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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PRAGMATIC DEVIANCE OF METAPHOR IN SHONEYIN'S *THE SECRET LIVES OF BABA SEGI'S WIVES*

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Abstract

*The theory of implicature propounded by Grice brings to linguistic enquiry the concept that speakers often say more than is semantically coded. This phenomenon, being pervasively employed in metaphoric language, engenders a semantic cum pragmatic symbiotic approach to the interpretation of tropes – a model that embellishes the sentence meaning, arising from its semantic structure, with appropriate contextual information and/or encyclopaedic knowledge of the world, derived from pragmatics. The paper investigates how metaphors in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* are pragmatically deviant by infringing the maxims of the Cooperative Principle literally, and how*

readers can work out the implicature. The study shows that most metaphors in the text flout the Maxims of Quality, Manner and Relation. However, the utterance meaning derived from enriching the conventional content of the expressions with contextual details ultimately preserves the Cooperative Principle.

Introduction

The Secret Lives of Baba Segi deals copiously with taboo subjects such as sex, sensual pleasure, and fertility. Many literary writers shy away from explicitness when handling such subject matters. Shoneyin demonstrates literary bravery and uncommon ingenuity in using taboo vocabulary and erotic language, but nevertheless shoves many of her descriptions into obliquity by employing a plethora of tropes among which metaphor stands out. The effect is to allow the reader to grasp the actual message via implicature.

Grice's Theory of Implicature posits that "...it is possible to mean (in some general sense) more than what is actually 'said' (i.e. more than what is literary expressed by the conventional sense of the linguistic expression uttered)" (Levinson 97). Thus, if meaning often goes beyond what is semantically coded, there arises a discrepancy between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. This prompts the hearer, who believes in the Cooperative Principle that guides conversation, to search for a new meaning of the utterance that upholds the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Saeed sees the Cooperative Principle as a kind of tacit agreement by speakers and listeners to cooperate in communication - an agreement that instils in a speaker the expectation that the hearer will work out the implicature of the utterance (204). He believes that the success of communication depends on the extent of correspondence between interpretation and utterance meaning (211). It is on the framework of the Implicature Theory that the pragmatic deviance of metaphor is hinged, given that what is expressed metaphorically is usually beyond the literal meaning.

Arseneaut avers that "almost every metaphor theorist accepts the Deviance Thesis: metaphor is essentially nonstandard and deviates

either semantically or pragmatically.... The Deviance Thesis views metaphor as being either literary false or conceptually incongruous” (598). Promoting this stance, Saeed posits, according to Literal Language Theory, that metaphor and other non-literal uses of language require a different processing strategy than literal language (16). The underlying argument is that, although hearers generally recognize non-literal language as semantically odd or factually nonsensical, they are not limited by this awareness; rather, they proceed to provide a suitable interpretation to the utterance by a sheer assumption that the speakers are definitely trying to make sense. For example if a speaker utters this sentence: *Before the robbers forcefully opened the door, I have died ten thousand times*, semantically it is impossible to die twice let alone ten thousand times. Pragmatically, the expression blatantly flouts the Cooperative Principle Maxim of Quality: try to make your contribution one that is true. Thus, the sentence becomes both semantically and pragmatically deviant. However, relying on the assumption of cooperation, the hearer draws the implicature by fleshing out the utterance based on contextual factors. The ability to arrive at this implicature effectively is a mark of pragmatic competence. Leech sees a pragmatic analyst as a receiver who tries to make sense of the content of a discourse according to whatever contextual evidence is available, regarding context as “any background knowledge assumed to be shared by *s* (speaker) and *h* (hearer) and which constitutes to *h*’s interpretation of what *s* means by a given utterance” (13).

Metaphor theorists disagree about the kind of expressions that come under metaphoric language. Two views are prominent: the broad view that categorize all figurative language as metaphor and the narrow view that distinguishes metaphor from other non-literal tropes. The latter sense conceives of metaphor as “what makes us think of one thing as another” (Arseneault 597). This second notion of metaphor will guide the corpus of metaphor selected for pragmatic analysis.

Synopsis of the Text

Shoneyin discusses in the text the ugly secrets of the wives of Mr Alao featured in the text as Baba Segi. He marries three wives who bear him eight children. Trouble springs up in the polygamous family with the coming of the fourth wife Bolanle, who is unable to conceive. Baba Segi, desperately worried about Bolanle's barrenness, takes her to hospital for medical examination. Fear grips the other wives at this development which will most likely uncover their abominable source of fruitfulness. Iya Segi and Iya Femi plant a charm in Baba Segi's bedroom and accuse Bolanle of bewitching their husband. Their plan to oust Bolanle out of their matrimonial home, to safeguard their secret, fails as Bolanle wriggles out of the frame up. Undeterred, Iya Segi and Iya Femi connive to give Bolanle poisoned chicken as refreshment from Femi's birthday. Bolanle innocently offers the chicken to Segi. She eats and falls seriously ill and is hospitalized. Bolanle's medical tests reveal that she is fertile. Baba Segi is invited for medical test. The result shows that he is infertile. To unravel the mystery of Baba Segi's paternity of his children, Iya Segi the first wife is invited by the doctor. She knows their game is up and confesses before the doctor and Baba Segi that all her husband's children are not fathered by him. Heartbroken by the deceit, Baba Segi asks the unfaithful wives to pack out with their children. Segi dies. The offending wives plead for forgiveness. Baba Segi pardons them so that his impotence will not be uncovered for public glare. Bolanle decides to go back to her father's house since there's no hope of conception.

Semantic Versus Pragmatic Accounts of Metaphor

Cognitive semantics (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Lakoff 1987) champion metaphor's creative value and role in the expansion of the vocabulary of a language as words are coined to fit new conditions. They see metaphor as no special use of language and argue that all language is basically metaphorical (Saeed 16). Although the cognitive essence of metaphor is incontrovertible, that all language is

metaphorical is blatantly unacceptable. Some metaphors in common use, with time, blend with literal language. This obscures their metaphoricity with the result that the task of inferring their sense becomes minimally tasking. However, this does not rule out the existence of metaphors which are glaringly non-literal, semantically weird, and pragmatically deviant.

Arseneault maintains that the cognitive value of metaphor should be separated from its deviance which may be viewed as either a violation of semantic rules or as a violation of pragmatic constraints. Illustrating this view, the author cites a typical metaphor *The stone died* as being semantically anomalous considering the semantic features of the noun *stone* against that of the verb *died*. *Stone* has the following features: object, physical, nonliving and mineral while the verb *die* has features such as process, result, cease to be (living). The specified features show that 'die' selects human, animal or plant; thus, the noun *stone* cannot select a verb of the above features to avoid a violation of selection restriction rule (598).

Hintikka, Jaakko and Sando Gabriel (1990) propose a different model of characterizing the semantic deviance of metaphor via possible world semantics. They believe that metaphorical meaning is constructed by visualizing the notional meaning lines which connect the individual in their respective possible world – a line that is defined by qualitative or functional similarity. This is to say that concepts compared share underlying attributes or qualities rather than semantic features (Arseneault 598). It should be, however, noted that these underlying attributes mapped on concepts cannot be thoroughly accounted for by semantics. Thus, however metaphor is viewed semantically, the fact remains that some metaphors need to be fleshed out by context. The same metaphorical utterance may vary from context to context. For example, the utterance: *The bomb exploded* has both a literal meaning and a metaphorical meaning. While the literal meaning is single, the metaphorical meaning varies from one context to the other and can only be truly interpreted pragmatically.

Traditional semantic theories of metaphor have a long standing view that metaphor is a central semantic process and not a problem in pragmatics at all. Two theories stand out in this view: the Comparison Theory and the Interactional Theory. The Comparison Theory sees metaphor as “simile with suppressed or deleted predications” (Levinson 148). Based on this theory *Lago is an eel* is semantically equivalent to *Lago is like an eel*. The Interactional Theory, according to Levinson, views metaphor as special uses of linguistic expression in which one ‘metaphorical’ expression (or focus) is embedded in another ‘literal’ expression (or frame), with the result that the meaning of the focus interacts with and changes the meaning of the frame and vice versa (148). He further argues that the two theories are beset with problems. On the one hand, not all metaphors have simile-equivalents. On the other hand, the mapping of features in the Interactional theory is too limited and determinate to convey the metaphoric force of the expressions coupled with the fact that “many aspects of the force have more to do with the contingent factual (real-world) attributes of the referents of the metaphoric focus than with the semantic features that can be claimed to express its meaning” (150).

It is on this observation that a pragmatic account of metaphor is predicated as much of the meaning ascribed to metaphors is derived from encyclopaedic knowledge of the world rather than from the semantic features of the referents. This kind of meaning arises from what Levinson calls ‘connotational penumbra’ of the expression in question (150). A pragmatic approach to metaphor will, thus, be based on the assumption that the principles of semantic interpretation cannot yield the metaphoric content of an utterance. What semantics does is to “provide a characterization of the literal meaning or conventional content of the expressions involved and from this, together with details of the context, pragmatics will have to provide the metaphorical interpretation” (156). This interpretation that arises from the conversational context is called implicature.

Pragmatic Analyses of Metaphors

The pragmatic deviance of metaphor will be analysed by evaluating how the metaphors infringe the Gricean maxims of the Cooperative Principles (CP). It is therefore pertinent to present the maxims to guide the analysis. As cited by Mey, the CP comprises four pragmatic subprinciples or maxims:

The Maxim of Quantity:

1. Make your contribution as informative as required;
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

The Maxim of Quality:

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

The Maxim of Relation: Make your contribution relevant.

The Maxim of Manner: *Be perspicuous, and specifically:*

1. Avoid obscurity
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief
4. Be orderly. (72)

Emphasis is laid on deliberate contravention or flouting of these maxims to realize a metaphorical utterance. According to Greenall, once such a breach is spotted, the hearer (reader) who believes the speaker is notwithstanding being cooperative will commence a search for an alternative meaning of the utterance that observes the maxim(s) and consequently observes the Cooperative Principle (569).

1. ‘...two years before he had boasted of his conquest: how Bolanle was tight as a bottleneck, how he pounded her until she was cross-eyed....all the pounding is in vain’. (4)

Based on Greenall's model of interpretation cited above, the following steps will be employed to arrive at the meaning of utterance (1) and subsequent utterances:

- a. Speaker (*s*) has uttered *U* (1) to hearer (*h*).
- b. *U* (1) breaches the maxim of quality by being literally untrue as a man does not pound his wife.
- c. But *h* has no reason to believe that *s* is not observing the CP.
- d. Thus, *s*'s *U* must mean something other than the literal meaning of 'pounded'.
- e. Background knowledge/context tells *h* that coitus was going on and that *s*'s sexual exercise can be compared to the use of a pestle to pound something.
- f. This leads to the implicature that 'pounded' means 'sex'. The implicature becomes a relevant *U* meaning and observes the CP.

The metaphoric use of 'pounded' for 'sex' also flouts the Maxim of Manner by being obscure, although the obscurity is employed to hedge a taboo subject. 'The pounding is in vain' implicates that Bolanle is childless. However, 'as tight as a bottleneck' is a simile which is not the preoccupation of this paper though it enriches the context that yields the metaphoric implicature.

2. '...he returned at midnight to hammer me like never before. He emptied his testicles as deep into my womb as never before.' (43)

The metaphor in (2) is similar to 'pounding' in (1). In this case 'hammer' is used as a metaphor for sex. To think of sex literally as 'hammer' is semantically deviant. Yet, pragmatically, context explicates the metaphoric meaning. The utterance flouts the Maxims of Quantity and Manner by being literally untrue, and obscure respectively. The use of 'hammer' to depict sex implicates that the act is not pleasurable to the speaker. The implicated meaning of 'hammer' is justified by the subsequent utterance. Again, it is impossible to empty one's testicles deep into a partner's womb during coitus, but a

whole is used for the part (synecdoche) to show the desperation of the man to impregnate his wife. The utterance meaning is arrived at by rejecting the propositional meaning to draw the implicature.

3. '...Baba Segi had taken the opportunity to let his eyes lick her unpainted fingernails, her lean face, her dark, plump lips, and her eyes.' (6)

There is a semantic anomaly in the above utterance in that eyes cannot lick; only the tongue does. And even the tongue does not 'lick' someone else's finger nails. Thus, the utterance does not only violate selection restriction rules but also flouts the CP Maxim of Quality by making an untrue contribution. Employing the usual strategy of fleshing out semantic meaning with background knowledge, the reader arrives at the implicature that the speaker absorbs with admiration the natural appearance and beauty of the other party just as the tongue licks tasty food. By extension, the utterance implicates that the speaker lusts after the woman described.

4. 'Then one day, as Mama sat in the front yard wrinkling her nose, the babies would leak down her leg.' (15)

Utterance (4) infringes the Maxim of Quality. It is semantically odd to think of babies as leaking down a woman's leg. Only liquid substances leak; babies are solid. Context explicates this semantic cum pragmatic deviance by providing an alternative utterance meaning: miscarriage.

5. 'While we waited for the traffic warden to wave us through, bread-sellers descended on the pick-up. Little fingers force-fed the car through the half open window on the passenger side.' (18)

'Little fingers' is a synecdoche. A part has been used to represent the whole. The metaphorical interest in the utterance lies with the expression 'force-fed the car'. While it is impossible to feed a car with bread, knowledge of the world embellishes the utterance with the implicature that small children (little fingers) clustered round the car

to display their commodity (bread) persuasively through the car window to solicit patronage from the occupants. The proposition, literally viewed, exploits the Maxim of Quality, yet the utterance meaning preserves the CP.

6. 'After a night with Baba Segi, the stomach is beaten into the chest by the baton that dangles between his legs.' (50)

'Baton' in this context is a metaphor for 'penis'. This metaphorical meaning is derived by implicature. The sentence flouts the Maxims of Quality and Manner in being untrue and obscure respectively. The reader is not deterred by the pragmatic deviance; rather, by taking context into account, a new meaning of 'baton' (penis), which upholds the CP, emerges.

7. 'Let's cut her feathers.' (66)

Utterance (7) is semantically and pragmatically deviant: the former because it violates selection restriction and the latter because it flouts outright the Maxim of Quality. That human beings have feathers is unthinkable as 'feather' is a feature of animals. The implicature is, thus, 'Let's incapacitate her'.

8. 'I didn't know that our stray hen had brought friends until I heard them rattling....' (75)

A similar mode of explanation in (7) holds for utterance (8). A human species is metaphorically thought of as a 'stray hen'. The accompanying text 'friends' makes it clear that the speaker certainly does not mean 'hen' *per se*. Background knowledge of how a stray hen behaves paves the way for the inference that preserves the CP and disregards the flouted Maxim of Quality.

9. 'Her eyes swept across the tiny fruits on my chest...by the time her husband finished the introductions, the lamps in her eyes were dead.' (83)

While it is not difficult to interpret the metaphor in 'her eyes swept' which according to Cognitive semanticists has become quite

conventionalized having acquired a somewhat literal meaning, 'tiny fruits on my chest' and 'lamps in her eyes were dead' are not literal at all. Both flout the maxim of Quantity and 'fruits' additionally flouts the maxim of manner: avoid obscurity. The usual fleshing out is done to work out the implicature via context that 'fruit' and 'lamp' mean 'breasts' and 'glow' respectively.

10. 'My daughters were born with eyes in their stomachs so they are quick to digest all that they see.' (88)

Utterance (10) exploits flagrantly the Maxim of Quantity in its literal sense. It is semantic fallacy to say that somebody is born with eyes in the stomach. If semantic meaning is enriched to accommodate context of situation, the implicature that the speaker's daughters are quick in analyzing situations intelligently, just as the stomach digests food, becomes apparent.

11. 'I have a secret. I have started weeding again. I do it when Baba Segi comes to lie with me. He doesn't like it; he keeps clasping my hands high above my head to stop me but when he is in the throes of humping, I wriggle one arm out of his grip. I close my eyes and crape the soil. I push aside the leaves; I prod the stem and pinch the bud. My mind goes to the meat seller so I pull slowly, very slowly. Then, quite unexpectedly, the plant is uprooted and pulsing at my fingertips.' (89)

According to Saeed, sentence meaning under represents speaker's meaning and requires that the hearer must enrich meaning to get an interpretation (211). Bearing this in mind, the reader is not surprised nor deterred by the conflicting use of agricultural register in the context of coitus in utterance (11) and the consequent flouting of the Maxims of Quality and Manner. The words *weeding*, *soil*, *leaves*, *stem*, *bud*, and *plant* are metaphorically used in a way that is not easily understood. However, Levinson asserts that the assumption of cooperation in conversation is very robust for even when a speaker overtly deviates from a maxim, his utterance is still considered to be

underlyingly cooperative, making it possible for inferences to be drawn by the hearer to sustain the overarching Cooperative Principle (109). Consequently, any reasonably informed reader knows that extract (11) is blatantly false literally but searches further to get a meaning that preserves the CP. Although Leech says that it is difficult to know what a speaker means by an utterance (30), a contextual wager may likely yield the following interpretation for the metaphoric words: *weeding* – caressing, *soil* – vagina, *leaves* – pubic hair, *stem* – penis, *bud* – clitoris, *plant uprooted unexpectedly* – eruption of orgasm. The avoidance of explicitness here and the preference for obliquity is to circumvent the use of taboo words and weaken their erotic import.

12. ‘I worked for many years not knowing the scent of women until the spirit of Ayikara found me and sucked me into its belly.’ (200)

Women obviously do not have a particular scent. ‘Scent of women’ therefore implicates ‘canal knowledge of women’. ‘Ayikara’ is a metonymy for harlotry (identifying something by that which is closely associated with it). Ayikara in the text is a place where harlots converge to entertain their clients. It is pragmatic deviance to view Ayikara as a person capable of finding another and sucking him or her into its belly as it does not even have a belly. *U* (12) flouts the maxims of quantity (having given under dose of information), quality (being untrue), and manner (being obscure). The implicature that the speaker heavily indulged in patronizing harlots is drawn.

13. ‘...when it seemed Iya Segi’s back would be permanently gummed to our matrimonial mat. Within months, she was forced on her side, her belly bulbous....’ (201)

Utterance (13) flouts the Maxim of Quantity by being semantically untrue. It is impossible for a woman’s back to be gummed to the matrimonial mat, let alone permanently. Encyclopedic knowledge clarifies the linguistic input to yield the implicature that a pregnant woman lies on her side rather than on her back while beforehand she

lies on her back to receive the 'seed'. So if one lies permanently gummed to the mat, she is unable to conceive. The co-text complements the implicature metaphorically: 'her belly bulbous'.

14. 'My belly is ringing its bell.' (203)

15. 'The wind has teeth today.' (206)

Utterances (14) and (15) flout the Maxim of Quality by being false. The wind cannot have teeth; neither does the belly ring a bell. A pragmatic interpretation will yield new meanings: the speaker is hungry and the weather is deeply cold respectively.

16. 'When the pick-up drove into the compound, the windscreen brought a piece of the sun with it.' (202)

It is impossible for the windscreen of a car to bring a piece of the sun with it into a compound. The sun cannot even be broken into pieces. However context enriches the linguistic information to give the implicature that the sun means 'joy' or 'happiness' in this utterance considering that the pick-up in question has just brought Segi home. She has just been discharged from hospital, having missed death from food poisoning narrowly. The original semantics of the sentence flouts the Maxim of Quality while the utterance meaning observes the CP.

17. 'Curled between her thighs was a flawless snail. Her lips were beautifully defined halves encasing perfect pink. So lost was I in the wonder of the pulsating snail... with my hand twitching in my shorts' (220)

18. 'Women are fickle creatures! They will eventually destroy this world with their slippery, slimy snails.' (221)

Utterances (17) and (18) present women as having 'snail' as part of their physiology. This contribution, being untrue, is both semantically and pragmatically deviant. Contextual inference and background knowledge provide the utterance meaning that 'snail' means the female genitalia (vagina). The 'lips' in (17) means 'clitoris'. Undoubtedly, the sight of snail cannot be pulsating nor arousing to the beholder as seen in 'with my hand twitching in my shorts'. In (18)

women are even said to be capable of destroying the world with their 'slippery, slimy snails'. The utterances flout the two sub maxims of manner by being ambiguous and obscure, and the maxim of quality by being untrue.

19. 'Indeed you have been no more than a door keeper. The day those children can open doors by themselves, they will depart and you will be left with nothing.' (230)

In the above utterance, since the children can open doors at the time of speech, 'opening of door' is not literally meant or it will amount to fallacy. The sentence flouts the Maxim of Quality and the Maxim of Relation – the latter because the utterance seems to make an irrelevant contribution. However, the context implicates that 'doorkeeper' means a guardian or a breadwinner while 'opening door' means 'fending for themselves'.

20. '... the silence in the Alao house grew until it was so sharp it stung the eye and drew salt water from the nose.' (231)

Semantically analysed, silence an inanimate concept selects a verb 'sting' of the feature animate. Thus, utterance (20) is both semantically and pragmatically deviant. 'Silence' cannot sting, neither can it draw salt water from the nose. 'Salt water' is a metaphor for 'mucus'. The sentence exploits the maxim of quality but the implicature observes the CP. The utterance could mean that the uncertainty of the fate of Baba Segi's wives, owing to their discovered infidelity, makes the women cry and their noses runny.

Conclusion

Metaphors are pervasively used in describing the plethora of human experience. They form part of the most dynamic way of creating new and apt expressions by way of extension of words to fit into contexts in which such words ordinarily do not occur. Metaphor provides a writer with a mother lode of vocabulary items and the license to use them regardless of semantic feature rules, thereby engendering semantic and pragmatic deviance in most cases. The analyses in this

paper show that metaphors are constructed based on knowledge of the world combined with linguistic knowledge. Thus, the work of interpreting metaphorical utterances captures a bipartite mode that employs a convergence of conventional or semantic content with contextual details. The convergence is embellished with analogical thinking to derive the utterance meaning which resolves the flouted maxims and upholds the Cooperative Principle via implicature. This eclectic method constitutes a pragmatic approach to metaphor. All in all, “unloading the ‘loaded weapon’ of language by deconstructing its metaphors is thus an appropriate task of pragmatics” (Mey 305).

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