
V. Novel of Manners: It is about the modes of social behaviour of a particular class of people at a particular period of time. Other types of novels are: sociological novel, sentimental novel and historical novel.

2.1.3 Poetry

Poetry is a special kind of literary genre in terms of language and organization. Presented in verse and stanza, poetry is known for abstraction in language use. Apart from being abstract, the language of poetry is creative and captivating. Commenting on the definition of poetry, Sean O' Brien (ibid., p. 186) makes an elaborate submission on poetry:

It is in the nature of poetry that the attempt to define a poem remains unfinished. The place to begin is by reading Aristotle's Poetics (cf. 350 B.C.), after which there is a vast body of description and analysis from which a number of phrases have entered common usage, including 'emotion recollected in tranquility', 'memorable speech', 'objective correlative', 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed' and 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'.

Sean O' Brien (ibid., p. 187) states that "the Greek root of the word poem – poiesia – means making, an act dependent on artistry, skill, practice and let it be said – a capacity not merely for taking endless pains but for enduring perpetual dissatisfaction."

2.2 Presupposition

Any background information available to the participants of discourse is referred to as "presupposition". Mey (ibid., p. 184), reports that "the notion of presupposition was originally developed in a semantic environment; as such, it does not hold up to our pragmatic expectations. For one thing, semantic presuppositions deal with truth or falsity: they are defined as 'holding' (that is, being true), even if the sentence containing the presupposition is false ..." Presupposition is a vital theoretical concept in pragmatics. It is used for inference-making on literal and non-literal utterances. Yule (cited in Bossan Rita (2018, pp. 70-71), gives elaborate perspectives on the concept of presupposition:

Existential Presupposition:
This has to do with entities named by the speaker and assumed to be present. When we name an object, it is presupposed that the object exists. All nouns are presuppositions e.g. Simba's car is new.

1. **Factive Presupposition:**
   It is the assumption that something is true due to the presence of some verbs such as know and realize. For example, when a teacher says that he didn't realize someone has failed the exam, we can suppose that someone has failed the exam.

2. **Lexical Presupposition:**
   It is the assumption that, in using one word, the speaker can act as if another meaning (word) will be understood. Example:
   o Clara stopped smoking (She used to smoke).
   o You are pregnant again (You were pregnant before).
      The use of the expression "stop" and "again" are taken to presuppose another (unstated) concept.

3. **Structural Presupposition:**
   This is the assumption associated with the use of certain words and phrases. WH-questions in English (e.g. when and where) are conventionally interpreted with the presupposition that the information after the Wh-form is already known to be the case. Examples:
   o When did she leave home? (She left.)
   o Where did you get the information? (You got the information.)

4. **Non-factive Presupposition:**
   It is an assumption that something is not true. For example, verbs like "imagine", "pretend" and "dream" are used with the presupposition that what follows is not true.
   o I dreamt that I got married (I am not married).
   o We imagined that we were Americans (We are not Americans).

5. **Counterfactual Presupposition:**
   It is the assumption that what is presupposed is not only untrue, but is the opposite of what is true or contrary to facts.

2.3 Pragmatics

In terms of origin, the term "pragmatics" is connected with the Greek "pragma" which means "deed" or "action)" Pragmatics emerged as a reaction against formalist approach to language study. Formalism trivializes man's creative potentials in the use of language; emphasis was on "linguistic competence" rather than "communicative competence". According to the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994), pragmatics is "the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes." According to Crystal and Varley (1993), "pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes." Austin (1962) submits that crucial concepts in pragmatics include:
➢ participants (users of language in context);
➢ speech acts (locutionary act which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and perlocutionary act which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
➢ context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
➢ non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
➢ inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);

- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

See Mey (2001) and Searle (1969; 1979) for more perspectives on pragmatics.

3. Theoretical Frameworks
The basic theoretical frameworks used in this study are examined below[1]:

3.1 Traugott's Tendency of Semantic Change
Traugott (1989, pp. 34-5) proposes three major tendencies of semantic change. These are:
1) "Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation
2) Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation
3) Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitudes towards the proposition.

Traugott's theory is suitable for this paper because it captures the roles of formal properties of language (grammar) in the analysis of language use.

3.2 Formalism
Omotayo Olorontoba-Oju, cited in Adegbija (1999) defines Formalism as "the emphasizing of formal elements in a work of art. It takes insights from linguistics, and concerns the establishment of art as an autonomous form and the application of linguistic and structural criteria to the analysis of literature. The stated objective of formalism was to "establish the study of literature on a scientific footing."

3.3 Functionalism
According to Omotayo Olorontoba-Oju (ibid.), Functionalism "refers to a utilitarian concern in literature. It is pertinent to African literature. It describes the tendency for the literature to be geared towards social functionality rather than pure aestheticism of the type associated with western literature."

4. The Functions of Presupposition in Literary Texts
Presupposition performs the following Functions in literary texts:

4.1 Organizing Message
Themes of literary texts are conveyed with heavy reliance on plot. Plot organizes the unfolding of events in a literary text, and this process is inseparable from the dissemination of central and sub-themes in a literary text. Societal institutions, domains, socio-cultural nuances are the presupposition elements of plot. In this sense, thematic preoccupations of literary writers are presupposition-driven. In the passage below, we exemplify how a literary writer explores writer-reader presupposition (shared knowledge/world knowledge) of how the sequence of a military warfare should unfold; it is presupposed by the readers (extra-text audience of a literary text) that military troop has to converge in a place to strategize and make logistics for proposed attacks (aggression) on the enemy. The word "camp" and adverbials in the text below, enhance the writer's use of presupposition to organize message:

> The soldiers were many in the camp. They marched with strength and purpose, ready to destroy the enemy. As the enemy advanced, several shots of gun were heard. I saw their leader. He walked very close to his troop, brought out a stick of cigarette and lit it with a daring gaze at the men in front. Then he looked straight into their eyes. He shouted, "There must be spillage of blood." Slowly and steadily, he walked into the midst of the men, tapping them on their shoulders. He suddenly turned, and at a dizzy speed, went in front of them. "Sergeant," he shouted.

4.2 Conveying Speech Acts
Searle's (ibid.) speech act theory posits that speech acts have word-to-world or world-to-word direction-of-fit when performed in context. In literary writings, presupposition underpins direction-of-fit in the sense that the participants understand the illocutionary forces and the felicity conditions that condition them. Background assumptions are presupposed before perlocutionary acts are generated in the dialogues that characters in literary texts engage in, as the writer develops the plot and unfolds the theme(s). The conversation below reveals discrete speech acts performed and their pragmatic implications in the transaction of meaning:

Then checking the coins against the tickets, he began to count the morning's take. It was mostly what he expected at this time of the month: small coins, a lot of pesewas … Collecting was easy around Passion Week. Not many passengers needed change; it was enough of a struggle looking round corners and the bottoms of boxes to find small coins somehow overlooked. So mostly people held out the exact fare and tried not to look into the receiver's face with its knowledge of their impotence. Collecting was certainly easier, but at the same time not as satisfactory as in the swollen days after pay day.

(Source: Ayi Kwei Armah's The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born[2])

The above text consists of the following speech acts:

1. Then, checking the coins against the tickets, he began to count the morning's take. (Descriptive)
2. It was mostly what he expected at this time the month: small coins. (Suppositive)
3. Collecting was always easier around Passion Week. (Informative)
4. Not many passengers needed change. (Informative)
5. It was enough of a struggle looking round corners and the bottoms of boxes to find small coins somehow overlooked. (Assertive)
6. So mostly people held out the exact fare and tried not to look into the receiver's face with its knowledge of their impotence. (Informative)
7. Collecting was certainly easier, but at the same time not as satisfactory as in the swollen days after pay day. (Informative)

The speaker's use of the words: "coins," "tickets", "collecting", "passengers," "change", "fare" and "morning's take", is of relevance as it portrays the linguistic context. These words suggest the participants, their transaction and the setting of such transaction. Thus, communication is an activity because the users of language (interlocutors) form utterances by exploring participant-factor, the physical and psychological setting and the purpose of the interaction. William P. Alston, cited in Savas L. T. (ibid.) rightly notes that "though an individual cannot determine which illocutionary rules are attached to a sentence, S, in the language, she can determine whether a particular utterance of S is within the range of activity in which a certain illocutionary rule applies, for it depends on U's intentions whether she is practicing pronunciation, testing a microphone or talking straightforward literal use of S. This makes it clear how it can be understood." The participants are passengers, a commercial driver and a conductor with whom these passengers engage in a routine. This is a common scene in the human society where every morning, people push to catch a bus to different places. The use of speech acts in African literature is context-driven given the fact that speech acts are essentially constitutive of the communicative events they convey. According to Levinson cited in Mey (ibid.), "the language we use, and in particular, the speech acts we utter, are entirely dependent on the context of the situation in which such acts are produced. All speech is situated speech; a speech act is never just an 'act of speech', but should be considered in the total situation of activity of which it is a part." The capitalization of "P" and "W" in "Passion Week" presupposes that the people in that linguistic community are familiar with the meaning of the expression (e) and the scheme of things it incorporates. In African literature, language use deploys discrete speech acts. Given the fact that coherence is a crucial component of effective communication, the use of speech acts in literary texts is rule-governed and principle-based. While rules concern linguistic conventions, principles have to do with pragmatics.

4.3 Facilitating Reference-making

The passage below shows the function of presupposition in reference-making:

Strange things happened at midday. The glittering sea rose up, moved apart in planes of blatant impossibility; the coral reef and the few, stunted palms that clung to the more elevated parts would float up into the sky, would quiver, be plucked apart, run like rain-drops on a wire or be repeated as in an odd succession of mirrors. Sometimes land loaned where there was no land and flicked out like a bubble as the children watched ... and since no boy could reach even the reef over the stretch of water where the snapping sharks waited, they grew accustomed to these mysteries and ignored them, just as they ignored the miraculous, throbbing stars. At midday the illusions merged into the sky and there the sun gazed down like an angry eye.

(Source: William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*)

In the above passage, writer-reader presupposition does not only enhance the use of language to make description, but also makes the text "easy to mean". The writer chooses words that appropriately depict the natural ecosystem of a coral reef as in the presupposed knowledge of readers: "sea", "sky" and "palms". In the above passage, references are also made to the usual (expected) happenings of such a scene, through the use of appropriate linguistic stretches: "glittering sea rose up, moved apart in planes of blatant impossibility"; "stunted palms that clung to the more elevated parts would float up into the sky"; and "the stretch of water where the snapping sharks waited".

In pragmatics, presupposition is essentially a referent. Acheoah (2015) views a referent as "Object Referred" (OR). It is a candidate for meaning. It is either in the remote world or immediate (physical) setting of a communicative event.

4.4 Interpreting Themes

Presupposition facilitates the interpretation of themes. Adegbija (1982) contends that the Master Speech Acts in literary texts have contextual structures (the different settings, physical contexts, societal domains) that produce them as the plot unfolds in relation to the writers' thematic concerns. Utterances (speech acts) used in each contextual structure is a reflection of writer-reader presupposition (background assumptions about practices in the real world). For example, to communicate the theme of corruption that pervades post-colonial Ghana, the writer of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* presents the text below through the conversation of intra-text characters:

> 'Lucky you,' the man said. 'How much?'
> The messenger hesitated before replying. 'One hundred cedi,' 'that's not very much,' the man laughed. 'I know,' said the messenger. 'But so many people would jump on me to help me eat it … The messenger frowned. 'I am happy, but I'm afraid,' he said.
> 'Juju?' the man smiled.
> 'No, not that,' said the messenger. 'But you know our Ghana.'
> 'Ah yes.' 'And everybody says the Ghana lottery is more Ghanaian than Ghana.'
> 'You're afraid you won't get your money?'
> 'I know people who won more than five hundred cedis last year. They still haven't got their money.' 'Have they been to the police?' 'To help them get their money?' 'You're joking,' said the messenger with some bitterness. 'It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all.' 'What will you do? the man asked. 'I hope some official at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as bribe and allow me to have the rest.' The messenger's smile was dead. 'You will be corrupting a public officer.'
> The man smiled. This is Ghana,' the messenger said …

The speech act categories in the above text are as follows:
1. 'Lucky you,' the man said. (Assertive)
2. 'How much? (Question)
3. The messenger hesitated before replying. One hundred cedis'. (Responsive)
4. 'That's not very much,' the man laughed. (Assertive)
5. 'I know,' said the messenger. (Accept)
6. 'But so many people would jump on me to help me eat it.' (Predictive)
7. The messenger frowned. (Informative)
8. 'I am happy but I'm afraid'. (Informative)
9. 'Juju?' the man smiled. (Question)
10. 'No, no that,' said the messenger. (Reject)
11. 'But you know our Ghana. (Informative)
12. 'Ah, yes'. (Accept)
13. 'And everybody says the Ghana lottery is more Ghanaian than Ghana. (Informative)
14. 'You're afraid you won't get your money?' (Question)
15. 'I know people who won more than five hundred cedis last year'. (Informative)
16. 'They still haven't got their money'. (Informative)
17. 'Have they been to the police?' (Question)
18. 'For what?' (Question)
19. 'To help them get their money'. (Suggestive)
20. 'You're joking', said the messenger with some bitterness. (Dissentive)
21. 'It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all'. (Informative)
22. 'What will you do? the man asked?' (Question)
23. 'I hope some official at the lottery place will take some of my hundred cedis as a bribe and allow me to have the rest. (Assertive)
24. The messenger's smile was dead. (Descriptive)
25. 'You will be corrupting a public officer'. (Advisory)
26. 'The man smiled'. (Assertive)
27. 'This is Ghana,' the messenger said. (Informative)

In the above text, the participants are people of equal social status. They relate freely, and there is no master-servant relationship. The messenger is worried. This psychological state affects his language and thought. Indeed, this text shows that in African literature, a single speech act is intentionally used by a speaker, to perform multiple acts: clearly shows that a speaker can inform (Informative) his interlocutor about societal phenomena and condemn (Dissentive) the phenomena at the same time (bipartite speech act sequencing). In using speech acts to perform discrete intentional acts, speakers explore their knowledge of the conventions of the language in terms of its syntax (structuring language units) and semantics (meanings of particularly chosen expressions). The encoder of "It costs you more money if you go to the police, that's all" is aware of the moral decadence (bribery and corruption) in the police force, and explores world

knowledge to invoke and condemn the greedy and parasitic attitudes of friends and relatives – his interlocutor is also aware of the status-quo (shared knowledge) as evident in the Responsive speech act ("Ah yes").

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigates the functions of presupposition in literary writings. In using language to communicate themes, literary writers demonstrate their already-acquired knowledge of the grammar (formal properties of language). This fact is established in the passages examined in this study. Therefore, in literary texts, presupposition concerns linguistic and extra-linguistic elements of communication. To deviate from grammar to pragma-stylistic use of language, good knowledge of the grammar of the operative language (the language being used to communicate the messages) is very vital.

Characters in literary texts put into consideration the feelings and emotions of other characters with whom they interact to convey writers' themes. These intra-text characters are conscious of the utterances that generate face-threatening acts and face-saving acts, which are about the different mental states of discourse participants. Chilton (cited in David Bara 2010) submits that cognitive pragmatics is defined as "a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions … produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another …" In terms of "contextual structure", (a term used by Adegbija 1982), literary texts present different speech communities which include villages, cities, occupational groups, etc. Each of these speech communities has one linguistic code or the other, conveying the values and practices of each group. Presuppositions are made by the members of each speech community as applicable in an on-going communicative event. In pragmatics, the reason for a speaker's utterance is important as it determines the illocutionary strategy to be used and perlocutionary act to expect. Speakers do not ignore speaker-hearer background knowledge (presupposition) because it enables their interlocutors to infer whether the speaker is being literal or non-literal, direct or indirect. Presupposition also helps participants of discourse to determine the category of illocutionary acts that utterances contain; the hearer has to know whether or not the speaker is: informing or ordering; asserting or persuading; stating or condemning.

The use of presupposition in the communication of themes is essentially about showing and telling. As the story unfolds, the readers are presented with realistic phenomena, value systems and societal practices that are easily presupposed within and outside the text. Presupposition enables literary writers give their texts realistic subjects[3].

This study reveals that the function of presupposition in literary text is immersed in the mutual beliefs of intra-text characters and extra-text audience. According to Bach and Harnish (ibid.), mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) facilitate the inferential process in a communicative event. They contend that when a member of a particular Linguistic Community (LC) utters an expression (e), he/she does so with Linguistic Presumption (LC) and Communicative Presumption (CP). These claims accentuate the roles of presupposition in literature.

Notes

[1.] However, this study hinges on Bach and Harnish's (1979) speech act taxonomy. See the theory for the categorization of speech acts: assertives, descriptives, assentives, dissentives, informatives, ascriptives, responsives, etc.

[2.] The wrong spelling of the word "beautiful" (spelt as "beautiful" in the front page of the text) is used by the author for thematic reason.

[3.] In this regard, Brighde Mullins (ibid., p. 266) submits that "There are various ways that playwrights approach writing a play: some work from subject (indeed, Aristotle says that 'the only thing is to have a subject'). The subject of the play is the material from which the play is formed. In psychological terms, the subject is 'one whose actions are studied', which blends into about how we think about the character as carrying the subject into the body of the play. In musical terms, the subject is the principal theme or phrase of a melodic composition. In psychological terms, the subject is perceived reality; and since the laws of human perception are our most valuable tools as playwrights, the modes of perceived reality are valuable to contemplate. These are useful distinctiveness although at this point, they may be a bit abstract-sounding."

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