



Investigating the Pragmatic Functions of Context in Literature: A Linguistic Appraisal of

Andrew Kure's *Harvest of Woes*

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.8411264](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8411264)

Submission Date: 29 July 2023 | Published Date: 05 Oct. 2023

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Abstract

This study is a pragmatic approach to the investigation of the functions of context in literature (literary writing). Literary writers are conscious of phenomena in society. Literature is a representation of life; literary writers (playwrights, novelists and poets) write to awaken the consciousness of society regarding certain vices. The themes of literary texts are essentially focused speech acts. Besides speech act, other theoretical concepts in pragmatics include context, presupposition, implicature, world knowledge and inference. However, this study is restricted to the investigation of context-driven verbal artistry as evident in the analysis of selected corpora from the macro-structure, *Harvest of Woes*. The study hinges on Hymes (1964) Theory of Communicative Competence in the analysis of data, and concludes that context is a crucial instrument in literature because it: conveys themes, reveals psychological underpinings, determines the performance of speech act, constitutes felicity conditions, facilitates the interpretation of literal and non-literal propositions, among other functions.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech act, context, literature, Theory of Communicative Competence, *Harvest of Woes*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the functions of context in literary writings, via a linguistic analysis of Andrew Kure's *Harvest of Woes*. Pragmatics is a linguistic study of language use. It elucidates the contextual nuances that inform the use of verbal and non-verbal means of communication. Literature is essentially language use by intra-text characters (characters in a literary text as used by the author). It is also a reflection of writer-reader communication. A study of the use of context (contextualization) in literature is an investigation of "how" and "why" context is deployed by the writer in the presentation of theme(s). Given the fact that *Harvest of Woes* is an unpublished manuscript, we do not think there is any linguistic study of it presently; therefore this study is significant.

2. Literature

Literary writings are literature texts written as play, prose or poem. A literary writer communicates themes to the audience (readers) by being imaginative and creative in the use of language, setting, plot and characterization. An overview of the three basic genres of literature is instructive:

2.1 Drama

According to Mike Harris (2007, p. 252), "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." In the presentation of plot and theme, drama uses dialogue. There are different types of drama:

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.

Comedy: It presents themes lightly via skillful use of humour.

Tragi-comedy: It strikes a balance between tragic and comic elements by using literary devices such as the non-linear plot.

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.

2.2 Prose

Prose is a genre of literature which tells new stories, hence the term “novel” which uses prose form and beauty in the presentation of themes. The term originated from the Italian *novella*.

There are different types of prose (novel):

Detective Novel: This type of novel dominantly presents crime as a theme. This culminates in murder.

Picaresque Novel: Common themes in this type of novel are: the actions of a rogue, scandalous love and morality.

Propaganda Novel: This type of novel does not only address economic, socio-political and moral issues in society, but also presents panacea.

Psychological Novel: It concentrates on how the inner feelings of fictional characters determine their reactions as the plot unfolds.

Novel of Manners: It is about the modes of social behaviour of a particular class of people at a particular period of time.

2.3 Poetry

Poetry is a literary genre written in verse and stanza. Sean O’ Brien (2007, p. 186) submits that “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.’” In addition, 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.” In poetry, language use is so enchanting that it makes poetry a unique genre of literature.

3. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of context-based language use. 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.” Crystal and Varley (1993) posit that 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.” Theoretical concepts in pragmatics include: speech act, context, presupposition, implicature, world knowledge, inference, etc. To understand these concepts and their dynamics in communication, see theories of pragmatics: Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Bach and Harnish (1979), Grice (1975), Adegbija (1982) and Mey (2001).

4. Context

Context is the background information of a communicative event. It determines the use and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication. Participants of discourse are aware of the contextual underpinnings of an on-going communication. They process such underpinnings to infer meanings of utterances. According to Adegbija (1999, p. 192, “... we may identify at least four types of context as impinging on utterance interpretation: the physical, the socio-cultural, the linguistic, and the psychological. Pertinent questions for probing into the context include the following:

Did the communicative exchange occur at night, in the morning, twenty years ago, at a church, at a mosque, in a bedroom, in the market, at a cemetery, at a hospital. Socio-culturally, one may ask questions such as these: what are the beliefs, habits, value systems, or cultures of those involved? Are their religious and cultural beliefs at hand? Linguistically, what are the other words appearing in the environment of the word used? What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and socio-cultural setting? Psychologically, what is the state of mind of those involved in

the interaction?” The literature of pragmatics is replete with different definitions of context. See van Dijk 1977, Levinson (1983) and Mey (ibid.) for insights on this claim.

5. Harvest of Woes

Andrew Kure’s *Harvest of Woes* is the story of a young man, Tamuna who started his journey of survival in the city of Lagos. As an ambitious man, he worked very hard in the city, and gained recognition as an entrepreneur. His ordeal changed when a group of friends introduced him to a notorious drug baron, Abuta. His parents were late. When his uncle received the news of Tamuna’s involvement in the sale of hard drugs, he tried to stop him, but was unable to do so. As fate would have it, Tamuna was arrested, convicted and imprisoned. After serving jail term, he ended up as a petty trader and rice farmer in Akwasum, a small village. His challenges became multiple. Depression and mental health problems set in. His marriage to Adu, a few years after he became a village dweller, was aimed at helping him recover from his serial misfortune. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored by Dell Hymes’ (ibid.) Theory of Communicative Competence. According to Dell Hymes (Hymes ibid.), “a theory of communicative competence is anchored by three concepts: (a) the verbal repertoire of speakers (context-specific range of speech and styles; (b) the linguistic habits or routines (everyday sequential organization of utterances in narratives, verbal interactions, etc.; (c) social spheres of linguistic behavior (context-specific use of linguistic variables).” The theory is appropriate for this study because it captures linguistic and extra-linguistic perspectives of language use.

7. The Pragmatics of Context in Literature

7.1 Time of Events

Context reveals time of events in literary texts. There are different techniques for revealing time of events in literature. Context is an extra-linguistic technique for doing so. For example, if a passage extracted from a literary text is about a classroom conversation between a teacher and a pupil, the readers will be able to infer the time of the action – day time. As the plot unfolds, contextualization can be used to convey summer or winter period. According to van Dijk (ibid., p. 26), “the actual context is defined by the period of time and the place where the common activities of speaker and hearer are realized and which satisfy the properties of ‘here’ and ‘now’ logically, physically and cognitively.” To depict colonialism and its attendant evils to African nations, post-colonial literature explores contextualization a great deal. They present theme-driven colonial physical settings.

7.2 Context-specific Propositions

In literary writings, propositions depend on context. This view corroborates Austin’s (ibid.) felicity conditions for the performance of speech acts. Literature is conveyed via the performance of speech acts. Consider the passage below:

“I cannot afford that price,” she said with a sad face. “But you should understand that it is not my fault. The amount of money you want to pay is the cost price of the product. Can you add something? I have not sold anything today, and the market is closing. My customer, add something,” the trader replied.

(Source: *Harvest of Woes*)

In the conversation above, there are context-revealing propositions, and such propositions would not be appropriate if the physical context of the conversation were an office. Collocation is “the company that words keep”. In a similar vein, words used in specific domains are referred to as register. There is affinity between a register lexical item and the propositions that are made with it. For example, in the above passage, “cost price”, “market” and “trader” are register items that are appropriate in the setting (context) and capture the discourse level of communication. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (1994, p. 1), submits that “in order to identify what a speaker means in uttering a sentence of his language, it is not enough that you should know which individual he thereby purports to identify (for example, Mary), and which property he thereby purports to truly or falsely, ascribe to that individual (for example, the property of getting married to a linguist at some point in the future) – to put it more generally, it is not enough that you should know which proposition he purports to be expressing in uttering the sentence he utters. What is required, in addition, is that you should know what is the meaning-determining act in the context of which he expresses that proposition – whether, for example, he expresses it in the context of an act of giving permission, or in the context of an act of giving a question, or in the context of an act of making a prediction, or in the context of an act of raising an objection, and so on. These are some of the acts that, under the generic name of illocutionary acts that was given them by Austin (1962) constitute the primary subject matter of speech act theory.”

7.3 Linguistics and Extra-linguistics of Communication

Context conveys the pragmatics of linguistic and extra-linguistic communication in literary texts. Literary writers use their knowledge of grammar to decide on principle-driven (pragmatics) language choice. For example, face acts are articulated in literary texts when certain grammatical categories (e.g. modal auxiliaries and deixis) are used by intra-text characters. In addition, Politeness Principle can be obeyed or violated when language choices are made by literary writers through their fictional characters. In this way the interaction between linguistic norm and principle (use and usage respectively) is established. The passage below reveals this claim:

“How dare you sit while I talk? No more indiscipline in this office. You have to treat all those files before noon ... and listen: one more lateness to work, you are fired.”

In the above passage, the psychological context (tensed atmosphere) and the social context (speaker-hearer relationship) is established through choice of words. These two contexts are extra-linguistic because they are not part of the formal properties of language. Language is simply invoked to depict such contexts. The verbal group “have to” (must) implies that the encoder is the boss while the addressee is the subordinate. Adebija (1982) submits that the social context of a communicative event has to do with the relationship between the participants. Adebija (1982) also contends that literary texts have extended body of discourse performed with a Master Speech Act and other speech acts, in varied contextual structures (domains) such as office, market, etc. The theme of such texts revolves around the Master Speech Act, as language is used to establish the link between “use” and “usage”. Interestingly, Levinson (ibid.), opines that pragmatics is “the study of those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars.”

In a similar vein, Dittmar (1976, p. 163) posits that “utterances are not only grammatical or acceptable, but must also be assessed by the extent to which they are successful and appropriate to the context ... In other words, the analysis must include those aspects which, in a theory of communicative competence, should decide the way in which sentences in a particular phonological and syntactic structure are regarded as functional for a given situation. This is where the concept of speech acts comes into its own. Sentences that are identical in their formal grammatical structure can, according to the situational context, be commands, requests, demands or apologies. Conversely, two grammatically different sentences can be understood as one and the same speech act. Furthermore, speech acts have immediate pragmatic consequences: a person who makes a promise or apologies for something is performing an action which has consequences both for himself and for others.”

7.4 Interpretation of Non-literal Propositions

Adebija (1982) contends that literary writers deploy indirect speech act (a kind of non-literal proposition in terms of meaning more than what is said) when they have to express difficult messages. In the interpretation of indirect illocutionary strategy, readers of literary texts (extra-text audience), rely on contextual underpinings as a pragmatic matrix. Consider the following passage from *Harvest of Woes*:

... and as a generous, caring father, he would not give his wife money for the children’s feeding. As he returned home that night, he expected his meal on the table. “Etuba,” he shouted. Does a husband eat before going to bed every night?” “Some husbands do. The responsible ones like you. That is why I cannot regret putting that delicious meal on the table,” the wife answered.

The readers of the above passage are able to process the utterances of the interlocutors. The world-spoken-of (See Allan (1986)) for the meaning of the term “world-spoken-of”) is that of “marriage and responsibility”. The husband is guilty of being irresponsible, considering his unwillingness to take care of his family by providing their needs. To lampoon her husband’s misdemeanor, the wife gives him praise that he does not deserve; it is a sarcastic remark. In the inferential process, readers explore the pragmatic context (presupposition, implicature and world knowledge) to ascertain that a non-literal proposition is uttered by characters in literary texts. Adebija (1999, p. 193) posits that “inference involves the drawing of a conclusion from known or assumed facts or statements, from available data or a particular premise. It is the deductive process through which the addressee or reader progresses from the literal meaning of an utterance to what the speaker/writer actually intends to express. The context of an utterance is often very crucial in making the appropriate inference. Inferences are made on the basis of the background context, our experience of life or world knowledge, and the mutually shared beliefs. Knowledge of the literal meaning of an utterance often contributes towards making the appropriate inference that will lead us to the non-literal meaning.” Commenting on the use of context in the interpretation of utterances, Hymes, cited in Gillian Brown and George Yule (1983, p. 38) submits that “the use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context it eliminates the meanings possible to that context other than those the form can signal: the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those the context can support.”

7.5 Face Act-potential

In the literature of face acts, the term “face” is “the public image that an individual desires as a member of a human society”. In literature, there are different reasons for the performance of face acts by characters, as the plot unfolds to generate writers’ thematic pre-occupations: the message to be communicated, the psychological underpinnings of a conversation, speaker-hearer shared knowledge, status difference between interlocutors and socio-cultural nuances. Bossan Rita (2017, pp. 61-65), reports Brown and Levinson who “... identify two types of face: positive face and negative face: Positive face is observed by the individual need to be appreciated and respected by others as well as to maintain positive self-image. To put it another way, positive face has to do with a person’s wish to be thought of; the desire to be understood by others, and the desire to be treated as a friend and confidant. Negative face on the other hand involves the freedom of action and the freedom from imposition ...” The passage below shows the underpinnings of face acts in literary text:

His uncle was furious, and said, “When your father was alive, he did not uphold that practice, I will personally hand you over to the police, idiot!” “Sir, it is not what you think. Why do you prefer to believe them? That very day, I was not even in town not to talk of being involved in the crime. Okay, I can explain ...”

(Source: Harvest of Woes)

In the above conversation, the participants do not have the same social status: one is higher than the other in terms of age. This is why politeness signaled by the use of the expression “sir” is deployed in the communication. Politeness is a face-saving act (FSA) because it has the potential to reduce the anger of an interlocutor. The psychological context is tense, as the encoder of “I will personally hand you over to the police, idiot!” threatens the face (FTA) of his interlocutor without regret. To protect his self-image, the addressee uses explanation as a communicative strategy; it is for self-justification. People do not tolerate damage to their public image as evident in the response speech act “Why do you prefer to believe them?” Given the fact that the encoder’s interlocutor is older, the responsive speech act (agitation) implies that the encoder is very displeased with the allegation (a face-threatening act).

In literary texts, face acts (the different psychological states/emotions expressed by characters) are essentially face acts. However, these acts are performed in diverse, changing physical contexts by using pragmatic elements (world knowledge, presupposition, inference, speech acts, etc.). Therefore, in the performance of face acts, contextualization is interwoven: the physical, psychological, social and pragmatic contexts commune.

8. CONCLUSION

In this study, the context-driven dimensions and functions of language use in literary text is examined. 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.” In using speech acts to perform discrete intentional acts, characters in literary texts explore their knowledge of context, in terms of the conventional communication behaviours expected. This establishes the multiple functions of context in literary writings. Some of the functions are mentioned in this study. A crucial determinant of meaning, context impinges on verbal and non-verbal (linguistic and extra-linguistic inputs) of intra-text characters in literary texts, as evident in the passages analyzed in this study. Like the readers of a literature text, the writer explores already acquired knowledge of the pragmatics of context in human communication. As literary writers tell their story through the unfolding plot, they rely on contextualization not just for the purpose of amplifying and clarifying themes, but also for driving thematic concerns closer to reality (realism).

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CITE AS

Aisha Umar, & Acheoah J. E. (2023). Investigating the Pragmatic Functions of Context in Literature: A Linguistic Appraisal of Andrew Kure's *Harvest of Woes*. *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature*, 3(5), 28–33. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8411264>