

Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and other Stories*: A Relevance-Theoretical Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Relevance Theory (RT), which is a theory that takes the Gricean approach to communication as a starting point of linguistic or literary analysis, is an influential theory in Pragmatics that was developed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson (1986, 1995). As a cognitive theory of meaning (which claims that semantic meaning is the result of linguistic decoding processes, whereas pragmatic meaning is the result of inferential processes constrained by one single principle, Principle of Relevance), its main assumption is that human beings are endowed with a biologically rooted ability to maximize the relevance of incoming stimuli. RT unifies the Gricean cooperative principle and his maxims into a single principle of relevance that motivates the hearer's inferential strategy. Based on the classic code model of communication and Grice's inferential model, RT holds that 'every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance'. Literary texts which present us with a useful depth of written data that serve as repositions of language in use can be analyzed linguistically. This is because writers use language in a particular way in their works to reveal their concerns. A literary work, just like the spoken language, contains information that enables the reader or hearer to get the intended message. The use of language is therefore not mode specific. It can be in a text or can be spoken, and either mode can portray the practices, values and aspirations of a particular speech community. With the analysis of Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* in the frame of RT, this paper shows that literary text communication 'communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance'. The deployment of the relevance theory in the interpretation of Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories* will certainly yield new insights in the understanding of the language and literary elements of the works. Chinua Achebe is regarded as the father of African modern literature. His works are being read in many schools and universities. It is therefore important to open new doors of interpretation for a better understanding of these works.

Key words: Relevance Theory, Ostensive-inferential communication, Optimal Relevance, Literary text.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, according to Mey (2001:6), studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. It is interested in the process of producing language and its producers, not just in the end-product, language. The goal of pragmatics is to show how linguistic meaning interacts with contextual assumptions in the comprehension of an utterance. One can however say that the linguistic field of pragmatics is concerned with the spoken aspect of language and with the study of how words are interpreted in a real conversation. Its basic assumption is that to understand people's words, we must infer their intentions (Mey, 2001). In order to clarify how utterance meaning is generated, pragmatics takes into account the language system, the particular situational context where a string of words occurs, and the personal knowledge that language users bring with

them (Christie, 2000). Language is inextricably entwined with our mental life, our perceiving, our remembering, our attending, our comprehending, our thinking and all of our attempts to make sense of our experience in the world. (Lindfors, 1991: 8). It is socially realized and, therefore, functions as a communicative tool in human communities which are said to form social units. Within an inferential-intentional approach to meaning, Grice claims that implicatures arises as the result of the infringement of certain principles or maxims of rational conversational behaviour which govern speech exchange. Grice claims that conversation is and should be governed by the cooperative principle, a general condition in the way rational conversation is conducted. The cooperative principle is essentially the principle that the participants in a conversation work together in order to manage their speech exchange in the most efficient way possible. Relevance The-

ory which was developed by Sperber and Wilson shares Grice's intuition that utterances raise expectations of relevance. However, they question several other aspects of his approach, including the need for a cooperative principle and maxims, the focus on pragmatics processes that contribute to implicatures rather than to explicit, truth-conditional content, the role of deliberate maxim violation in utterance interpretation, and the treatment of figurative utterances as deviations from a maxim or convention of truthfulness. Building on the central insights of Grice's contribution but advancing beyond him in significant ways, Sperber and Wilson argue that cooperation is not crucial for ostensive communication. However, it is fundamental for all speakers to form their contributions so that the audience will not only attend to them but will be able to infer the intended meaning without unjustifiable processing effort, the notion of relevance supplants all other factors Grice considered. This approach is grounded in a general view of human cognition according to which human cognitive processes are geared to achieving the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing unit. For individuals to achieve this, they must focus their attention on what seems to be the most relevant information available to them. However, relevance theoretical approach will not be fully understood without a detailed investigation of utterance interpretation in a wide variety of communication and contexts. The language of literature is one of the most traditional applications of linguistics, 'one which has been given new impetus by the rapid new developments in linguistics since the development of generative grammar. At the present time, linguistic analysis of literature is one of the most active and creative areas of literary studies' (Traugott & Pratt 1980: 19-20). Literary works, which are written texts, are characterized by "careful use of language, being written in a literary genre (poetry, prose/fiction, or drama), being read aesthetically, and containing many weak implicatures" (Meyer 1997: 24). These literary texts present us with a useful depth of written data which serve as repository of language in use. One can find in them real or concrete instances of communication in a social context. And social discourse is about interaction and exchange, people, institutions, power and status, and about relationships and difference. Language can be patterned to reveal creativity in meaning and serve to generate emotional and psychological responses on the part of writers/readers. It now seems to be accepted that, contrary to Austin and Grice's initial view of literature as a parasitic use of language, literary works may be categorized as complex communicative acts which draw upon certain mental processes both in their production and their reception, and which are therefore open to the insights of Pragmatics, and more specifically of Relevance Theory. Hence, for example, Pilkington has recently written: Poets (and novelists and playwrights) may spend a considerable amount of time making sure the right words are placed in the right order. They take this trouble because the thoughts they wish to communicate are extremely rich and subtle. Only by adopting a theoretical approach of the kind that relevance theory offers, concentrating on thoughts as complex sets of assumptions of varying degrees of strength and weakness, interacting dynamically on-line with other

sets of assumptions, can justice be done to the complexity of the thoughts that may be communicated. As I have argued elsewhere... the notion of literariness might more satisfactorily be defined in terms of mental representations and mental processes, of the specific kind described here (through the analyses of Relevance Theory), than in terms of the linguistic properties of texts (1996: 160).

Literary works can be analyzed linguistically. This is because writers use language in a particular way in their works to bring out their concerns. A literary work, just like the spoken language, contains information that enables the reader or hearer to get the intended message. The use of language is therefore not mode specific. It can be in a text or spoken and either mode can portray the practices, values and aspirations of a particular speech community. Literary text is therefore a unique form of communication and the interpretation of literary text-- Achebe's *Girls at War* within the frame of Relevance Theory will be the outset of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is obvious that there is non-linguistic distinction between literature and any other kind of language because there is no knowledge of any linguistic feature or set of features which is found in literature but not in other kinds of texts.

Literature, therefore, is constituted by language and it represents one of the most recurrent uses of language. There are various works which have argued for the use of literary texts in linguistic analysis. Leech (1969) discusses how one should carry out a linguistic research on English poetry. He discusses the features of poetry such as sound features like rhyme. In addition, Culler (1975) explains how the structuralism theory of linguistics may be used to analyze literary works. His rationale being that literature is founded on language. The works of Crystal and Davy (1969) also look on how one may investigate English style based on conversations and commentaries. Written and spoken material also helps establish the connection between language and literature. These works help to justify the choice of a literary text, *Achebe's Girls at War and Other Stories* in the present study. The collection of short stories has twelve short stories and they include: "The Madman," "The Voter," "Marriage is a Private Affair," "Akueke," "Chike's School Days," "The Sacrificial Egg," "The Vengeful Creditor," "Dead Men's Path," "Uncle Ben's Choice," "Civil Peace," "Sugar Baby," and "Girls at War". The earliest short stories were published in the Ibadan student magazine, *The University Herald*. The stories of *Girls at War and Other Stories* explore the essence of the Nigerian way of life and its social and moral retrogression displaying a wide range of experience where ideals and pride of the people must scuffle with the zeal to survive. The collection appeared in 1972, two years after the end of Nigerian-Biafran Civil war. However, some of the stories according to the author were composed decades before the civil war, especially when he was an undergraduate in the University College, Ibadan. One of the reasons for the publication of the collection which deals with diverse themes, different from the dominant preoccupation of Achebe in his novels is given in the preface to the text: "a fellow country-

man of mine, Wole Soyinka, once charged me, albeit in a friendly way, with an ‘unrelieved competence’ in my novels. I trust that some at least of these short stories stretching farther back in time than the novels and touching upon varied areas of experience will please by occasional departures into relieved competence....” It is interesting to note that the short stories have a very close affinity with the novels of Achebe. The short stories, like the novels, reveal the same thematic concerns, stylistic techniques and even the same interests. Lindfors in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* discusses the role of proverbs in Achebe’s four novels namely; *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Arrow of God*. Lindfors’ study is based on the premise that ‘Achebe is a skilful stylist who achieves an appropriate language for each of his novels largely through the use of proverbs’ and that by studying his proverbs ‘we are able to interpret his novels’ and so all so his short stories. Lindfors (1978:6) summarizes the function of proverbs in Achebe’s works thus: Indeed Achebe’s proverbs can serve as keys to an understanding of his novels because he uses them not merely to add touches of local colour but to sound and reiterate themes, sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society he is portraying. Since the use of proverbs is integral in Achebe’s works, and since proverbs enhance meaning in a text, Lindfors’ analysis of proverbs has served as a good starting point for our understanding of the same in the short stories. The shades of the fictional worlds of the novels like, *A Man of the People* and *No Longer at Ease* can be clearly traced in stories like, “The Voter” and “Marriage Is a Private Affair”. While the novels of Achebe, with the exception of *Anthills of the Savannah*, are mainly concerned with the cream of the society, the powerful Igbo men but what is peculiar of the short stories is that Achebe is concerned with the state of the affairs of the common and marginalized people in almost all his stories. Igbo culture has gone into complete transformation due to the traumatic contact with the West and the stories realistically capture and chronicle the change in the African way of life and values. For better understanding and thematic concern, the stories can be classified into four categories — stories that explore Igbo culture being contested from within due to exclusionary practices as in “The Madman” and “Akueke”; stories that reveal the formation of hybrid identities due to cultural encounter and to this group may belong stories like “Chike’s School Days”, “Marriage Is a Private Affair”, “Uncle Ben’s Choice”, “The Sacrificial Egg” and “Dead Men’s Path”; stories dealing with the emerging class and nation such as - “The Voter” and “The Vengeful Creditor”; last group bears the shadow of Nigeria –Biafran war and to this group belong “Sugar Baby”, “Civil Peace” and ‘Girls at War’. However, Carroll (1980) and Githae-Mugo (1978) are the only scholars we came across having analyzed the stories in *Girls at War and Other Stories*. Carroll analyzes these stories under three categories based on the story’s thematic concerns. He, however, concentrates his discussions on plot and, very superficially on theme. Micere-Mugo, on the other hand, discusses some of the stories from a purely thematic point of view. The stories that Micere- Mugo discusses are

“The Voter”, “Vengeful Creditor” and “Girls at War”. This paper’s approach to the short stories is a linguistic one unlike Carroll’s and Githae-Mugo’s work.

ANALYSIS

Relevance and Cognition

Relevance is seen as a key of inputs to cognitive processes: utterances, thoughts, memories, actions, sounds, sights, smell, and so on, and context is crucial. Relevance under cognition is defined as a property of inputs to cognitive systems: an input is more relevant the more cognitive effects it yields and less relevant the more mental effort it takes to process which implies that an input is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him: say, by answering a question he had in mind, improving his knowledge on a certain topic, settling a doubt, confirming a suspicion, or correcting a mistaken impression (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:608). This stresses the assertion that information is relevant to you if it interacts in a certain way with your existing assumptions about the world. In RT, cognitive effects are the positive results in a cognitive system of processing an utterance or other stimulus. Processing is always performed in a context, so cognitive effects and contextual effects are identical and the two terms are used interchangeably. There are three types of cognitive effects:

- (a) to support and strengthen an existing assumption;
- (b) to contradict and rule out an existing assumption;
- (c) to interact inferentially with existing assumptions to produce a new conclusion.

The claim under here is that information is relevant to you if it interacts in a certain way with your existing assumptions about the world. For example, Nnaemeka in *Marriage is a Private Affairs* tells his wife, Nene that his father (Mr. Okeke) will certainly reject his marriage plan:

Example 1

Nene: Have you written to your dad yet?

Nnaemeka: No. I have been thinking about it. I think it’s better to tell him when I get home on leave!

Nene:... He should be let into our happiness now.

Nnaemeka:... I wish I were sure it would be happiness to him.

Nene: Of course it must... why shouldn’t it?

Nnaemeka: They (including Nnaemeka’s father) are most unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. (p.20)

When Nnaemeka eventually goes home with the news of his marriage engagement, the reaction of Mr. Okeke is thus:

Example 2

Okeke: I shall never see her. (p.24)

In this case, from Nnaemeka’s existing assumption in example (1), and the new information in example (2), according to Sperber and Wilson, one can deduce some further assumption not deducible from either the existing assumption or the new information alone in this example (3): Nnaemeka can marry Nene but as far as Okeke is concerned, Nene is not part of his family. To deduce example (3), one have to use both old and new information as joint premises

in an inference process. Therefore, the new information (example 2) would be relevant precisely because it enables such a joint inference process to take place. It is now assumed that example 1 is the context in which the new information (example 2) is processed and that (example 2) contextually implies (example 3) in the context of (example 1). The claim therefore is that new information is relevant in any context in which it has contextual implications, and the more contextual implications it has, the more relevant it will be.

Moreover, Sperber and Wilson also state that assumptions about the world may vary in their strength: you may have more or less evidence for your assumption that something actually happened. New information may positively affect the strength of existing assumptions as in the example below:

Nnaemeka has actually been convinced that his marriage to Nene will hardly be accepted by his father and form the hypothesis:

Nnaemeka: Nene Atang from Calabar. She is the only girl I can marry. (p.23)

Despite all the persuasion Mr. Okeke employed and the threat of abandoning his son, Nnaemeka, he (Nnaemeka) becomes resolute and goes on with his marriage plan:

Nnaemeka: Don't cry, my darling said 'her husband'...

This new information however strengthens the existing assumption; therefore, the new information is relevant simply because it strengthens an existing assumption of Nnaemeka.

In addition, if new information can achieve relevance by strengthening an existing assumption, it can also achieve relevance by contradicting and ruling out an existing assumption; for example:

Akueke in *Akueke* has been thought by her brothers to be dead having been stricken with the swelling disease which is an abomination to the land. However, when Akueke's brothers are summoned by their grandfather, they see that Akueke is still alive:

Grandfather: come back, said the old man with a sad smile. Do you know who this young woman is? I want an answer... Ofodile: she is our sister Akueke.

Grandfather: your sister Akueke? But you have just told me that she died of the swelling disease. How could she die and then be here... if you don't know what the swelling disease is why did you not ask those who do? (p.32). Here, grandfather's reply provides conclusive evidence against the old assumption:

Akueke's brothers: Akueke has died by swelling disease and has 'obviously been eaten by wild animals, which sometimes happened in such cases. (p.32) which would therefore be abandoned; more so, grandfather's reply would be relevant in this circumstances. The claim there is that new information is relevant in any context in which it contradicts, and leads to the elimination of an existing assumption.

Relevance and Communication

Every utterance, for Sperber and Wilson, 'communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. This is the communicative principle of relevance that comprises two parts:

- (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it; and
- (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:267,270).

The term ostensive communication refers to a situation where there is an interaction: the communicator wants to signal something, creates a mutual environment of communication and his intention is recognized by her hearers. The interaction between Nwankwo and Gladys in *Girls at War* is a clear example of ostensive communication:

Gladys:... You have nothing in your fridge.

Nwankwo: Like what? He asked, half-offended.

Gladys: 'Like meat,' she replied undaunted.

Nwankwo: 'Do you still eat meat?' he challenged. (p. 112)

(Nwankwo's implicature: there is no meat)

Nwankwo's implicature is the implicated (logical) conclusion and therefore no other conclusion can be reached from the premise. Little wonder Wilson and Sperber correctly point out that communicators 'cannot be expected to go against their own interests and preferences in producing an utterance. There may be relevant information that they are unable or unwilling to produce, and ostensive stimulus that would convey their intentions more economically, but that they are unwilling to produce, or unable to think of at the time'. All this is covered in clause (b) definition of optimal relevance which states that the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one 'that the communicator is willing and able to produce' (Sperber and Wilson, 1995:258).

Thus Achebe writes in the conversation between Udenkwo and Mgboye in 'The Madman' in the collection of *Girls at War and Other Stories*:

Udenkwo: What has a little dog done to you? She screamed loud enough for half the village to hear. I ask you

Mgboye, what is the offence of a puppy this early in the day?

Mgboye: What your puppy did this early in the day, replied Mgboye, is that he put his shit-mouth into my soup pot. (p.4)

Mgboye's answer '... he put his shit mouth into my soup pot' is maximally relevant: there is no other way she could have conveyed this information more efficiently. If on the other hand, Mgboye reply is thus:

Mgboye: A toad does not run in day time for nothing. People not puppy are meant to take food from a pot. You need to retrain your puppy to avoid people's pot.

Then, her answer will be considerably less relevant (though still true) because it will cost Udenkwo considerable effort to interpret; just like Nwankwo's reply to Gladys when she demands searching his boot:

Gladys: 'Good afternoon, sir. I want to see your boot.'

Nwankwo: 'Oh Christ! What do you think is in the boot?'

Gladys: I don't know, sir. (p. 104)

('What do you think is in the boot' intends that there is nothing in the boot) The communicative principle of relevance states from the analysis given above (that of the conversation between Udenkwo and Mgboye) that a speaker implies the relevance of their words by the very act of speaking: in saying something to a hearer, a speaker implies that the utterance is the most relevant that they could have pro-

duced under the circumstances, and that it is at least relevant enough to warrant the hearer's attention.

Relevance and Comprehension

This approach is meant to account for how a hearer exploits a range of meaning from the input of the communicator to arrive at the most relevant conclusion of an utterance. The principles which govern hearers' interpretations of utterances are described by a two step comprehension procedure (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:18):

(a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects. In particular, test interpretative hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicature, etc.) in order of accessibility.

(b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied. What this implies is that the most relevant utterance is the easiest to understand. Therefore, since the speaker is expected to make her utterance as relevant as possible, the hearer is justified in following the path of least effort by considering the most accessible or obvious interpretation of the speaker's words first. Sperber and Wilson further state that 'the hearer is also justified in stopping at the first interpretation that satisfies his expectations of relevance because, if the speaker has succeeded in producing an utterance that satisfies the presumption of relevance it conveys, there should never be more than one such interpretation' (Sperber and Wilson, 2002:19). Let us see an example of how the comprehension procedure accounts for the contextual interpretation of an utterance. Consider the following dialogue taken from Achebe's 'Marriage is a Private Affair':

Madubogwu: Have you thought of consulting a native doctor about your son?

Okeke: He (Nnaemeka) isn't sick. (p.25)

Madubogwu's mentally represented of a sick person includes many attributes (for example, abnormality, irrationality, pomposity) which are all activated to some extent by Okeke's use of the word 'sick'. However, they are not all activated to the same degree. Certain attributes also receive some activation from the context and these become the most accessible ones. These differences in the accessibility of the various attributes of a 'sick' person create corresponding differences in the accessibility of various possible implications of Okeke's utterance, as shown below:

- (a) Nnaemeka is disordered
- (b) Nnaemeka is infected
- (c) Nnaemeka has planned who to marry
- (d) Nnaemeka wants to question his father's authority
- (e) Nnaemeka is richer than his father

Following the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, Madubogwu considers these implications in order of accessibility, arrives at an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance at options (a) and (b) and stops there. He does not even consider further possible implications such as options (c)--(d), let alone evaluate and reject them. Another example of this kind is seen in *The Voter* when Roof and the leader of POP where discussing the election of Marcus and his opponent:

Roof: You know I work for Marcus.

Leader of POP: Marcus will not be there when you put in your paper...

Roof: It will not be heard outside this room?

Leader of POP: We are after votes not gossip. (p. 16)

Leader of POP's last reply, 'we are after votes not gossip' may be interpreted thus:

- (a) He (Leader of POP) is devoted to his duty.
- (b) He identifies with the goals of his team.
- (c) He aspires for political position.
- (d) He wills to follow Roof's wish.
- (e) He earns political money

Sperber and Wilson (2004) state that 'the hearer's goal is to construct a hypothesis about the speaker's meaning that satisfies the presumption of relevance conveyed by the utterance' and that is why Roof considers these implications in order of accessibility, arrives at an interpretation which satisfies his expectations of relevance at (b) and stops there. He does not even consider further possible implications such as (c)--(e), let alone evaluate and reject them.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the research has sketched an ostensive-inferential account of the optimal relevance of literary text-*Achebe's Girls at War and Other Stories* to be precise, which is the essence of Relevance Theory: every act of inferential communication creates an expectation of optimal relevance, in the light of which hypotheses about the intended interpretation can be evaluated. What we have achieved in the light of the application of the relevance theory is a deeper understanding of the dialogue and communication in the works. With this deeper understanding of the dialogues comes also a better understanding of the Igbo world of Chinua Achebe, which is the cultural context of the utterances and dialogues. The result of reading the texts with such new tools of interpretation as the relevance theory provides is indeed refreshing.

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