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Research Article

In Search of the Pragmatics of Contextualization in Literature: A Linguistic Analysis of Selected Corpora from Camara Laye's *The African Child*

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Abstract

Through the medium of literature (literary writing), contextual language use is investigated. Fowler [1] posits that "linguistic structure is not arbitrary. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs. Corroborating this view, Adegbija [2] opines that "language use is not incidental. It is of credit." A linguistic analysis of literary text examines the analytic potential of language theories and insights in the elucidation of textual features. Immersed in pragmatics, this paper examines the functions of context in literary writing as evident in the presentation of themes and other elements of literature. In this regard, selected passages from Camara Laye's [3] *The African Child* are analyzed. Hinging on Interactional Sociolinguistics Theory (cf. Chukwu Catherine Ifeoma and Anyanwu Josephine and Igbemma [4]), this paper concludes that the functions of context in literature include: conveying non-verbal communication, unfolding themes, operating as felicity conditions for speech acts performed by characters, showing psychological underpinnings of communication and developing topic of discourse.

Keywords: literature, context, function, *The African Child*, pragmatics, Interactional Sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

Context is a crucial pragmatic concept because it performs multiple functions in the use and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication. This study investigates the functions of contextualization in literature, by analyzing how context operates in Camara Laye's [3] presentation of different aspects of the text, including themes. Although the novel is famous across the world, we do not know of any study that examines the pragmatic functions of context in *The African Child*. This study explores insights from pragmatics and literature (in terms of literary writing conventions and concepts) to give it direction and sound theoretical base.

2. Literature as "Literary Writing"

Rees defines literature as "the permanent expression in words of some thoughts or feelings in ideas about life and the world." Literature is verbal artistry communicated by novelists, playwrights and poets. See Mike Harris [5], Sean O' Brien [6] and Omotayo Olorutoba Oju (cited in Adegbija [7]) for insights on the three basic genres of literature. Literature is a piece of writing that reflects life through the use of language. A literary writer conveys his/her interpretation (views) of life through literature. There is usually audience for a piece of literature, although literature remains useful to readers across ages and class. The functions of literary writing transcend entertainment. Literary writers explore Functionalism (a literature perspective which views art as a means of transforming society) not just in the use of language, but also in the presentation of the elements of literature, including theme. Moody [8] opines that "literature springs from our inborn love of telling a story, of arranging words in pleasing patterns, of expressing in words some special aspects of our human experience." A literary writer's main goal is not to transmit knowledge via a literary text; it is to present the readers' already-acquired knowledge and experiences for perception. Thus, literature is an imitation of life; Aristotle calls this *mimesis*. There is the tendency to view literature as not being part of life, simply because of the literary writer's infusion of aesthetics (beauty) into literature. Literature explores the concept of "realism" to take fiction closer to life. It interacts with social forces as its thematic concerns are immersed in societal vices. Literature is

imaginative, evocative and contextual in the use of language, by deploying figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, personification, alliteration, etc. See Jim Meyer [9] for more perspectives on the term "literature".

3. Camara Laye's the African Child

The African Child is a novel in which Camara Laye [3] narrates his factual experiences as a child and youth in the Malinke region of Upper French Guinea. It is a true story of the author's past experiences. The setting is agrarian. It reveals not only how the author relates with his immediate world, but also how he views it. The novel was first published in 1954 before it was translated.

The novel begins when the author is six years of age, and the spread of the story is thirteen years. The author's encounter with a snake begins the narration, and at nineteen, he leaves home for further studies in France. Laye is born in a peaceful, harmonious, polygamous family; his father has to wives. Laye's human qualities accentuate his family values. He imbibes and demonstrates these values. For example, he loves and respects his father's apprentices.

In spite of the painful nostalgia caused by his separation from family members and loved ones, the story emphasizes the good aspects of the writer's thematic concerns; for example, the visit to Laye's maternal home in rural Tindican, where he gets involved with activities in rice farm. Fascinating aspects of the plot include the difficulties in initiation and circumcision and the good-bad sides of school life in Kouroussa and Conakry. Laye's admiration for Marie is the greatest. Marie is a student at the Girls' High School in Conakry. The admiration is comparable to Laye's great love for his mother.

As the plot ends, Laye departs from Africa to further his studies (Western Education). However, he hopes that in future there can be re-union.

4. Contextualization of Language Use

From pragmatic point of view, language use is contextual. This means that context transcends any on-going communication situation. It concerns the background antecedents that are pragmatically linked with a present communication. The topic of a communicative event is "textual", while the situational nuances that underpin the communication constitute the "discourse world"[1]. In literary texts, the utterances of characters are interpreted by their interlocutors through different inference strategies, including processing background information.

Commenting on context as a physical concept, Noun, cited in Butari Nahum Upah [10] submits:
… other features of the physical context to include:
   (i)   Participants, e.g. boys, girls, men, traders
   (ii) Ongoing activity, e.g. playing, chatting, debating
   (iii) The place, e.g. church, class, stadium, diningtable
   (iv) The time, e.g. time of the day or season.

Context is dynamic, and generates not just conversational inputs, but also those attitudinal dimensions that are naturally acceptable, as the context of a communicative event unfolds. According to Mey [11] "… context creates the 'affordances … for our societal and linguistic conduct; in short: for our acting pragmatically."

Context determines the use and interpretation of language. 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 [7], "… we may identify at least four types of contexts 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?" See Mey [11] for more tips on "context" as a core pragmatic theoretical concept.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study explores Interactional Sociolinguistics (cited in Chukwu Catherine Ifeoma and Anyanwu Josephine and Igbemma [4]) as a theoretical framework. According to Chukwu Catherine Ifeoma and Anyanwu Josephine and Igbemma [4], Interactional Sociolinguistics "is a methodological perspective on language use based in linguistics, sociology and anthropology. It shares the concerns of all the three fields with language, society and culture. It uses discourse analysis to study how language users create meaning via social interactions … communication involves contextualization cues …" The theory acknowledges the possibility of pragmatic failure when participants of discourse lack the necessary background (contextual) assumptions for easy inference-making.

6. The Pragmatics of Contextualization in Literature
6.1 Time of Events

Context reveals time of events in literary texts. There are different techniques for revealing time of events in literary texts; context is an extra-linguistic technique for doing so. If a passage, extracted from a literary text, is about a classroom conversation between a teacher and a pupil, the readers will rightly infer that the action takes place during the day. However, as the plot unfolds, contextualization can be used to convey summer or winter period. According to van Dijk T. A. [12], "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 in Africa, post-colonial literature explores contextualization a great deal, presenting theme-driven colonial setting and characterization.

In the passage below, the linguistic context (use of the expressions "pot from the fire", "hot water" and "cooled it to the right temperature") reveals that contextualization is deployed in literature to show time of events, as the plot unfolds:

> Then she would go back to the hut, take the pot from the fire, and pour the hot water into a calabash. After she had cooled it to the right temperature, she would carry it into the wash-place. There she would soap me from head to foot with black soap, then rub me roughly down with a sponge made of tow from the dried sterns of pulpy plants.

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)

In the above passage, readers can infer that the event did not take place at noon; under normal circumstances, people hardly use boiled water to bathe (world knowledge).

6.2 Context-specific Words, Utterances and Propositions

In literary writings, the use of words, utterances and propositions depends on context. This view corroborates Ausin's [13] felicity conditions for the performance of speech acts. Context-specific propositions are not appropriate when performed outside their appropriate physical settings. Such physical settings are referred to as "contextual structure" in Adegbija [2]. For example, in certain occupational settings, lexical items of such occupational settings (register) are used by speakers. The passage below is an example of the context-specific feature of language use:

> The guava trees in the school yard would be in fulls leaf again, and the old leaves would be strewn around in scattered heaps. In places, there were even more than just heaps of them: it would be like a muddy sea of leaves … so at an order from the older boys we would all line up like peasants about to reap or glean a field, and we would set to work like members of a chain-gang. In too bad: the guava trees were fairly well spaced; but there was one part where the closely planted trees grew in a hopeless tangle of leaves and branches.

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)
In the above passage, school yard informs the use of the family of words: "guava trees", "leaves", "scattered heaps", muddy sea of leaves" "field", "trees" and "branches".

6.3 Conveying Linguistic and Extra-linguistic Elements of Communication

Context conveys the pragmatics of linguistic (norms) and extra-linguistic (principle) communication in literary texts. Literary writers use their knowledge of grammar to decide on principle-driven language choice. For example, face acts are articulated in literary texts when certain grammatical categories (e.g. modal auxiliaries) are used by intra-text characters. In addition, the Politeness Principle can be obeyed or violated when language choices are made by intra-text characters. In this way the interaction between norm and principle ("use" and "usage" respectively) is established by the literary artist. The passage below reveals the use of similes ("like peasants about to reap or glean a field" and "like members of a chain-gang") to capture state-of-affairs (servitude, helplessness and toilsome existence) of the encoder's past (nostalgia).

> … so, at an order from the older boys we would all line up like peasants about to reap or glean a field, and we would set to work like members of a chain-gang. In too bad: the guava trees were fairly well spaced; but there was one part where the closely planted trees grew in a hopeless tangle of leaves and branches. The sun could not penetrate here, and the acrid stench of decay lingered in the undergrowth even at the height of summer.

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)

Readers of literary texts rely on writers' ample description of phenomena and objects to process themes as the plot unfolds. The above passage captures both psychological context (intense memory) and social context (master-servant relationship) informed by the older boys' domination. Adegbija [2] submits that the social context of a communicative event has to do with the relationship between the participants. As evident in the above passage, descriptive words in literary writings are appropriately deployed to capture contextual underpinnings. Dittmar [14] 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."

6.4 Interpretation of Non-literal Utterances

Context interprets non-literal utterances in literary texts. Adegbija [2] contends that literary writers deploy indirect speech act when they have to express difficult messages effectively. In the interpretation of indirect illocutionary strategies or non-literal propositions (figurative language), readers of literary texts (extra-text audience), rely on contextual underpinnings as a pragmatic matrix. Figurative language is also interpreted with the use of contextualization cues. Consider the passage below in which the utterance "my blood racing under my gleaming skin" is understood by readers as a figurative one (linguistic context), used to refer to "a very thorough bath" which the encoder's grandmother gave him:

> There she would soap me from head to foot with black soap, then rub me roughly down with a sponge made of tow from the dried sterns of pulpy plants. I would leave the hut, all shinning … my blood racing under my gleaming skin …

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)

6.5 Facilitating Intertextuality

Intertextuality is essentially about one text reading another. This explains why scholars view context has having preceding backgrounds that impinge on an on-gong communication. In the passage below, there is intertextuality between the underlined part and the non-underlined part if they are split as discrete passages:

> But for the moment I would go into the hut only in order to take my clothes off: my grandmother felt that after walking from Kouroussa, the first thing to do was to give myself a bath. She wanted me at least to start my visit clean, though she had no illusions about how long such cleanliness would last; so she would take me straight way to the wash-place, a small enclosure near the hut, surrounded by a reed fence and paved with large stones. Then she would go back to the hut, take the pot from the fire, and pour the hot water into a calabash. After she had cooled it to the right temperature, she would carry it into the wash-place. There she would soap me from head to foot with black soap, then rub me roughly down with a sponge made of tow from the dried sterns of pulpy plants. I would leave the hut, all shinning … my blood racing under my gleaming skin, my hair black as pitch, and run to dry myself in front of the fire.

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)

The two linguistic stretches: "I would go into the hut…" and "Then she would go back to the hut…" are inter-textual in the sense that: the definite article "the" is used to talk about the same hut; and the propositions of the former clause are linked to the propositions in the latter clause[2]. In the above passage, the linguistic context (e.g. "the" "go back") and the pragmatic context ("presupposition" that readers understand the latter use of "hut" as making reference to the hut mentioned in the former) are the sources of intertextuality and inference-making.

6.6 Developing Topic of Discourse

Literary writers rely on contextualization in the development of discourse topics. For example, the different places (physical contexts) and relationships (pragmatic contexts) presented in a literary text impinge on conversational turns as they generate topic nomination, topic change (shift) and other features of conversation. In the passage below, the discourse topic (past memories) is developed through the fusion of physical, pragmatic, social, linguistic and psychological contexts:

> I still remember – my hands and my finger-tips still remember what used to lie in store for us on our return to school from the holidays. The guava trees in the school yard would be in full leaf again, and the old leaves would be strewn around in scattered heaps. In places, there were even more than just heaps of them: it would be like a muddy sea of leaves … so at an order from the older boys we would all line up like peasants about to reap or glean a field, and we would set to work like members of a chain-gang. In too bad: the guava trees were fairly well spaced; but there was one part where the closely planted trees grew in a hopeless tangle of leaves and branches. The sun could not penetrate here, and the acrid stench of decay lingered in the undergrowth even at the height of summer.

(Source: Camara Laye's *The African Child*)

7. Conclusion

What we see as the plot unfolds in a literary text to realize the writer's thematic concern, is that fictional characters explore their word knowledge to interpret unfolding contexts and act accordingly as a show of cooperative communication behaviour. Just like intra-text characters, readers of literary texts process context-driven utterances to arrive at writer-meanings. Literary writers cannot successfully communicate themes if they do not appropriately explore discrete contexts. Inferences made by readers of literary texts cut across language use, setting, theme and characterization. Adegbija [7] 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 background underpinnings of a communicative event, our life experiences, world knowledge and encoder-decoder shared beliefs. Commenting on the potency of context in the interpretation of language use, Hymes, cited in Gillian Brown and George Yule [15] 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."

The use of context in literary writings is about the situation-sensitive nature of language use. Camara Laye [3] demonstrated his mastery of language-context phenomenon, as evident in the passages examined in this study[3]. Literary writers desire to make their choice of language meaningful to readers. For this reason, they manipulate contextualization as best as they can.

Notes

1. At the discourse world level, pragmatic elements are the contextualized components in communicative events. Such components facilitate inference-making.
2. In using context to achieve intertexuality, literary writers enable their audience process the language of texts.
3. Scholars hold the view that communicative competence is essentially about exploring contextual nuances in the use of direct and indirect communicative strategies.

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