

## Relevance Theoretical Interpretation of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

Adaoma Igwedibia<sup>1</sup>, Austin Okeke<sup>2</sup>, Christian Anieke<sup>3</sup>, Ozouri, Innocent Ikechukwu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department Of English And Literary Studies, University Of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department Of Theatre And Film Studies, University Of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Department Of English And Literary Studies, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Nigeria

**Corresponding Author:** Adaoma Igwedibia, E-mail: adaoma.igwedibia@unn.edu.ng

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: March 24, 2019

Accepted: May 20, 2019

Published: July 31, 2019

Volume: 8 Issue: 4

Advance access: June 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### ABSTRACT

For certain, one does not need to be a colossal voracious reader as to arriving at what Maya Angelou is driving at in virtually all her works. Of course, Maya is not just a fantastic poet but also a renowned storyteller, a fearless activist, a peculiar autobiographer, a gifted singer and playwright whose works generally provoke some sort of empowering flash of thoughts in that they are mostly soused in a struggle to overcome prejudice and injustice. As a matter of fact, Maya Angelou's works are evidently frontal and a host of them have been literarily torn in and out. Hence they are glaringly a projection of self-awareness even in the face of oppression. It is on this stroke that this present study seeks to dig deep into the most confrontational work of Maya Angelou, her assertive but reliant poem "Still I Rise" so as to come by other extra-linguistic significations therein. And when a study tends to incorporate other varying meanings in a particular data in relation to context, it is, presumably, under the purview of pragmatics whose preoccupation is to accentuate meaning on context basis. But pragmatics is such broad a discipline with several frameworks. Therefore, even though this paper is going to be very much encompassing in the course of this study, its object of attention is to pragmatically study just a fraction of Maya Angelou's works, her poem "Still I Rise" to be precise with a viable context-based theory, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory.

**Key words:** Pragmatics, Self Awareness, Relevance, Poem, Maya Angelou

### INTRODUCTION

No doubt, meanings are greatly determined by contexts in such a way that a speaker's utterances might entirely mean a different thing from their wordings. That is to say meaning is, of course, not that explicit in the world of pragmatics. For instance, when a speaker makes an utterance as this: 'it is hot in here,' perhaps such a speaker is in a room where the doors are shut, the above expression could either mean that the windows should be opened or that the fan should be put on. There are still other possible meanings of the above utterance which are to be determined by the context of such utterance which is to be determined by the context of such utterance. What this implies is that people do not always say exactly what they mean, in the words of Jenny Thomas (1995). For Thomas, it is commonplace that speakers mean entirely what does not reflect in their bare words. And for this singular reason, context becomes a factor that necessitates meanings in pragmatics. So, while one undertakes a pragmatic study of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" it would not be baseless to establish from where the speaker

still rises and by doing so, a question like was the speaker already down?, comes to mind.

However, the investigation of the speaker's immediate situation in the above title of the poem under study can only be successful when one is verily on terms with Angelou's social dealings from her childhood. The tones of the various speakers in her poems reflect her humiliating experiences immediately after birth to the point it seemed she has slipped off the clutch of prejudice and social injustice and in clear terms defined her humanness with a formidable awareness of herself. Obviously, Angelou's Autobiographies are spiritedly connected with her poems in that they project her demeaning past as well as her reassurance of a complete human and woman who does not need anyone's pity. We see this posture in the first stanza of our dear poem in this paper where the speaker's tone resonates the poem's title in respect to assurance of victory.

Thus: You may write me down in history  
With your bitter twisted lies  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

The boldness with which the speaker faces the oppressors is highly commendable and this boldness as demonstrated in this paper is always already ignited by the speaker's awakening and awareness of herself.

Interesting, it is worthy to note that while doing pragmatic studies of literary works, say poems, novels or plays, it is very much indispensable to understudy the background of the writers whose works are to be analysed so as to have a clue of the various contexts that are to determine the information values of such literary works unlike what is obtained in the literary studies where it is believed that the author dies as soon as their works are published. It is already very clear that one can hardly do a pragmatic analysis of any of Maya Angelou's literary works without first digging into her background which could easily be done by reading her autobiographies wherein she enunciates her numerous experiences as they are various. Apart from having the background knowledge of the author in pragmatic studies, the language of a writer most times, triggers of a very strong pragmatic force in such a way that an attentive reader need not contemplate as to what inferences to make from the context that has already been laid bare by such pugnacious language.

However, it is on this note that this paper seeks to punctuate this force of an utterance with a very recent pragmatic framework in Angelou's "Still I Rise" whose interest is nothing but to identify what seems to be the most relevant aspect of a speaker's utterance or of a primary data. And going by the dictates of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory which of course is the framework to be adopted in this study, an utterance is said to be most relevant when little effort is exerted to come by its signification (Sperber and Wilson 1986). It is this very parameter that constitutes the degree of relevance in Sperber and Wilson's theory and this degree is governed by the cognitive or contextual effects and the processing efforts (cutting 2002). But proving the relevance of an utterance according to the theory is determined by the accessibility of its relevance to the hearer. So, the wings of this study cannot be clipped as to analyzing Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" pragmatically with its theory of relevance.

### Statement of the Problem

It has already been said in this paper that Maya Angelou is an impressionistic writer whose writings have entertained a lot of critical studies. But it is, of course, astonishing that virtually all the studies on Maya Angelou's works are literarily oriented. Yes, Maya Angelou is undoubtedly a literary artist with a difference, but that does not mean that her literary works cannot be linguistically studied. Though this researcher has not come by any form of linguistic studies on Maya Angelou's writings but if at all there are linguistic studies on her works and eventually in the area of pragmatics, the researchers feel that relevance theory is such a recent pragmatic theory which is an offshoot of one of Grice's maxims and has not been greatly employed by linguistic scholars in analyzing many literary works. Therefore, it is the above problem which no doubt is a gap in scholarship that this paper tends to fill by studying Maya Angelou's outstanding poem "Still I Rise" with Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance.

### Objectives of the Study

The very thing this study seeks to do is to undertake a pragmatic study of Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" as regards the principles of relevance theory. Specifically, this study is contrived to:

Examine the cognitive or contextual effects of Maya Angelou's language in "Still I Rise."

Check the processing efforts of the above poem on the side of the readers.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

We know, of course, that the general orientation of pragmatics is purely interpretation, in that it is in pragmatics that words go beyond the surface in order to signify. Pragmatics as a level of linguistic analysis does not only study meaning in context but also prevails on words to do something and in a different manner in such a way that a study of meaning is taken beyond the literary or linguistic data. Hence even implied meanings are sufficiently taken care of in pragmatics and these meanings are extracted within the context of communications. It is important to be aware that most of these meaning extractions or inferences, so to speak, are successfully done by the readers or the listeners, and before any inferences are made from a text, say a speech or a literary work, it is important for the interpreter to have a background knowledge of either the speaker of the utterance or the author of such a literary works. And having this background knowledge, of course, paves the way for understanding the context. No wonder why (Indede, 2009), believes that the impact pragmatics has on a text conforms to its totality as well as its emotionally imaginative appeals.

Just like Indede, Emmanuel Ngara also believes that literary works which are also communicative utterances birthed by the writer and to be interpreted by the receiver who would eventually become the reader or the hearer. For him, this interpretation is more effective when such literary work is audibly performed before the hearer, and when the work is a poem which of course is not in any way akin to ordinary speech because of its orderings, its purports become more engaging. Yes, it is not fictitious that interpretations are different, but there are already accentuated parameters that aid the interpretations of a text and it is these parameters that determine the texts significations. This is why the discourse analyst Van Djike (1981), believes that every aspect of the text is separately relevant to its effect as a function.

Moreover, in his article entitled "Quest for Identify: A Thematic Study on Selected Works of Maya Angelou," K. Sasidher observes that Maya Angelou has distinguished herself as a woman whose quest for human individuality is entirely a motivation. He believes that her chief mission, as evidenced in her poems, especially our dear chosen poem here "Still I Rise", is to evoke a critical self-reflection triggered by her dehumanizing past. And it is because of her vehement stance that the African American women gained wider respectability and greater reception. K. Sasidher also believes that Maya Angelou's poetry is a reflection of her revolution and she became a paradigm to her reader to survive and transcend a

socially constructed ideology designed to control self-understanding and socio-economic mobility as a result.

In the same vein, Cudjoe (1984) maintains that "the writings of Maya Angelou, up until the contemporary era, remain the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of the Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism." Angelou (1990) acknowledges her writings as a development of the slave narrative tradition as embodied by Fredrick Douglass, and the legacy of slavery has outlived its formal abolishment and race, which lies at the core of slavery and of the oppression of black people by their owners, remains the primary issue in terms of the African-American identity. In the interview with George Plimpton (1990), Angelou explains how she handles referential truth, admitting she has her methods of selection. Thus: "Sometimes I make a character from a composite three or four people because the essence in any one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about. Essentially though, the work is true though sometimes I fiddle with the facts(...) I am using the first person singular and trying to make that the first person plural, so that anybody can read the work and say, Hmm, that is the truth, yes, hu-huh, and live In the work. It is a large, ambitious dream. But I love the form" (Angelou 1990 p. 9).

Be that as it may, Ria Resky Hardianti Iham (2015) in his "Racism Reflected in Maya Angelou's Poems," observes that Angelou expresses her spirit of not giving up. That happiness can come toward the hardest life of a slave just because they can finish their work in the plantation because in all of these humiliations still, I will rise. Hardianti also believes that Angelou's Poems describe the condition of class struggle in powerless image in that she compares the life of two families, the blacks and the whites where the difference is frankly noticeable based on the way they spent their time and activity. And in his "The sounds of African-American in Maya Angelou's Poems: "Alone" "Still I rise" "Caged Bird" and "Equality" (2014), Retno Palupi believes that Maya Angelou's poems are a liberation of a mind that has been corrupted by some physical dealings and a determination for a redefinition of self. He also observes that there are three sounds of African-American that reflect in Angelou's poems: First, the sound of freedom that represents "Caged Bird" the second is the sound of equality that represents "Equality" and finally, the sound of racism which of course is the sub-cruX of "Alone" and "Still I Rise." And in the words of Goldman, "the literary work is not to be separated from the intrinsic and extrinsic element because the historical background of the author as a member of the social group always gives influence to the work"

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Method of Data Analysis

This study seeks to use Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory as a theoretical guide in the analysis of our data, Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise." The analysis would be done to reveal the relevant and contextual elements of "Still I Rise"

## Theoretical Framework

### Relevance theory

There are evidently in Grice's cooperative Principle, four maxims that are duty-bound to make conversations succinctly successful in that their preachments are about adequate cooperation from communicators. It is worthy to note that of all the maxims, there is one that stands out as the nucleus, the maxim of relation not just that it is saddled with the responsibility of identifying with only the utterances that are inundated in relevance, but also because it is on its foundation that Sperber and Wilson built their pragmatic framework of relevance. Maybe we should enquire into what happens when interlocutors flout any of the other three maxims, such as the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality and the manner maxim, like when they give more or less information than required or when they are not being truthfully in the course of their conversation or when they are neither orderly nor brief. And what we are driving at here is trying to know whether there is any iota of relevance in an utterance that is devoid of the requisite information or in the ones that are not only false but also disorderly and full of embellishments. Are these kinds of utterances not already irrelevant? Of course, they are. That is to say, relevance theory is not only interested in understanding the interpretations of utterances as a matter of fact, but has also in a point of fact come to correct some pragmatic impressions with its viable principles. And for this reason, Mey (1994) observes that there is more to the question of rules [and] principles than a mere squabble about terminology in that all that is important is the fact that people engage in communicative activity whenever they use language: whether or not they observe a particular syntactic rule is not too important. Utterances are believed to be relevant in this framework when they connect to the mutual cognitive environments as well as the available contextual assumptions so long they can yield positive cognitive effects, and once these cognitive effects of utterances are come by relevance is practically maximized. Sperber and Wilson (1995) believe that the cognitive effects an utterance yields and the processing efforts required to extract these effects are what make an utterance relevant. They believe that the purpose of communication is not to duplicate thoughts but to enlarge mutual cognitive environments in that conversational implicature is easily understood by hearers simply by selecting the relevant features of context, and recognizing whatever speakers say that is relevant to the conversation. And for cutting (2002), when a text is made sense of by readers and hearers, they interpret the connections between utterances as meaningful, making inferences by drawing on their background knowledge of the world. The degree of relevance is governed by what Sperber and Wilson call "cognitive effects and processing efforts" of an utterance. The more glaring the cognitive effects are, the greater the relevance of a particular fact. And a new fact is not connected to anything already known is not worth processing whereas a new fact taken with something that is already known is worth processing in that it is this new fact that is connected to something already known that maximizes relevance. That is to say, the less effort it takes

to recover a fact that is, the less effort it takes to process the cognitive effects of an utterance, the greater the relevance.

## ANALYSIS

In this analysis, it is Maya Angelou herself that we hear, not the persona so to speak. Angelou tells, in this poem, how ready she is to overcome anything with her self-esteem. She shows how nothing can bring her down because no matter how catastrophic the snares of the fowlers are, she is sure she would fall back to track. So, it can be said that the general orientation of the poem is the importance of perseverance and persistence. She describes the way she is judged, the obstacles she faces and the adversity in her entire life. But after a description of any obstacle she meets around, she demonstrates a positive attitude and that she does not let her problems bring her down, hence she keeps rising.

In "Still I Rise" Angelou talks directly to her oppressors about how she has overcome her difficulties. She states how she rises whenever she is knocked down by her oppressors.

I rise

I rise

I rise

The first stanza of the poem begins by stating how words have no power over her. Still, in the opening of the poem, we find vehement confidence as well as a positive attitude that the narrator possesses. The narrator moves forward to compare the certainty of nature with her resilience and determination to rise against challenges. As a stirring poem "Still I Rise" is packed full of figurative languages and when read through comes over as a secular hymn to the oppressed and abused. The message is, of course, loud and clear - no matter the cruelty, regardless of method and circumstance, the seemed victim will surely rise, and the slave will overcome adversity.

"Still I Rise" is undoubtedly written with the black slavery and civil rights issues in mind, but it is universal in its appeal in that any innocent individual, any minority, any nation subject to oppression or abuse could understand the underlying message of the poem, which is, don't give in to torture, bullying, humiliation and injustice. The poem consists of forty-three lines in total made up of seven quatrains and two end stanzas which help to reinforce the central message of individual hope, "I Rise" being repeated in mantra fashion. However, "Still I Rise" is entirely aimed at the oppressor. The natural imagery of the poem is far-reaching and the voice is loud and clear. There are moons and suns, tides and black ocean; there is clear daybreak and ancestral gifts all joining together in a crescendo of hope. Similes and metaphors abound. Every stanza has at least one, from the first. "But still, like dust, I'll rise" to the last..."I am the dream and the hope of the slave." As one reads through the poem, one finds out that there is defiance as if the speaker is trying to prick the conscience of the oppressor by reminding them of their wrongs and the present realities. The sense of 'sassiness' in the poem suggests an arrogant self-confidence backed up by the use of laugh times and sexiness. Yes, Angelou's use of hyperbole with these nouns adds a kind of absurd beauty to the poem thus:

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as some surprise?

That I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

The sixth stanza of the poem brings the oppressive issue to a conclusion so to speak. Three of the lines begins with 'you' the speaker choosing particularly active verbs—"shoot, cut, kill" to emphasize the aggressiveness of the oppressor, but the oppressed is sure in the face of their oppression, to rise again, and this time, like the air, which you cannot shoot cut or kill. By and large, there is every indication that "Still I Rise" is an inspirational poem with powerful repetitive energy as well as a universal message.

## Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

There is a kind of relevant appeal throughout the first stanza of "Still I Rise" which is so direct as it is explicit too, and does not need much effort to pick out the cognitive effect by the reader. And by implication, it generally indicates a robust maximization of the optional relevance. The first line of this very stanza is too straight to the crux in such a way that its confrontationality is not hidden. But this image-battery portrayed by the speaker is, evidently, backed by such venomous signs as 'bitter twisted lies', which do not have any such powers as intended, given the strong will of the speaker.

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise

What the speaker communicates in the above lines, no doubt has a natural saliency such that the speaker and the oppressor cum addressee could co-ordinate on the production and recognition of intentions without infinite regress of knowledge. However, for the fact that Sperber and Wilson presume some computation of rough confirmation values, they hope to enable the deductive device to handle contradictions without generating infinite conclusions, by accepting the premise with the higher confirmation value, and this confirmation value was added to Sperber and Wilson's theory so as not to make non-obvious, reminders, tautologies, and the like irrelevant. The said confirmation value is well captured in the last line of the first stanza of our dear poem: 'But still, like dust, I'll rise;

In the same vein, there are two questions rhetorically asked by the speaker in the second stanza of which are ironically encapsulated in contradictions. We find in the first line of this stanza a proud tone that tends to directly register aggression in such a way that the so-called oppressor has been relegated to the background as well as to the receiving side. The second line of this same stanza, also a rhetorical question, needs little or even no processing effort to come by the provocative intent of the speaker in that when someone is said to have been beset in the gloom, they are not only devoid of hope but are also soused in sadness. The perceived aggression in this stanza is bravely punctuated with the subsequent stanza which is entirely a reminder to the oppressor of the speaker's looming hope ignited by sheer self-awareness.

Thus:

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still, I'll rise.

It is very clear that the contextual effects of the above lines are inversely proportional to the processing efforts required for their recovery, because there is no theoretical limit to the search for relevance of a phenomenon and that of an ostensive stimulus: in the latter case, an individual can assume, following the 'principle of relevance' that the speaker is aiming at optimal relevance: 'just like hopes springing high, Still I'll rise' replicates the speaker's determination not to succumb to the humiliations and the oppression against the African Americans which of course is the optimal relevance.

Moreover, "Still I Rise" is generally a protest poem that tends to rewrite a given narrative. Maya Angelou's approach in the poem is not pretentious, her aggression throughout the poem is loud and her message is clear and her stance is unapologetically vehement.

## CONCLUSION

This study is entirely a pragmatic exploration of a protest in a lyric form with a framework that is keen on doing something different. The attempt to undertake a pragmatic study of Maya Angelou's poem, for certain, with Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory is mind-blowing and fun too because of the criticality in measuring the number of efforts required to extract the optimal relevance of the cognitive or the contextual effect of the entire poem.

## REFERENCES

- Angelou, Maya (1994). *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House.
- Angelou, Maya (n.d.). *The Heart of A Woman*. New York: Random House.
- Carstn, R. and Uchida, S. (eds) (1998). *Relevance Theory: Application and Implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cudjoe, S.R.(1984). "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical statement." In *Black Women Writers. 1950-1980*, edited by Mari Evans, 6-24. New York: Anchor Books.
- Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Gutt, E. A. (1991). *Translation and Relevance*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Igwedibia, A. (2017). Grice's Conversational Implicature: A Pragmatics Analysis of Selected Poems of Audre Lorde. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 7(1), 120-129.
- Ilham, A. R. (2015). *Racism Reflected in Maya Angelou's Poems*. Thesis Publication: Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta.
- Kirkpatrick, K. (n.d.). *The Life and Works of Maya Angelou*. Unpublished Paper. Retrieved on March 10, 2014, from <http://people.ehe.osu.edu/bgordon/files/2012/kathryn-kirkpatrick.pdf>
- Mey, J.L. (1994). *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Ngara, E. (1990). *Ideology and Form in African Poetry*. London: James Currey.
- Palupi, N. R. (2014). *The Sounds of African-American in Maya Angelou's Poems: Alone, still I Rise, Caged Bird and Equality*/Thesis Publications: Universitas Brawijaya.
- Sperber, D. and Wilson D. (1995). *Relevance Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. Essex, England: Longman.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1981). *Studies in the Pragmatics of Discourse*. New York: Mouton Publishers.