

The Cooperative Principle, Conversation and Poetic Monologue: A Stylistic Study of Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*

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Introduction

One of the motivations for this paper comes from the nature of literature. Literature itself has been defined as 'artistic creation through language and its product'(McArthur 565). Egudu (1) sees it as 'a mode or method of expression...the way, manner or method in which something is said or expressed'. To Hudson (10), the object of literature is to impart knowledge and 'yield aesthetic satisfaction by the manner in which it handles its theme'. And to Obi (488), literature 'encourages the use of language, not only for oral communication, but also for discourse within the community'. One point that runs through all these views is the affective nature of literature through the instrument of language. Language has been viewed as the chief means by which human beings communicate'(Williamson 1). Thus, literature is communication between writers and their readers.

Another motivation for this paper is the recent trend in the poetics of Nigerian poetry. Literary scholars like Ojaide, Jegede, and Ezenwa-Ohaeto (see Works Cited) are all agreed that Nigerian poetry now tilts towards a poetry of orality. This brand of poetry is composed deliberately with an ear for performance (Jegede 154) and thus written 'in ways that are acceptable to the highly critical live evidence'(Ezenwa-Ohaeto 14). It therefore features elements of oral communication. Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice of the Night Masquerade*(The Voice henceforth) is written in this style.

This paper then posits that Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice* is not just a one-way flow of information from the poet (or his persona) to the audience. Rather, it is a turn in the conversation between the poet's persona and the audience. Thus the paper highlights features of conversation exhibited in the anthology. Secondly, since the anthology is a conversation turn, this paper holds that a pragmatic approach to its analysis will accentuate its message and aesthetic quality. Thus, this paper weighs the language of the text on the scale of Grice's cooperative principle to see how much cooperation exists between the poet's persona and the audience.

Some clarification is expedient at this juncture. The foregoing discourse might give the impression of only one persona for *The Voice*. However, it should be stated that the anthology has two personas, but the role of one is just to introduce the other. The first person speaks in the first poem in the anthology, 'A Call at Dusk', preparing a conducive atmosphere

for the appearance of the major persona: the night masquerade. Laced with proverbs, anecdotes and other wise sayings, the first persona invokes the second:

Call

Call, call

Call out the masquerade (14)

The persona's role ends with his announcement that:

the masquerade is out –(15)

Every other poem in the anthology is now taken to be an utterance by the second persona: the night masquerade. And these constitute the focus of this paper. In other words, this discourse is restricted to the utterance of the masquerade alone since they make up the poet's message.

A Brief Review of *The Voice*

African literature is essentially functional and Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice* is no exception. The anthology is born out of the poet's desire to make society better (Oyali 2). Written essentially for the Nigerian audience, the anthology was published when Nigeria was steeped deep in military dictatorship and the attendant high level of brazen corruption, sycophancy, murder, prostitution fear and massive migration of Nigerians to countries abroad for fear of their lives or in search of better means of livelihood. Thus the anthology addresses such ills in the society as corrupt leadership ('The Spirit Ties me to the Earth'), tyranny ('Each Night One Fled'), prostitution ('On the Streets at Night'), sycophancy ('The Dancing Bee Is About to Sting'). It also identifies the neglect of our natural resources as the cause of the search for greener pastures abroad and then calls for concerted efforts to tap these resources and develop the country ('The Treasure at Home' and 'Planting Seeds in the Womb of Time'). The anthology further eulogises literary icons of national and international repute, living and dead, to recapitulate their contributions to societal growth as well as to inspire the younger generation to hold on to noble ideas ('A Chant for the Dead' and 'Songs for the Living').

***The Voice* as a Conversation Turn**

Mey (135) defines conversation as 'what happens among people; when we use language together (as in 'con-versation'), our speech acting only makes sense in our common context'. He also sees it as 'a way of using language socially, of 'doing things with words'together with other persons'(136). It involves the exchange of utterances between two or more persons for the purpose of communication. Though complex, conversation is essentially structured and has identifiable features.

In the first place, conversation usually features adjacency pairs: pairs of utterances one of which is a response to the other. Wardhaugh (195) explains this concept thus:

A greeting leads to a return of greeting; a summons leads to a response; a question leads to an answer; a request or offer leads to an acceptance or refusal; a complaint leads to an apology or some kind of rejection; a statement leads to some kind of confirmation or recognition; a compliment leads to acceptance or rejection; a farewell leads to a farewell; and so on.

Secondly, conversation involves two or more people; thus some principles govern who speaks at what point. This is called the principle of turn-taking. Sacks (quoted in Mey 139) has identified a turn –a shift in the direction of the speaking ‘flow’–as the basic unit of conversation.

In addition to these, conversation also has ways of getting started, usually an exchange of greeting. Such utterance or ‘attention getter’ is often called a pre-sequence. And once such pre-sequences are exchanged, it becomes necessary to establish the topic(s) of the conversation. Wardhaugh (299) adds that once a topic is established, ‘speakers can keep it going by employing many of the ...devices they use as individuals to keep their turns going’. And when the topic(s) are exhausted, the conversation is brought to a close, usually with an exchange of ritualistic ‘Goodbyes’.

Our text is peculiar: it presents the utterances of only one of the participants –the persona of the anthology invariably the night masquerade. The title of the anthology lends weight to this claim. Ezenwa-Ohaeto himself also accentuates this in the proword where he establishes that the decay in the society demands the appearance of the night masquerade. He then declares that ‘this is the voice of the night masquerade, I am only the medium’(8). The presentation of only one unit of conversation can be linked to the nature of the persona.

The masquerade in Igboland is generally known as *mmonwu*, morphologically a blend of *mmuo* (spirit) and *onwu* (death). Literally, *mmonwu* means spirit of death. The masquerade is a masked person who manifests ‘some ontological relationship with the land of spirits and the dead’(Eboh 383). Nzekwu (quoted in Anigala 34) observes that masquerades ‘are representatives of ancestral sprits and these sprits’are superior to mere mortals, and constitute an unusual phenomenon when they assume physical forms’. Though the identity of the masked person may be known, it is never discussed openly (Achebe 63-64). And, according to Oha (webpage), these secrecy and sacredness accorded to this knowledge accentuate the glory and power of the masquerade. They are necessary for the masquerade to perform his duties efficiently.

These duties include conflict resolution, social regulation and control. The masquerade is the supreme legislative authority in traditional Igbo society (Aniakor 316). Thus his authority is rarely challenged. His judgements are final. Achebe alludes to this authority in chapter ten of *Things Fall Apart* where the masquerade rules on the case between Uzowulu and his in-laws.

Evil Forest began to speak and all the while he spoke everyone was silent. The eight other egwugwu were as still as statues. (66)

In other words, masquerading provides a convenient forum for passing 'impeccable' judgements, expected not to be questioned. Thus, the masked person can go as far as pointing up the excess of political leaders.

Back to our text, this attribute of the masquerade must have informed the poet's presenting only his utterance since the other participant in the conversation event –the society –is expected not to question his pontifications. Challenging the masquerade attracts very serious penalties. So, presenting the other participant's defence might not only be distasteful but also might affect the credibility of the presentation.

However, *The Voice* features other characteristics of conversation. The anthology begins with the invocation of the night masquerade in 'A Call at Dusk'. And the masquerade appears in the very next poem aptly titled 'Raising a Chant'. This poem starts thus:

Raise a chant for me
 Raise a chant for me
 can you cast a spell
 can you cast a spell
 If you are not a spirit
 Can you cast a spell? (16)

The masquerade apparently just appears and is asking his followers to welcome him with some praise chants. Indeed, this particular poem is a compendium of praises for the night masquerade, emphasising his aura and power, his omnipotent and omniscient character:

I am the third eye
 The invisible one
 If you cannot see me
 Does it mean I cannot see you? (17)

Through with the ritualistic opening greetings, the masquerade goes ahead to address the issues that call for his appearance. Thus, the

following twenty-six poems address the various ailing aspects of the society. These constitute the topics of the conversation.

The topics exhausted, his mission over, the night masquerade has to leave. And the last two poems of the anthology make up the ritualistic closing greetings. The penultimate poem, 'A Chant at the Anthole' starts thus

Masquerades emerge from antholes

Masquerades depart through antholes (91)

The last stanza of same poem reads:

I started a journey in the night

A new day is about to break

The beautiful eagle will depart

The masquerade is at the anthole

The night masquerade does his job at night and is now at the anthole, ready to depart to the land of the spirits. The last poem aptly titled 'Fading Chant' features what might be properly called the masquerade's valedictory speech, reflecting on the possible effect of his message:

The night masquerade has spoken

Time unfolds the sense of words

And just the same way as he appears, the masquerade departs asking that a chant be raised for him:

Raise a chant for me

Raise a chant for me

Raise a chant for ---

The dash indeed gives the impression of the fading voice of the masquerade.

Having shown that *The Voice* is indeed a turn, a unit of conversation, this paper will now investigate how much co-operation exists between the masquerade and his audience.

The Co-operative Principle in *The Voice*

Communication is the goal of every act of conversation and occurs 'when hearers are able to accurately identify the intended meaning of the speaker's utterance and respond to it' (Bello and Ajose 253). Scholars on conversation studies have established that conversations have order and structure. One outcome of such studies is Grice's cooperative principle which posits that a kind of tacit agreement exists between speakers and

listeners while conversing. Grice (45) sums the thrust of his postulation thus

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

He supports the principle with four maxims (as reported by Saeed 204-205)

The Maxim of Quality

Try to make your contribution one that is true, i.e.

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Quantity

1. Make your contributions as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

The Maxim of Relevance (Relation)

Make your contributions relevant

The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous; and specifically:

1. Avoid ambiguity
2. Avoid obscurity
3. Be brief
4. Be orderly

These maxims, however, are not rules to be followed, but basic assumptions about speaker-hearer conduct during conversation. They can be violated and/or flouted. While the former takes place when the speaker secretly breaks the maxims, for example, by lying, the latter occurs when the speaker breaks them for some linguistic effect (Saeed 206). Flouting them, however, does not mean the breakdown of the communication process since the speaker's intended meaning can still be got through implicature and inference. The choice of inference or implicature depends largely on the point of view from which the text is approached. For according to Yule (40), 'it is speakers who communicate meaning via implicatures and it is listeners who recognise those communicated meanings via inference.

In *The Voice*, only the maxims of quality and manner are flouted. The masquerade indeed adheres to the maxims of quantity by being neither

under or over-informative. And utterances that seem not relevant to the discourse at first sight actually contribute a lot to the poet's message. In view of these, this discourse will focus on the maxims of quality and manner.

'Raising a Chant' flouts the maxim of quality. Here the masquerade tells blatant lies by declaring

I am the tree

I cannot be climbed

I am the earth

I cannot be carried (16)

I am the fly

I never perch on one spot

I am the third eye

The invisible one

If you cannot see me

Does it mean that I cannot see you? (17)

Similar lies abound in 'A Chant at the Anthole':

I am the raffia straw that talks

I am the spirit that talks,

I am the leopard that kills and devours,

I am the fearful two-headed snake,

I am knower of things done in secret (92)

Obviously, the persona does not expect his audience to interpret his utterances literally. He cannot be all of these at the same time. Rather, they are metaphors that point at his acclaimed qualities: a spirit, omniscient, omnipotent, indefatigable, fearless, indomitable, and invincible. Indeed, the audience know that the masquerade is a masked person, but they will not acknowledge it in the open. This then gives the masquerade the leverage to make such claims. It should be noted that these claims are made mainly at the masquerade's appearance and departure. So, such impression is necessary for the masquerade to maintain his aura and power.

Apart from this, the masquerade also says things that are difficult to prove. 'Before God Goes to Bed's start thus:

I must go see God
before God goes to bed (23)

This implies that God goes to bed at some point and that the speaker has access to Him. Such claims cannot be verified because, as is generally believed, no mortal man has seen God who in turn is believed to be never-sleeping. Again, this flouting of the maxim of quality does not break down the communication process. Since the masquerade is believed to be a spirit, he is not restricted like mortals. So he is believed to have access to God and know His sleeping schedule. The poem laments the strange ways evil triumphs in the land and innocent people suffer the brunt.

Somewhere a shrine was defiled
Elsewhere the gods wreaked vengeance,
For crimes in the rainy season
They seek revenge in the dry season,
I now have a taste of things to come
I have tasted blood (23)

The innocent suffer for a crime they know nothing about. Punishments are meted at the wrong periods. The future seems more horrible. The masquerade then wonders whether God has deserted the land or is simply not interested in her affairs.

I am assembling the questions:
Is God now tired of this land? (23)

But I must go see God
Before God goes to bed
But tell me quickly
When does God go to bed? (24)

This last excerpt, incidentally the last stanza of the poem, betrays the human nature of the masquerade. He seems not to know God's schedule. It also foregrounds how hopeless the situation seems since the people's last hope –the masquerade –seems not to know what to do.

Obviously, the most flouted maxim is that of manner. The masquerade's manner of presenting his messages does not seem to be cooperative. For instance, he masks many things in metaphors and

imagery thereby taking his audience to task. Interpreting his message then seems an exclusive preserve of a select few. For instance, the tyranny of military dictatorship espoused in 'Each Night One Fled' is hidden in the metaphor of the ogre and the voice:

Each dawn the ogre fed
 A stream of blood flowed
 And the voice that sang at dusk
 Never wakes with us (34)

The poem is apparently pointing at cases like the purported state-sponsored death of Dele Giwa through a letter bomb and the brazen murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists.

Secondly, most of the poems seem to lack organisation with so many seemingly incoherent allusions. 'Planting Seeds in the Womb of Time' reads in part:

The rain starts with a drizzle:

Know that the death of a contemporary
 Warns the one who is still alive;

When rain clouds gather
 Dark clouds warn the day
 Rumbling sounds warn the blind
 And the rain starts with a drizzle;

If the trap catches the clever bush rats
 How can the sluggish bush rat escape;

The rain starts with a drizzle

I walk a little I pause a while
 I walk a little I talk a while (83)

In fact, it requires a very attentive audience to link the allusions to rain clouds, death of a contemporary, traps and bush rats, walking and pausing. But all of this is a warning of the danger that awaits corrupt public leaders. These lines establish the link

When you appropriate public wealth
You owe the public a large debt.

I talk loud
The weed must be uprooted
The weed ruined the farm

This apparent masking of message can be explained. Inasmuch as the masquerade is a spirit, he also recognises the audience's tacit knowledge of his identity. And when the victim of his vituperations or satire is a powerful person, then the masked person's life becomes endangered. Kolawole (35) tells the story of an oral poet who is manhandled for criticising a governor. So the masquerade performs his duties stealthily. But his message is not lost. In fact, his resort to proverbs and other graphic allusions increases the audience's chances of retaining the information and acting on same even long after the message is sent. Proverbs are based on a people's experience and reflect their social value and sensibility (Akporobaro 69). Indeed, the masquerade's message would have been less forceful if it had been presented directly.

Another aspect of the maxim of manner flouted is on brevity of expression. The text features a lot of repetitions. 'Raising a Chant' for example, starts thus:

Raise a chant for me
Raise a chant for me
 can you cast a spell
 can you cast a spell
 If you are not a spirit
Can you cast a spell? (16)

The second part of 'The Mouth of the Night' is punctuated at random with Abali di egwuc. Similarly, 'The Treasure at Home' features the almost tiresome repetition of 'It is the treasure at home...' However, these repetitions do not affect the communication process negatively. Rather, they emphasise the ideas being repeated. Chukwuma (20) observes that repetition is 'a means of establishing emphases... a method of oral learning and retention of data.' The repetitions actually aid the audience's memory.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that although Ezenwa-Ohaeto's *The Voice* appears to be a monologue, it is actually a turn in the conversation between the persona and his audience. The presentation of only the turn of

the masquerade is apparently intended to stress the importance of the masquerade's message. And, indeed, if the poet had presented the utterances of the other conversational participant, this discourse would have identified all the features of conversation in the text. Besides, the text might also have featured floutings of the maxims of quantity and relevance as well.

Another instance where a 'full' or 'complete' conversation between the persona and another participant will take place is where another poetry anthology is published in response to *The Voice*; just as *Song of Ocol* is a response to *Song of Lawino*. This paper then calls on linguists and critics to be more vigorous in applying pragmatics – a branch of linguistics – to the study of poetry. Though this practice seems to be out of place, this discourse has demonstrated its viability and vitality and then ask that its 'treasures' be harnessed maximally.

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