

Speech Acts and Narrativity: A Re-Reading of Okri's *The Famished Road*

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of speech acts and narrativity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, offering a re-reading of the novel through the lens of linguistic and narrative pragmatics. Drawing on J. L. Austin's and John Searle's speech act theory, the paper examines how Okri's use of performative utterances, conversational implicatures, and narrative structures shape the novel's complex interplay of realism and magical realism. The research focuses on the role of speech acts in advancing the plot, constructing characters, and conveying the socio-political under currents of post colonial Nigeria. It argues that Okri's narrative technique employs both locutionary and illocutionary acts to challenge conventional storytelling, creating a dynamic dialogue between the physical and spiritual realms. Furthermore, the study highlights how the abiku child, Azaro, serves as a narrative agent through whom speech acts disrupt temporal and spatial boundaries, fostering a layered and cyclical perception of reality. *¹ By situating the analysis within the framework of narrativity, the paper sheds light on how Okri's language use transcends traditional narrative forms, ultimately enriching the philosophical and cultural dimensions of the text. This re-reading underscores the transformative power of speech acts in shaping not just individual experiences but also collective histories, positioning *The Famished Road* as a seminal work in African literature.

Keywords: speech acts, magical realism, narrativity, Ben Okri, abiku*

¹ In Yoruba cosmology, Abiku represents a spirit child who is destined to die young and be reborn as another child, repeating this cycle of death and rebirth.

Introduction

Literature serves as a medium through which complex societal, cultural, and philosophical issues are explored, often reflecting the multifaceted nature of human experiences. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), a landmark text in African literature, exemplifies this complexity through its rich narrative structure and use of magical realism. The novel, which revolves around the life of Azaro, a spirit child, or abiku, in an unnamed African city presents a multi-layered narrative which intertwines the physical and metaphysical realms. As a result,

it offers fertile ground for examining how speech acts and narrativity contribute to the construction of meaning within the text.

Speech acts, broadly understood as communicative utterances that perform functions beyond mere representation, play a significant role in the novel's narrative construction. Through the interactions between Azaro, his family, political figures, and supernatural beings, Okri employs language to mediate between different realms of existence. Conversations in the novel often transcend literal meaning, engaging in implicit negotiations of power, identity, and resistance. The spoken word, therefore, becomes an essential tool for character development, plot progression, and thematic exploration, reinforcing the novel's underlying philosophical inquiries into fate, agency, and historical continuity. The interplay between speech acts and the narrative is particularly significant in the novel as it reflects the tension between the mundane realities of post colonial Nigeria and the transcendent, mythical dimensions of the abiku world. Through this lens, Okri's text can be seen as an exploration of how language shapes perception and mediates between different ontological planes.

Narrativity, on the other hand, pertains to the strategies employed in the telling of a story, encompassing elements such as structure, temporality, and point of view (Genette,1980). It is central to literature, where it enables the construction of meaningful stories. From epics to contemporary novels, narrativity engages audiences by weaving coherent and emotionally resonant tales. Narrativity also informs how individuals use language to construct personal and cultural identities. Studies in pragmatics and sociolinguistics reveal how narratives are embedded in everyday interactions. However, Okri's narrative style, marked by its cyclical structure and dreamlike sequences, challenges conventional linear storytelling. This unconventional approach necessitates a re-reading of the novel to uncover the symbiotic relationship between speech acts and the narrative structure. Specifically, the study explores how Okri uses speech acts not only to develop characters but also to navigate the blurred boundaries between reality and myth.

So, this study re-reads *The Famished Road* through the interplay of narrativity and speech acts, arguing that Okri's linguistic and narrative techniques serve not only to construct an immersive magical-realist world but also to engage with larger socio-political discourses. By examining the novel's use of speech as an integral part of its narrative fabric, this research sheds new light on how language operates within literary structures to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, ultimately positioning *The Famished Road* as a profound meditation on history, identity, and storytelling itself. This study further aims to analyze the intersections of

speech acts and narrativity in the text, situating the discussion within the broader context of postcolonial literary studies and linguistic pragmatics. By examining how speech acts contribute to the novel's narrative dynamics, the study sheds light on the ways in which Okri redefines storytelling to reflect the complexities of African identity and experience. Assuch, this re-reading underscores the significance of language as both a narrative device and a cultural tool for negotiating meaning in postcolonial texts.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the interplay between speech acts and narrativity in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, examining how the use of speech acts contributes to the construction of the novel's narrative structure, themes, and its overall communicative effect.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Analyze the use of speech acts in *The Famished Road*: Investigate how various speech acts (e.g., assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations) are employed in the text to convey meaning and enhance the narrative.
2. Examine the role of narrativity in Okri's work: Study how the novel's narrative techniques interact with its linguistic features to create meaning and contribute to its magical realist framework.
3. Contribute to linguistic and literary scholarship by providing insights into the integration of linguistic theories, particularly speech act theory, into the analysis of literary texts, thereby expanding the scope of narratology and stylistics in African literature.

Significance of the Study

The research highlights the role of speech acts—such as assertions, promises, and commands—in shaping the narrativity of magical realism. By analyzing the performative and illocutionary dimensions of language in Okri's work, the study reveals how narrative and linguistic structures interact to convey meaning, engage readers, and construct a dynamic interplay between the real and the surreal.

It equally fills a crucial gap in scholarship by integrating Speech Act Theory with Narratology in the context of African magical realist fiction. While previous studies have examined *The Famished Road* from postcolonial, philosophical, and thematic perspectives, little attention has been paid to how speech acts function as narrative tools that construct

meaning, reality, and subjectivity in the text. Existing research in Pragmatics has largely focused on speech acts in conversational discourse, while Narratology has examined narrative structure without deeply engaging with the pragmatics of performative language. This study, therefore, bridges the divide between these disciplines by demonstrating how speech acts not only shape interpersonal communication within the novel but also influence the overall narrative architecture.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the evolving discourse on African literature by highlighting the role of indigenous oral traditions in the pragmatic structuring of narratives. By situating speech act theory within the framework of an African literary text, the research offers an alternative model for analyzing literary pragmatics beyond Western literary traditions. It extends the scope of speech act analysis from everyday linguistic exchanges to the realm of fictional world-building, enriching both Pragmatics and Narratology with new interdisciplinary insights. It further provides a fresh perspective on Okri's exploration of African cosmology, communal identity, and socio-political realities. It underscores the importance of linguistic pragmatics in understanding the nuances of storytelling within the African literary tradition, thereby enriching the discourse on African literature as a site of cultural negotiation and resistance.

Statement of the Problem

Chen Jiaying (2003) argues that the philosophy of language needs to answer two questions: the meaning of language; the relationship between language and the world. Speech Act Theory is special in that it explores the problem of meaning from the interpretation of the relationship between words and the world, arguing that the meaning of a sentence lies not in its true or false value but in what it does. Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* as a seminal work of African literature has been widely acclaimed for its intricate narrative style and profound engagement with post colonial realities. However, much of the existing scholarship has focused on its magical realism, socio-political themes, and philosophical undertones, leaving the linguistic and pragmatic dimensions of the text under explored.

Oko (2020) in "Postcolonial Realities in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and *Songs of Enchantment*" delves into the postcolonial realities as depicted by the author and discusses how he uses the myth of the abiku (spirit child) to highlight some of the socio-political issues in post-independence Nigeria.

In her 1996 article "Beyond the Postcolonial Novel: Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and its 'Abiku' Traveller," Margaret Cezair-Thompson examines how Okri's novel transcends traditional postcolonial narratives by integrating the Yoruba concept of the abiku—a spirit child caught between life and death—to explore themes of identity, spirituality, and societal transformation. She argues that through the protagonist Azaro's perpetual oscillation between the physical and spiritual realms, Okri challenges linear storytelling and reflects the complexities of postcolonial African existence.

Garuba (1993) explores Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, describing its narrative style as animist realism, where the spiritual and material worlds seamlessly coexist. He argues that Okri's work transcends conventional magical realism by drawing from African oral traditions, creating a genre that reflects the complexities of postcolonial Nigeria.

Jyoti Dahiya (2015) narrates how Ben Okri conveys a supernatural African worldview through magical realism to address neocolonial political hegemony and societal struggles.

In "The Writings of Ben Okri: Transcending the Local and the National," Maurice O'Connor (2008) examines how Okri's work blends postcolonial studies, diasporic criticism, and anthropological perspectives to create a unique literary discourse. O'Connor highlights Okri's integration of Yoruba cultural elements, positioning his literature within a globalized African consciousness that embraces all humanity.

Specifically, the interplay between speech acts and narrativity in shaping the novel's meaning and its engagement with cultural and existential issues has not been given adequate attention. In text, the use of speech acts—such as assertions, promises, commands, and questions—is not merely functional but central to the construction of its narrative universe. The novel's reliance on oral traditions and storytelling techniques further complicates the analysis of how language is used to perform actions, shape relationships, and construct reality within the text. Despite this, there is limited exploration of how Okri employs speech acts to foreground issues of identity, agency, and cultural memory within the narrative.

This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the relationship between speech acts and narrativity in *The Famished Road*. It will examine how the performative functions of language contribute to the novel's narrative structure, thematic development, and representation of cultural identity. By re-reading the text through the lens of speech act theory, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how language operates as a tool of resistance, creativity, and meaning-making in Okri's literary work.

Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks

Speech act theory, first developed by Austin (1962) and further refined by Searle (1969), provides a robust framework for analyzing the performative and communicative functions of language. It is a means of digging beneath the surface of discourse and establishing the function of what is said (Cook 1992). In other words, speech act theory attempts to explain how speakers use language to accomplish intended actions and how hearers infer intended meaning from what is said. In literature, speech acts are not merely vehicles for conveying dialogue but also tools for revealing character motivations, advancing plot, and constructing meaning.

This study, however, adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a textual analysis framework. It employs the theoretical lens of pragmatics, focusing on Speech Act Theory, and narratology to analyze the interplay between speech acts and narrative structures in *The Famished Road*. The theoretical framework of Speech Act proposed by J. L. Austin and expanded by John Searle, that categorizes utterances into locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts will be used to examine how characters' speech constructs meaning and contributes to the novel's narrative development. Quite arguably, there is no doubt that Austin's contribution to language understanding is immortal. Yang Yucheng (2004) stated that the concept of performatives and speech act theory is original and permanent contributions to philosophy and linguistics. Gu Yueguo (1989) believes that although Austin failed to put forward a relatively complete linguistic theory like Saussure, Chomsky, and Halliday, it opened up a new way to study the use of language from the perspective of speech act.

In addition, however, narratology which analyzes narrative techniques, such as point of view, temporal structures, and character development will be used. And Gérard Genette's concepts of focalization and narrative time will also be employed to uncover the structural intricacies of the novel.

Data Collection

This study involves a close reading of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Key passages that highlight the use of dialogue, monologue, and narrative descriptions will be extracted and analyzed. Particular attention will be paid to:

- Dialogues that reveal character intentions and conflicts.
- Descriptive and symbolic elements that link speech acts to broader thematic

concerns.

- Instances where speech acts drive plot progression or illuminate cultural and existential themes.

Connection between speech acts and narrativity

Speech acts and narrativity are central concepts in linguistics, literary studies, and discourse analysis. Their connection lies in how speech acts shape narrative structures and influence how stories are told, understood, and interpreted. This study explores their relationship using theories of pragmatics and narratology, supported by examples and scholarly insights. Speech act theory as a subfield of pragmatics is concerned with the ways in which words can be used, not only to present information but to carry out actions. Pragmatics describes the connection between language and human life, and it is the study of how people use language. Language is very important in human lives and interaction. It represents the medium through which we encounter reality as, "Our language both reflects and creates that reality" (Holtgraves2008:1). It represents a uniquely human ability-an ability that reflects the essence of what it means to be human, and for others, language is a system that allows people to communicate or transfer propositions among themselves. It is to us more than a system of thought transference and can be considered based on its use rather than its abstract and symbolic quality.

Philosophers of language have often noted that fiction is a distinct speech act. Philosophical reflection about fiction is almost always linked with reflection about language. Fictional discourses are distinct types of illocutionary activity. Although at the semantic level, as set of propositions have the same meaning whether they are fictional or factual, they may be used in actual communication to perform different speech acts: to acquaint the hearer with an actual state of affairs or to entertain him with a story.

However, Searle practices linguistic analysis in the spirit of Austin, "careful elucidation of some of the concepts of ordinary language." Like Austin, Searle believes we cannot account for meaning in narrative discourse in the absence of the context of a speech act. To Searle, sentences (types) do not express a proposition; instead, tokens or sentences in a context express propositions. Austin's framework points out that there are many ways of describing or "carving up" the same speech act (physical act, act of reference, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act). In looking at a single narrative act, there are many ways of describing it: The speaker will characteristically have moved his tongue and jaw, and undoubtedly made some noises. He will have performed acts within the class which includes

making statements, issuing commands, asking questions, greeting, warning or giving reports. The members of this last class are what Austin called illocutionary acts and it is with this class and Searle's speech acts category as they relate to narrativity in Okri's *The Famished Road* that this paper shall be concerned with. For Searle, the basic unit of language is the speech act or illocutionary act, the production of a token in the context of a speech act (not the word, the sentence type or the theory).

Furthermore, the pragmatic dimension of narratives involves understanding the communicative intentions behind story telling. Narratives often include embedded speech acts that reveal characters' intentions and advance the plot. The interplay between speech acts and narrativity reveals how language functions as a tool for action and storytelling. Speech acts provide the micro-level mechanisms that build narratives, while narrativity gives coherence and purpose to these acts. This connection highlights the dynamic relationship between pragmatics and narratology, enriching our understanding of communication and representation.

Narrative is a place where sequence and language among other things intersect to form a discursive code. And relying on language, *The Famished Road* provides a conceptual and aesthetic frame which to paraphrase Azaro ascertains "the liberty of limitations" (Okri 1991:557). Jameson (1989) conceptualizes narrative as a key epistemological category through which we gain knowledge of the world, he argues that much of what we learn come in form of stories. So, narratives are thus a particular way of presenting or re-presenting the world or some aspects of it, in graphic and textual forms and with a given interpretation. For Jameson, individual narratives do not exist in isolation, but reflect (and simultaneously conceal) a deeper and more pervasive narrative linked to particular social (class or group) interests.

Narrative Structure in *The Famished Road*

Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* employs a complex narrative structure that blends elements of magical realism, African oral traditions, and modernist storytelling. The structure can be analyzed as follows:

1. **Circular and Episodic Structure:** The novel begins with the transformation of a river into a road, symbolizing the cyclical journey of life and the interconnectedness of different realms. "In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (Okri 1991:3) This passage metaphorically links the natural flow of a

river to the constructed paths of human civilization, suggesting an inherent, insatiable drive within these pathways. Additionally, the novel reflects on the human condition: "We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see" (1991:3).

This imagery sets the tone for the novel's exploration of circularity and repetition. It does not follow a traditional linear plot. Instead, it unfolds in a circular, episodic manner, mirroring the cyclical nature of life and the spiritual themes at its core. The protagonist, Azaro, repeatedly oscillates between the physical and spiritual worlds, reflecting his identity as an *abiku* (spirit child). According to him, "We were the ones who kept coming and going, unwilling to come to terms with life. We had the ability to will our deaths. Our pacts were binding" (1991:4). Hear Dad describing the nation as an *abiku*, "Ours too was an *abiku* nation, a spirit-child, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth comes blood and betrayal,.... (1991:478). Events often loop back to previous themes, emphasizing continuity and repetition in the lives of the characters.

2. Dual Realities: The titular "famished road" symbolizes the connection between the two worlds. Passages where Azaro describes the road as a living entity or as a pathway for spirits are crucial. The roads seemed to me then [Azaro says] to have a cruel and infinite imagination. All the roads multiplied, reproducing themselves, subdividing themselves, like snakes, tail in their mouth, twisting themselves into labyrinth. The road became my torment, my aimless pilgrimage, and I found myself merely walking to discover where all the roads lead to, where they end. (1991:114–15).

The narrative further interweaves two parallel realms: the physical world (a poverty-stricken Nigerian village) and the spiritual world (filled with supernatural beings and visions). Azaro's perspective allows the story to shift fluidly between these realities, creating a dreamlike and surreal narrative experience.

3. Oral Story telling Tradition: Storytelling "where in personal, experiential geographies are conveyed in narrative form" (Cameron 2012:575). The novel draws heavily on the African oral tradition, with a story telling style rich in proverbs, metaphors, and symbolic imagery. The episodic nature resembles folktales, where each chapter of ten feels like a standalone story contributing to the larger narrative.

4. Fragmented and Dreamlike Narrative: The *Famished Road* is renowned for its fragmented and dreamlike narrative, reflecting the protagonist Azaro's experiences as a spirit child (an *abiku*) navigating between the spiritual and physical realms. This narrative style permeates

the novel, with numerous passages exemplifying its surreal and episodic nature. For instance, the opening lines immediately immerse the reader in a mystical atmosphere: "In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (1991:3). The narrative is fragmented, often blurring the lines between past, present, and future. Dreams and visions are a significant part of the story, providing insights into characters' fears, hopes, and the socio-political context of post-colonial Nigeria.

5. Symbolic and Allegorical Layers: The novel operates on multiple levels: it is both a personal story of Azaro and a broader allegory for Nigeria's political struggles, societal corruption, and spiritual resilience. Azaro remembers in his closing words: "I wanted the liberty of limitation, to have to find or create new roads for this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be" (1991:487). The narrative uses symbols such as the road, the spirits, and the characters' struggles to reflect deeper truths about life and human existence.

6. Non-Resolution: The novel aligns with its circular structure and the recurring theme of the abiku spirit, who is caught in a cycle of birth and death. Azaro also informs us about what happens to the spirit children that choose to stay, "Our minds are invaded by the images of the future. We are the strange ones, with half of our beings always in the spirit world (1991:4). The novel depicts a worldview that acknowledges ancestral and unborn spirits, a parallel spirit realm, and the ability of certain individuals (abikus, herbalists, witches, etc.) to communicate with them. Its non-resolution and lack of closure reinforces the perpetual struggle of life, poverty, and hope in the face of adversity.

The Language of Hybridism in *The Famished Road*

The constitutive feature of the text is a powerfully appealing hybridism of the realistic and the fabulous which involve speech acts in their linguistic articulation. Obviously, the characters of Okri, particularly Azaro, acknowledge that there exists a tension between the "real" and the "magical" features of the world they inhabit. As Zamora and Faris put it, "in magical realist texts... the supernatural is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (1995:3).

The *Famished Road* as a post modern text reveals "a multiplicity of narrative dimensions and cultural inter discursivity" (Ogunsanwo 1995:41). With the help of intertextuality, integrating and intertwining narrative modes, Okri provides the amalgamation of

the spirit and mundane worlds. The novel is post-colonial and multicultural in form and content. Ogunsanwo asserts that the novel is neo-traditionalist, decolonized, and post modern as it is "a bold rewriting and reinterpretation of the writer's socio-cultural past. The recontextualization has taken place only after their colonial experience" (1995:42). For Ogunsanwo, Okri never simply offers a nostalgic return to old African traditions as represented through Azaro, the abiku child who embraces his past, present, and whose future lives with him. Rather, his neo-traditional art is actually a "rewriting of the socio-cultural past in the present in a way that demands critical reinterpretation in anticipation of the future" as this is revealed in the encoding of some narrative and linguistic acts (1995:45).

In the novel, Azaro, the abiku child goes back and forth between the world soft he is living and the dead, and becomes the most important example and symbol of hybridism. Again, Azaro is a proof of the existence of magical realist vision in the text. Often, he has been "caught in the middle space between the living and the dead" (Okri1991:258) and this reminds us of Faris's assertion:

We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds (...) The magical realist vision exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Fluid boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead are traced only to be crossed (2004:172).

Hence, the abiku child serves as a tool that combines the natural and the supernatural, and equally blurs the boundaries between the two worlds. The following quotation reveals one of Azaro's experiences with one of his companions:

(...) I found the three headed spirit sitting beside me. He had never left. He had been waiting patiently. (...) Dad was on his chair, polishing his boots. He looked at me furtively. I felt the frailty of parents, how powerless they are. And because he made no attempts to reach me, made no gestures towards me, did nothing to appease me, did not even attempt a smile at me, I listened to what the three-headed spirit was saying. "Your parents are treating you atrociously," he said. Come with me. Your companions are desperate to embrace you. There is truly a wonderful feast awaiting your home-coming. (...) "Dad got up from his chair and stood over me. His breathing manifested itself as a heavy wind in the world in which I was traveling. (...) The spirit caught me and dragged me down to the ground. "Don't fly away," the spirit said. "If you fly away I don't know

where you will and (...)" Dad coughed and It ripped over a green bump on the road. *Wetravelledon* (1991:326-328).

The above quotation proves that Azaro concurrently captures two distinct worlds and sees both the spiritual and the mundane worlds as real. His metaphorical consciousness is defined in a realistic picture. And while shuttling between the two worlds, he can both talk to the three headed spirit and observe his father's behavior carefully. Okri poses two contrasting elements continually and then combines them in the deconstruction of the paradigm which the characters face. As a result, his ambiguity is not perplexing but rather deliberate, as he suggests to the reader that a solution lies in the combining of worlds, and not in the loss of one for the gain of another. And in combining two worlds and in discovering new possibilities, Okri expresses a new hope for Nigeria.

Again, using this hybrid genre, Okri refutes the assumed superiority of Western knowledge systems. He deliberately creates the spirit world as a tangible embodiment of traditional knowledge, equally real to the more familiar reality of the living world. In the disorder of Western and Nigerian knowledge systems colliding prior to independence, Okri seeks to reject the assumed superiority of Western knowledge. Azaro's divided ontological state is symbolic of the external conflicts between traditional Nigeria and the imposing Western world. Through the interaction of the two realms, the novel blurs the lines of reality, easing between phantasmagoric and factual scenes seamlessly. This, however, creates an uncertain reality caught between conflicting contexts, thus knowledge becomes indeterminate.

Knowledge, Speech Acts and Context

Okri divulges ignorance's role through its negative, positive and existential forms, while also considering an individual's awareness of its influence. The novel captures the concept of ignorance as a reflection of its context, contorting Western bias of what constitutes knowledge to a wider perspective. Basically, knowledge is obtained from experiences, from contexts. Therefore, restricted circumstances lead to manifestation of ignorance. So, ignorance stems from lack of knowledge.

Azaro, the protagonist lives within a restricted context. An impoverished child in rural Nigeria, his world consists of the locations he frequents: his home, Madame Koto's Bar and the forest. Beyond this, the descriptions become distorted and transient where "all the paths had fractured" (1991:78). The italicized is a speech act of a class called assertives. These transitive speech acts (taking a single, direct object) with an 'epistemic' modality (describing what is) include statements, descriptions and assertions and "their point is to represent how

things are" (Searle 1970:69). The italicized quotation suggests Azaro's inability to comprehend knowledge existing beyond his contained reality. His own youth also limits his exposure to knowledge in "You are too young to hear all this" (Okri 1991:264) reflects how society creates contextual restrictions in order to protect. Within this, knowledge possessed reflects what is necessary to each individual, as Azaro is without need for superfluous knowledge not necessary for survival.

Dad desires knowledge. Despite their poverty, he attempts to gain esoteric knowledge through buying books and this cripples his family, as "his son starves, his wife is lean" (1991:419). Contrastingly, "We watched her learning to drive the car" (1991:379). This shows Madame Koto's indulgence in new learning, a luxury only afforded with wealth. In this, ignorance is reflective of socio-economic means. Ignorance is also reflective of age. As Azaro matures, his immersion in the "Living world" expands, while his interactions with the spiritual world decline, and his ignorance innately echoes this: "As a child I could read people's minds. I could foretell their future" (1991:11). Mind reading is a skill that fades rapidly, as Azaro's initial close affiliation with the spirit world abates. With this, his immersion in the living world expands, and so does his knowledge, "grumbling in an ancient monotone about how hard life was, I listened intently, for I had begun to understand something of what she meant" (1991:177). Azaro's loss of spiritual knowledge and skill is replaced by practical understanding, thus reflecting his evolving context.

Within the novel, the uncertainty of conflicting contexts creates difficulty in discerning knowledge from ignorance: "The rain made everything alien. Its persistence altered my vision. After a while it seemed to me that beyond the screen lay a bazaar of mysteries, a subcontinent of the forbidden" (1991:289). Rain as symbol of the transitions within the novel blurs reality. Confusion rises as a specific form of ignorance as "The fight became confused. Everyone seemed to be hitting everyone else" (1991:337). With change, knowledge fluctuates, and ignorance becomes dominant. From this, ignorance is depicted as an evolving phenomenon reflective of both physical and social contexts in the novel. From this idea of ignorance as only possessive of irrelevant knowledge, Okri depicts ignorance as benign.

Yet, we observed that ignorance is not an inconsequential force. It can be advantageous, constructing and constituting a drive for knowledge. In a surrealistic dream sequence, a community of spirit labour over the construction of a road. They possess "an infinity of hope and an eternity of struggles. Nothing can destroy them except themselves and they will never finish the road that is their soul and they do not know it" (1991:330). In this, Okri insinuates

that their existence is sustained by their ignorance of the futility of their toil. Ignorance relieves the burden of knowledge, manifesting hope. Again, ignorance alludes to the occurrence of curiosity, implied in, "could these be the reasons why I wanted to be born-these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of the living while one is alive" (1991:487-488). Humanity's discomfort with the unknown elicits progress. In the title, *The Famished Road*, the metaphorical road of life is intrinsically linked with our hunger for more. For Okri, "And because the road was once a river it was always hungry" (1991:3) illustrates the endless ignorance that we endlessly seek to fill, sustaining us.

Furthermore, vulnerable population is an inevitable repercussion of ignorance. Through the desperate demand of understanding coupled with illiteracy within the context, distorted conceptions often eventuate. With Madame Koto's sudden wealth, spurious rumour of "They said she had been drinking human blood to lengthen her life and that she was more than hundred years old" (1991:374), is readily accepted by the village inhabitants. Their deluded theories are primarily due to their innate desperation to understand. Yet it is also due to their prior contextual understandings. In the context of Nigeria, witchcraft is a legitimate explanation of her sudden success. Early in the novel, the imagery surrounding Madame Koto, "cauldron of pepper soup" (1991:102) and "the white beads which she had dug in to the ground at night" (1991:102), authenticate the claims of Madame Koto's witchcraft in the context of traditional Nigeria. These italicized quotations are speech acts and they are distinguished according to how they mediate the relationship between the 'word' and the 'world'.

The five speech act categories according to Searle are:

Representatives (or assertives)

Directives

Commissives

Expressives, and

Declarative

The quotations above are mainly representatives. These speech acts are assertions about a state of affairs in the world; hence "they are called 'assertives' and thus carry the value 'true' or 'false'..." (Leech 1983:128). And that is their 'point', that is, they should match the world in order to be true. In the novel, Ade, one of the spirit-child companions describes the country (Nigeria) as an abiku. He asserts, "Our country is an abiku country. Like the spirit child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain; it will become strong"

(1991:478). Here, Ade, the spirit companion of Azaro informs and at the same time asserts that the major organizing symbol in *The Famished Road* is the symbol of African nations, particularly Nigeria as an abiku nation. To Searle, the central intellectual fact about the contemporary world is that we already know all aspects of reality, and that this stock of knowledge is growing by the hour. Furthermore, this research shows that a major task for speech acts is to account for how speakers/characters can succeed in what they say and do despite the various ways in which linguistic meaning undermines use. The story in *The Famished Road* is the story of Azaro who is at the same time man and spirit; who decides to remain in his fifth visitation to the earth. Azaro's story combines two strains. The first strain takes up Azaro's story of his experiences while here on earth. The second strain shows Azaro's experiences as a symbolic representation of the nation's historical experiences.

Dad found out that all nations are children, it shocked him that ours too was an abiku nation, aspirit-child nation, one that keeps being reborn and after each birth came blood and betrayals (1991:494). For an abiku child to stay and live his normal life on earth, the parents will need to consult herbalists and make expensive sacrifices. As Dad discovered, "the child of our will (the nation) refuses to stay till we have made propitious sacrifice and displayed our serious intent to bear the weight of a unique destiny" (1991:494). The speech acts in this quotation is called directives. These speech acts embody an effort on the part of the speaker to get the hearer to do something, to 'direct' him or her towards some goal (of the speaker's, mostly). This is "their illocutionary point; at the extreme of this category, we have the classical imperative" (Mey2001:120).

Note that 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 (Levinson 1979) and therefore, it is always a pragmatic act rather than a mere speech act. Speech acts, in order to be effective, have to be situated. That is to say, they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realized. Speech acts as we see them in *The Famished Road* are verbal action shappingen in the world. In uttering a speech act, one does something with his/her words: he performs an activity that (at least intentionally) brings about a change in the existing state of affairs (hence the label, performative utterances that originally was attached to speech acts).

Speech Acts and Narrativity in the Novel

Toolan (1988) believes that events or change of events is the key and fundamental of narrative. He defines narrative as "a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events" (1988:7). In this definition, the phrase non-randomly connected events "implies that narrative is not an amorphous amalgam of events but an organized set of events performed with speech acts. Whatever may be the structure of narrative, as Barthes (1968) observes, "It is through narrative we make sense of our world" (Barthes quoted in Sim 1999:275). This study shows that Okri's narrative style is brought about as a response to societal vices and ills, political turmoil, spiritual and moral decadence prevalent in his home country, Nigeria. According to Prince, narrative is "there counting (as product and process, object and act structure and structuration) of one or more fictitious events communicated by one, two or several narrators to one, two or several narratees" (Prince 1982:4). Thus, narrative can either be by an individual or a group. Whatever the case maybe, narrative is a set of events told by a narrator to a narratee. And what they use in the process of narration are basically speech acts.

John Austin, however, gave three instances of speech acts namely:

- i. Locutionary act
- ii. Illocutionary act, and
- iii. Perlocutionary act

In John Searle's "An Essay in the Philosophy of Language" (1970) a locutionary act is the performance of an utterance and hence of a speech act. The term equally refers to the surface meaning of an utterance because, according to Austin's *How to do Things with Words*, a speech act should be analyzed as a locutionary act (i.e. the actual utterance and its ostensible meaning, comprising phonetic, phatic and rhetic acts) corresponding to the verbal, syntactic and semantic aspects of any meaningful utterance, as well as an illocutionary act, the semantic "illocutionary force" of an utterance, thus its real, intended meaning, and in certain cases a further perlocutionary act (i.e. its actual effect, whether intended or not). Austin developed speech act theory from the basic belief that language is used to perform actions: thus, its fundamental insights focus on how meaning and action are related to language.

In the novel under study, we encounter politicians (from the party of the Rich) and their empty promises. The free milk they gave out to the hungry poor masses is poisoned milk which made every one that took it ill, "the rotten milk of bad politics" (Okri 1991:132) as the author, Okri called it. Listen to the narration and conversation that took place between the masses and the politicians before the dishing out of the rotten milk. The politician in the van speaks on behalf of his party members.

'VOTE FOR US. WE ARE THE PARTY OF THE RICH, FRIENDS OF THE POOR...'

'The poor has no friends; someone in the crowd said. 'Only rats.'

'IF YOU VOTE FOR US...'

'...we are finished.' Someone added

'...WE WILL FEED YOUR CHILDREN...'

'...lies.'

'...AND WE WILL BRING YOU GOOD ROADS...'

'...which the rain will turn into gutters!'

'...AND WE WILL BRING ELECTRICITY...'

'...so you can see better how to rob us!'

'...AND WE WILL BUILD SCHOOLS...'

'...to teach illiteracy!'

'...AND HOSPITALS. WE WILL MAKE YOU RICH LIKE US. THERE IS PLENTY FOR EVERYBODY. PLENTY OF FOOD. PLENTY OF POWER. VOTE FOR UNITY AND POWER!'

By this time the mocking voices were silent.

'And to prove to you that WE ARE NOT EMPTY WORDS BRING YOUR CHILDREN TO US. WE ARE GIVING AWAY FREE MILK! YES, FREE MILK FROM US, COURTESY OF OUR GREAT PARTY!' (Okri1991:123).

The politicians eventually gave out poisoned milk that caused the famished poor untold suffering and sickness. And the authorial voice says about the milk "All the jollity and good feeling of Sunday gave way to groans, to cries of incomprehension, and demands for a witch-doctor's investigation" (1991:130). On another occasion, the politicians came back with their "van of bad politics" (1991:152) and this time with sacks of garri. They blare 'passionate' speeches through their loud hailer, blaming the party of the poor with ferocious conviction for impersonating and pretending to be them (i.e. The Party of the Rich). They claim that their rivalry, the Party of the Poor actually gave them the poisoned milk and not them, the Party of the Rich.

Hear them:

"THEY WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE MILK, NOT US. THEY WANT TO DISCREDIT US" (1991:152).

The above quotation is an illocutionary act. It is a linguistic act that constitutes an imperative statement and a denial at once. The people find their statement and claim very ridiculous and

strange because at the back of their van are the very same people who had come around the first time. They recognize the mall. But now they came with bags of garri, with twice the number of thugs. According to the author, "they had whips and clubs among the garri bags and they seemed prepared for charity and war at the same time (1991:152-153). The politicians maintained with great vigour, WE ARE YOUR FRIENDS. WE WILL BRING YOU ELECTRICITY AND BAD ROADS, NOT GOOD MILK, I MEAN GOOD ROAD, NOT BAD MILK (1991:153).

The claim, "We are your friends" is a kind of positive self-presentation in which the politicians claim closeness and affinity to the ordinary masses. The intention of the politicians is to gain the confidence and trust of the audience. Obviously, persuasion is central to political discourse, hence the politicians' appeal to the conscience and emotion of the hungry rural dwellers. This in fact is the perlocutionary force with which the party wants to hold the poor masses. The Party of the Rich wants to evoke the feeling of oneness with the ordinary people and indirectly incite them against their opposition (i.e. The Party of the Poor). Furthermore, the author uses the slip of the tongue committed by the politicians to indict them and reveal the true nature of the Party of the Rich. In *Infinite Riches* (the third volume of the *abiku* trilogy). Okri refers to such promises and claims of the politicians as "contradictory promises" (1998:200). We witness an interchange between the politicians and the inhabitants after they made their contradictory promises:

'TRUSTUS!TRUSTOURLEADERS!TRUSTOURGARRI!OURPARTYBELIEVESINSHARINGTHENATIONALGARRIAND...'

'LIES!' Someone cried from the crowd.

'THIEVES!' said another.

'POISONERS!'

'MURDERERS!'

Although the politicians hand out pans of garri, no one came forward to receive any, the inhabitants just surged and massed silently around their van. It was as if a message was being passed along. And as the author rightly pointed out, "there was something ominous in their silence" (1991:153).

We can analyze the politicians' utterances as having verbal, syntactic and semantic structure with an illocutionary force which have its semantic, real and intended meanings. What follows next is an expected illocutionary act or force; and this is the actual effect necessitated from and by the locutionary and illocutionary acts. The masses call them liars, thieves,

poisoners and murderers. The effect of their utterances and the outcome that followed the politicians' action are obvious because they couldn't withstand the angry poor masses who beat them (i.e. the politicians) to a pulp and got their van burnt down.

So, we can understand the complexities of social life and social change through the language employed. But we also observe that the social is not reducible to a set of logical characteristics of language. That said, it is of course true that human social life-coordinating, planning, strategizing, conspiring, cooperating, competing, or narrativity is enormously dependent on our ability to use language to express our thoughts and intentions. In other words, social actions and social structures are reciprocal and inseparable and they are necessitated by speech acts inherent in narratives.

Conclusion

Words give man his moorings and reference points; a sense of definition and equilibrium. Language is an integral part of social life. A good part of our social life consists of speech acts and narratives and the routine exchange of linguistic expressions in the day-to-day flow of social interactions. Okri however uses the resources of language to establish the themes of the supernatural and social power semantics. This research shows that speech act theory can be used in analyzing magical realist texts and those linguistic expressions are not analyzed in isolation from the specific social conditions in which they are used.

Findings reveal that the theory of speech acts emphasizes that utterances have a different or specific meaning to its user and listener other than its meaning according to the raw linguistic data. Almost every speech act is really the performance of several acts at once, distinguished by different aspects of the speaker's intention: there is the act of saying something, what one does in saying it, such as requesting, ordering, narrating, stating or promising and how one is trying to affect one's audience so as to achieve a particular result.

Language itself is endowed with a distinctly material presence, thereby exemplifying the power of words. Narrativity involves languageuse. When we narrate, we put forward a message about the understanding or meaning we receive from (or attribute to) our experiences. Narratives are thus a way of presenting and representing the world, or particular aspects of it in a textual form that interpret that world in a particular way. The narrative and communicative acts employed by Okri are intended to positively change his world (environment) and these goals are achieved by means of linguistic and other codes shared by

the speakers and hearers. Again, language and its meanings cannot be effectively studied or understood outside the socio-linguistic and socio-cultural contexts in which it functions.

Okri has, however, succeeded in using linguistic resources to encode the existential realities of his society and to vividly paint a picture of anomalies and disjuncture by conceptualizing the Nigerian society as an abiku. This study reveals and concludes that the abiku continued metamorphosis of the nation can be salvaged and living conditions improved if the leaders and citizens are willing and ready to "bear the weight of a unique destiny" by addressing once and for all the root problems besetting it as a nation and equally focus their attention on in violate areas of the African consciousness. The author's narrative ideology, however, awakens and reasserts the lost national consciousness and also queries and rejects Western demeaning and demonization of African spiritual and cultural values and practices.

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