

Ethno-Pragmatic Study of Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *The Placenta of Death*

ERHUVWU ANITA MALEDO
University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract. This paper is an ethno-pragmatic study of proverbs in Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife* (1982) and *The Placenta of Death* (2007) in the face of the paucity of linguistic studies of the plays of Sam Ukala. It applies Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory with insights from Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication. The focus is to explain how politeness features are appropriated to guide the usage of proverbs in the selected plays, while paying attention to the ethnographic features of the usage of proverbs. Ten proverbs are purposefully selected from the texts for a rigorous and qualitative analysis. Findings show that the politeness routines and the ethnographic features of speaking appropriately guide the usage of proverbs in the socio-cultural context of the plays and they ensure that there is no breakdown in communication. Specifically, the politeness features inherent in the proverbs are face saving devices (though some proverbs contain face threatening acts) as they help to ease tensions in their mitigating roles while Dell Hymes' speaking demonstrates that the use of proverbs in the texts obeys the social-cultural norms of interaction of Owa people. Finally, the paper shows the relevance of the place of linguistics in the study of the plays of Sam Ukala.

Keywords: Politeness, Proverbs, Sam Ukala, Ethnography of Speaking

1. Introduction

Language can be simply defined as a means of communication and interaction. It is a means by which humans express their thoughts, ideas, feelings and emotions among others. Language is primarily oral as the spoken form precedes the written form. Culture on the other hand consists of whatever one must know to function in a particular society. This is succinctly defined by Goodenough (1957, p.167) when he states that a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to

operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for anyone of themselves" (cited in Wardhaugh, 2000, p.216).

Language as a system of sign has cultural values. In fact, language embodies and expresses cultural reality (Kramsch, 1998, p. 3). The relationship between language and culture has been well studied in the field of Sociolinguistics. The culture of a particular society or group of people reflects in the language of that society while the language of a society is a means of expressing the culture of that society. This relationship gave rise to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which is a claim that "the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the world" (Wardhaugh, 2000, p. 216).

As a playwright, Sam Ukala explores folklore as an aspect of the culture of his people in his dramatic creativity. Lindsfor (2002) defines folklore in its broadest sense to include popular beliefs, stereotypes, and verbal performance types as well as folktales, proverbs, and other forms of patterned oral arts (as cited in Tugbokorwei, 2018, p.78). In the same vein, Brundvand (1968) sees folklore as those materials in culture that circulate traditionally among members of any group in different versions, whether in oral form or by means of customary examples (cited in Tugbokorwei, 2018, p. 73-74). Sam Ukala's drama explores aspects of folklore materials of his native culture as defined above. His reliance on the use of folklore materials gave birth to his theoretical construct "folkism" as a literary theory designed for the analysis and interpretation of texts that manifests the use of folk materials. Essentially, he dwells on the exploration of folkloric materials such as folktales, proverbs, songs, incantations, oracle, among other non-verbal art forms. For instance, the storyline behind *The Slave Wife* (1982) and *The Placenta of Death* (2007) which are selected for this study is folktales and the plays are referred to as folk scripts. Ukala also makes use of proverbs as a

means of cultural communication to manage social conflicts and minimize friction in the socio-cultural context of his folk plays. Therefore, this study applies ethnography of communication and politeness as pragmatic tools in the analysis and interpretation of proverbs in the two selected plays of Sam Ukala.

2. Literature Review

Of the different oral literary forms, the proverb is one of the forms proven to be of continuing importance to modern man. Proverb can be defined as traditional sayings which are concise, witty and figurative in form and which usually express a truth derived from practical experiences (Akpobaro, 2006). Generally, proverbs are short witty sayings which contain general truths. The language is often forceful, in compressed form. Akpobaro (2006) further posits that proverbs are powerful and effective instruments for the transmission of culture, social morality, manners and ideas of a people from one generation to another. Proverbial sayings are usually regarded as incontrovertible truths.

A playwright, poet, actor, and theater director, Sam Ukala is not a new name in the usage of proverb in the discourse of contemporary Nigerian drama and theatre. He has published over eight dramatic texts amongst which are *Break a Boil*, *The Placenta of Death*, *The Log in Your Eye*, *The Slave Wife*, *The Last Heroes*, *Akpakaland* and the 2014 Nigerian LNG award winning play, *Iredi War*. His dramatic texts have also received a good number of critical and scholarly attentions. However, most of them are in the directions of folkloric/literary criticisms and theatrical studies with very little attention paid to his plays from the point of view of linguistic criticism. For instance, out of the forty-seven chapters in a festschrift in honour of Sam Ukala edited by Tugbokorwei and Anyawu (2018), none is a study from linguistic orientation. Also, in another collection edited by Ogude and Egede (1999) in honour of Sam Ukala, none of the essays is from the point of view of language. Furthermore, Agho (1999) is a study of the dialectics of power play in Sam Ukala's *Placenta of Death*. He sees the play as a transmutation of a folktale on the theme of misrule, high-handedness, rivalry and other human related weakness into a parable for characterizing the ill health of the Nigerian polity. He goes further to show how the play encapsulate power play as dialectal opposition between the ruler and the ruled, the rich and the poor, the slave and the freeborn and the dramatic fusion of classes of the poor and the slave at the end of the play. Opara (1999) examines Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *The Log in Your Eye* from the

perspective of the poetics of gender politics. She sees Ukala as a writer who counters the sexist tradition of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Wole Soyinka and strives to depict women pitted against vitiating cultural factors.

Examining how tokens of folklore, such as narration, songs, idioms, morals and other traditional motifs are employed to orchestrate a conformity that draws a parallel between the present and the past is the focus of Nwaozuzu (2018) in her critical study of Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *Akpakaland*. Ihekwe and Obah (2018) focus their study on indigenous patterns of women oppression and liminality in *Akpakaland* and *The Slave Wife*. They conclude that the two plays demonstrate Ukala's foregrounding of traditional histrionics through his female characters that embody the worst form of female oppression and liminality. Bello (2018) is an exemplification of conflict and power relation in *Akpakaland* and *Placenta of Death*. He avers that conflict arises in the two plays as a result of the desire of the senior wife to protect her position and situation from a rival wife using means that are not so orthodox.

Ehiemua (1999) adopts a Post-Structuralist reading of *The Placenta of Death* and *The Last Heroes*. He states that a dimension in Ukala's drama is that the forces of tyranny finally lose grip and gets dethroned and there is the enthronement of the will of the masses or the oppressed people. In concluding, he suggests that the entire drama of Ukala be subjected to a post-structuralist interpretation to see how the texts deconstruct themselves and provide a valid and uninhibited understanding of culture and the implications of social relationship. Ibhawoh (1999) sees *The Slave Wife* as a piece of oral historical material of the Owa people. He sees the triumph of good and justice over evil, of moral rights over power and influence, and the rise of the down trodden oppressed slave over her oppressors as sufficiently familiar theories in history. He concludes that oral literature is an important part of oral historical tradition which forms the basis of the historian's reconstruction of the African past. Bello (2013) discusses aspects of African tradition in Ukala's plays. He posits that Ukala's plays are influenced by the Ika traditional experiences of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. He concludes that the playwright blends Ika folklore with his western conception of drama.

In another vein, the theories adopted for this study have been successfully adopted by scholars in similar studies. Houssaini (2019) is a sociolinguistic approach of taboo words in Moroccan society. The

study combines societal and situational factors to investigate how they influence taboo. The paper avers that euphemisms are used in place of taboo expressions. Using Hymes' ethnography as the major framework, it concludes that taboo expressions and euphemisms differ from one individual to another depending on sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, educational background and the context of use. Also, Arewa and Dundes (1964) apply Dell Hymes' "Speaking" in their study of Yoruba proverbs of child training. They argue that since folklore is communication, then the ways in which it is used to communicate should be taken into account. Their study underscores the relevance of ethnographic features of proverb as a folkloric material. Odebode (2012) discusses Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* using Dell Hymes' Ethnography of communication. He concludes that this approach gives a deeper and better understanding of utterances as portrayed by characters in the text in terms of the components of the acronym "speaking". Obeng (1996) is a study of the politeness features of proverbs as a mitigating strategy in Akan discourse. Essentially, he adopts Brown and Levinson's (1987) concept of "face". The paper explicates the pragmatic significance of proverbs in advice-giving and concludes that proverbs play important roles in the management of face in Akan. Odebunmi (2008) is a study of crisis-motivated proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to Blame*. The paper applies Mey's (2001) pragmatic act approach and categorizes the proverbs into socio-crisis motivated proverbs and political-crisis motivated proverbs. It concludes that the pragmatic study of literary proverbs used in crisis situation makes a contribution to the paremiological pool and provides a helpful tool for language teaching.

From the above review, the evident fact that there is paucity of linguistic study of Sam Ukala's plays is obvious. This is the prime motivator for this study.

2.1 Synopsis of the selected texts

Sam Ukala's plays are mainly rooted in folklore. The playwright skilfully blends folkloric materials with features of modern African drama. The two plays selected for this study are adaptations from aspects of the folktales of Owa people in the present Ika area of Delta State.

The Slave Wife is based on the importance of a male heir/child in the Ika tradition. Oba Ogiso, the king of Idu's five wives have not been able to give birth to a male heir who will inherit his throne after his death as the throne must be occupied after him by his heir.

This is a great concern, not only to the king but also to the chiefs and the entire people of Idu as the kingship is hereditary. The oracle divines that the king should marry a slave who shall beget him a male child. This he did and after much intrigues, the male child borne by the slave wife returns home.

The story line of *The Placenta of Death* is not too different from that of *The Slave Wife*. In *The Placenta of Death*, Sam Ukala weaves folklore, narration and dramatization. He enlarges a family crisis into a national calamity and transforms a folktale into a metaphor of contemporary times. The play lays bare the nature of individual and communal tragedy, man's dichotomy into social class and how the oppression of the poor by the powerful in the society culminates in an uprising.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Dell Hyme's (1962) ethnography of communication. Politeness generally has to do with the practical application of good manners (Salami, 2014 p.6). In linguistics, it is a framework that looks at the way and means in which one can avoid causing offence in a speech situation/event. Different scholars have proposed different models of the politeness theory. Lakoff (1977) proposes three rules of politeness: formality - do not impose/remain aloof; hesitancy - give the addressee his options and equality or camaraderie - act as if you and the addressee were equal or make him feel good. Leech (1983) proposes a set of politeness maxims which includes tact maxim - minimize cost to others, maximise benefit to others; generosity maxim - minimise benefit to self, maximise cost to self; approbation maxim - minimise dispraise of others, maximise praise of others and modesty maxim - minimise praise of self, maximise dispraise of self, agreement maxim - minimize disagreement between self and other and sympathy maxim - minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

However, Brown and Levinson (1978) developed a model of politeness which is more valid across cultures. An interesting aspect of their model is the introduction of the concept of "face" as something that is emotionally invested and which can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Fasold, 1990, p.160). According to them, the notion of face is central to their model and this consists of two specific kinds of wishes or desires which they termed "face wants": the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative

face) and the desire to be approved of in some respects (positive face). (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.13) They developed certain acts known as face threatening acts (FTA) which are liable to damage or threaten another person's face. To mitigate the damage that face threats may cause, speakers adopt some strategies designed to avoid conversational breakdown as a result of the failure to address their addresser's face needs (Adegbite, 2004). This concept of face is relevant to our study as the use of proverbs helps to mitigate and minimize a potential face threat. It helps to soften the force of impending face threatening act (FTA) on the hearer. The use of proverb also helps to maintain a speaker's face since his can also be threatened by the face threatening act inherent in his own utterance (Obeng, p.521).

The Ethnography of a communication of event is a description of the factors that are relevant in understanding how that particular communicative event achieves its objective (Wardhaugh, 2000 p.242). The term "ethnography" is a way of discovering the nature of social relationship in a culture. According to Fasold (1990), ethnography of communication is a framework which relates language to its social and cultural contexts of use. It is the study of language in culture and in this type of study, one is interested in both the roles of a language and the rules for the use of the language (Arewa and Dundes, 1964, p.71). In proposing this theory, Dell Hymes (1964) was of the view that different cultures communicate in different ways, however, all forms of communication require a shared code (as cited in Odebode and Eke-Opara, 2015, p. 14). Thus, he suggests that there are certain components of speech event that an ethnographer should look out for. According to Fasold (2000, p.43), Hymes (1972) groups them into eight with the acronym SPEAKING.

Wardhaugh (2000, p. 243) summarizes the acronym as shown below. *S* stands for setting and scene. Setting is the concrete physical circumstances in which a speech event takes place while scene is the psychological setting or the cultural definition of the occasion. *P* stands for participants which may include addresser-addressee, speaker-listener or sender-receiver who play socially specified roles in a speech event. *E* means ends. This has to do with the expected outcome or the personal goal that the participants seek to achieve with an utterance or in a speech event. *A* is act sequence which is the actual form or the precise words, how they are used and the relationship between what is said and the actual topic at hand. *K* is key and it stands for the tone, manner, or the spirit in which a particular message is

conveyed while *I* stands for instrumentalities and it is the choice of channel: oral, written, the language, dialect, code or register. *N* stands for norms of interaction and interpretation. It refers to the specific behaviour and properties that are attached to speaking while *G* is genre and it stands for the clearly demarcated types of utterance. These ethnographic features of a speech event are applied to our data as it helps to look at the rules for the use of proverbs in the selected texts.

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this study is textual analysis. Our data which consists of ten proverbs (five per text) are extracted from Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *The Placenta of Death* and presented for analysis. In our data presentation, the proverbs are numbered serially with SW and PD preceding each serial number to indicate excerpt from *The Slave Wife* and *The Placenta of Death* respectively. The choice of texts and the selection of proverbs from each text are purposeful since from available study not much has been done from the point of view of language in any of the plays of Sam Ukala. Also, the selection of ten proverbs from the two texts is done essentially to allow for a detailed and rigorous analysis as the study deploys a qualitative method of data analysis. The extracted proverbs were analysed one after the other by applying Dell Hyme's Ethnography of communication and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory which were appropriate since proverbs are folkloric materials.

4. Analysis and findings

The analysis reveals that politeness routines and the ethnographic features of speaking appropriately guide the usage of proverbs in the sociocultural context of the plays and they ensure that there is no breakdown in communication. Proverbs play very important roles in face management. This is due to the fact that some of the politeness features inherent in the proverbs are face saving devices as they help to ease tensions in their mitigating roles. It is also discovered that the four politeness strategies: positive politeness, negative politeness, bald on record and off record as postulated by Brown and Levinson (1987) manifest in the data.

SW1. Pear roasted in haste ... gets burnt (p. 4)

This proverb is uttered by Eteruma to Ologbosere in the presence of Ogiso and other chiefs. In the opening scene when king Ogiso has gathered the palace chiefs and sent for the Oracle priest, Obu, to divine why his wives are yet to get pregnant to

produce a male child that will inherit the throne when he, Oba Ogiso, is no more. Pragmatically, it is a positive politeness strategy as it helps to avoid disagreement between the Oba and the oracle priest. It is used to maintain the addresser and the addressee's face in that the addresser's utterance is not seen as a warning to Ologbosere. The proverb expresses warm and positive concern for Eteruma, Ologbosere and the listeners (audience) including Oba Ogiso. It is also used to minimize the impending friction with the Oracle priest, Obu. It conveys Eteruma's unwillingness to impose his thoughts and ideas on the anger and violence expressed by Ogiso and supported by Ologbosere. In so doing, it is appropriate with the face work done here.

Ethnographically, it is in a declarative form and a response to Ologbosere's tacit support of king Ogiso's anger to deal with the Oracle priest, Obu, if he fails to speak the truth. The end is to urge Ologbosere directly and king Ogiso indirectly to exercise caution and be patient with the Oracle priest. Thus, it is advisory with serious tone with respect to the subject matter at hand. With regard to the context, setting and participants, this proverb is appropriately used by the addresser to the addressee and the audience as the age of the speaker and the addressee and listeners makes it so. The key is also appropriate as it does not elicit any form of negative response from the addressee.

SW2. I have sweated night after night in the arms of the slave, pounding out my very life but the yam has simply refused to mash (p. 5).

The first part of this proverb is a face threatening act. The Oba referring to his wife as "the slave" threatens the positive face of his youngest wife even though she is not physically present at the scene of the discourse. The second part is a face saving strategy employed by the Oba. He uses it to address his positive face, to elicit pity and exonerate himself from being the cause of the slave wife's inability to get pregnant as a result of his weakness. "The yam has refused to mash" is suggestive of the fact that despite his efforts, the woman has simply refused to get pregnant. This proverb therefore is a positive politeness strategy.

The setting is still Oba Ogiso's hall while the participants are Ogiso, the addresser, and his chiefs, the addressees. They are all awaiting the arrival of the Oracle priest, Obu. The proverb likens the coital efforts of the Oba to make the slave wife pregnant to no avail to that of a yam that is pounded in a mortar but refuses to mash. As part of the ethnographic rule

of most Nigerian culture in general and Owa people in particular, issues of sex and pregnancy are considered a taboo in open public interaction. Thus, Ogiso has to use a means of linguistic indirectness not only to show his communicative competence but also to address his own positive face as the speaker and that of the addressee and the audience. The end is to register his frustration in the process of having a male child to occupy his throne after his demise. The key is serious in a frustrated tone. As a play text, the instrumentality is oral while the norm of interaction is strictly observed as the proverb can be considered appropriate in terms of its linguistic form and context of situation.

SW3. A tooth that must pull, pulls even at a meal of pounded cocoyam (p. 5)

The physical setting is still Ogiso's hall with Ogiso and the chiefs waiting for Obu. This proverb is used by Ezomo in response to Ologbosere's rhetorical question, "has the oracle not lied before?". In this context, this proverb is interpreted to mean that what is bad is already bad. The key is also appropriate as it creates the intended impression on the addressees. The speaker uses this positive politeness strategy to address the positive face of Ogiso that it is not the fault of the Oracle that the slave wife is not pregnant yet. As he says further, the oracle has directed them well during the wars. In summary, this proverb tries to avoid the face threatening act of "the oracle is not responsible for Ogiso's inability to make the slave wife pregnant". Therefore, it is a mitigating device in the context of use. Again, what the speaker aims to achieve is patience and caution on the side of Ogiso as what will be will be. The act of a tooth pulling in the presence of the soft meal (pounded cocoyam) is linked to social context of Ogiso's inability of making the slave wife pregnant. The proverb obeys the social-interactional norms of the Ika people as no one is expected to address the Oba with the bare facts of any matter not to talk of his weakness. Thus, it mitigates and minimizes the face threatening act on the positive face of Oba Ogiso while at the same time it is a face saving device on the side of the speaker.

SW4. No one can detect a cock from an egg. (p. 8)

This proverb is uttered by Obu, the oracle priest to Oba Ogiso and his chiefs in the Oba's hall at the end of his consultation. The setting and scene are very appropriate for the proverb as it is a declarative statement to the question by Ologbosere "may we ask the oracle who the lucky woman shall be?" As tradition demands, it is a taboo in most African cultural tradition to ask or to guess who will get

pregnant or who will give birth to a child between two women. Pragmatically, the proverb is meant to address the positive face of Ogiso and his chiefs. An “I do not know” for an answer from the Oracle would have meant an open affront and thus, a face threatening act. But the proverb mitigates the FTA on both the speaker and the hearers by presenting the answer in a way to show the impossibility of what they are asking for to all of them. It is an indirect way of avoiding the imposition and FTA on the question asked by Ologboshere and Eteruma. It is thus, a negative politeness strategy as it indicates reluctance to divulge sensitive information. By the social-cultural distance and relation between the participants, the Oracle, Obu, is here culturally superior to both Ogiso and the chiefs. Thus, he is very appropriate in using the proverb as the knowledge of knowing the unknown is reposed in him. From this perspective, his using this proverb which can be interpreted as a denial of divulging the knowledge of the gods can also be seen as FTA. Thus, the end can be seen as a conservation of the knowledge of the gods while the act sequence is very appropriate as no one can actually detect a cock from an egg in the real world. This proverb is uttered in serious tone as matters of the gods are not taken lightly in Owa tradition. This elicits the mood of seriousness in the addressees.

SW5. ...anyone who plants where the land is out and out dry must water and water his seed (p. 19)

This proverb is used by Eteruma to address Oba Ogiso and the physical setting is the Oba’s palace. Other listeners are the chiefs. The Oba’s attendants are also present as passive observers/listeners. In this scene, the Oba is anxious to go to war and enlarge his kingdom. He complains of being the only one busy “prodding the sore of whoever opens hers”. But he is turned between a choice of staying at home “to water his seed” (have sex with the slave wife to make her pregnant and give birth to a male child that will succeed him) or go to war to enlarge his kingdom. The proverb is a declarative statement which likens the Oba’s slave wife as a dry land which must be watered for the plant to grow. So the Oba must stay at home to perform his manly duty to the slave wife in anticipation of having an heir. As Iyase asks later “...what will it profit us if we conquered all the world and passed away without an heir to consolidate our victory?” Pragmatically, this proverb is meant to mitigate the threat on the positive face of the Oba as he has special right to face protection. A blunt way of putting it would have been to tell the Oba to stay at home and carry out his conjugal duties before his slave wife who is considered barren (dry land). This

would have been an affront and an attack on the Oba’s positive face. As the Owa tradition stipulates, issues of bareness and sex are not mentioned so directly and open in the public. This restriction makes this proverb appropriate and a mark of politeness and deference to the Oba. The use of “anyone” is also a politeness marker because it makes the proverb general and applicable to anybody and not specific to the Oba whose “land” is actually “out and out dry”. It is an off-record politeness strategy as it gives hints to the Oba to do the needful. The act sequence is proper while the key is serious, appropriate to the subject matter at hand.

The above analysis and interpretation can also be given for Obaseki’s utterance *...a good blacksmith stays by the bellows while his iron is black in the fire*, though using different wordings. This is more advisory in nature to the Ogiso who is likened to the blacksmith while the wife is the iron that is black (meaning not pregnant). Thus, the Ogiso must stay close to the wife until she gets pregnant (as the blacksmith must stay by the bellows until his iron turns red). This analogy is a politeness marker on the positive face of the addresser (Obaseki) and the addressee (Oba Ogiso).

PD6. If a child smacks a mound of excreta, we do not cut off its hands; we wash it (p. 14).

The physical setting here is Owodo’s court where Oba Owodo is in consultation with his ministers. The marriage of Oba Owodo to a slave was contracted by his father who is now dead. However, the people of Owodoland did not like it. This point is reiterated by Ihama and this proverb by Oba Owodo is a response to Ihama. It literally means that the mistake of his marrying a slave had been made by his father and he is now married to a slave (so the Oba is the child that smacks a mound). What is needed now is not to apportion blames or reject him and the slave wife (cut off its hands) but how to remedy the situation (wash the hand). Thus, the ends for this proverb is how to chart a way forward as the act sequence explained above suggests to the topic at hand. It is said with a serious tone, and obeys the norms of interaction of Owa people which is the wider situation of the text.

This proverb also encodes features of positive politeness strategy as it makes use of in-group identity marker and also asserts common ground between the interlocutors. It mitigates a threat to the positive face of Ihama by expressing a contradiction or a disagreement to his blames on Owodo’s marriage to Ibo, the slave girl. This point is further buttressed by Olotu’s utterance: “No. Ihama will cut

it off' which is a face threatening act to the positive face of Ihama.

PD7. Yes. And a husband. But when it comes to running the home, aren't men rams? *The sheep that bore rams, does she boast of children?* (p. 26).

This is a gossip scene between the First and Second Woman over the rumor of the birth of a child by Ibo. However, the focus of this proverb is not on the child born by the slave wife but the relevance of female children in running a home. First Woman complains that she is the only one in the house, though she has seven sons plus the husband. The act sequence compares men to rams who roam about the street looking for sheep without helping in house chores. It touches on an important fabric of most African culture in which males do not partake in any type of chores at home. In this aspect, men are considered as not children by their mothers. This proverb is uttered by the First Woman in a light hearted manner or tone and it suits the context of utterance and it is appropriate with respect to the age and the sex of the participants and the norms of interaction.

In terms of politeness, it is a positive politeness strategy as it asserts common ground between the interlocutors. It poses no threat to the positive face of the participants. Rather, it tends to seek solidarity between the two participants who are mothers and face the same challenges in their respective homes.

PD8. Isn't it the fool who needs telling to come out of smoke? (p. 31)

The setting is in Oba Owodo's court. The scene is where Oba Owodo confirms Iyasere's assertions that Emeni is a slave and Emeni is not happy about it. The speaker is Emeni and it is directed at Oba Owodo. The end is a challenge to the claim being made that he is a slave and it is said in a very angry and serious tone. The utterance is in form of a rhetorical question to confirm the obvious that he has been fooled for a long time in bearing the invectives by Iyasere that he is a slave; now it has been confirmed by the king. The act sequence is appropriate as it is only a fool that needs to be told to leave a fire side where he suffers the influence of smoke. Though in a rhetorical form, it is meant to assert that the speaker is not a fool before the addressee and the listeners.

From the point of view of politeness, the strategy in this proverb is off record. It employs a rhetorical question and gives hint that the Oba thinks he is a fool. It threatens the positive face of Oba Owodo as it

is a challenge and an imposition of an accusation on the Oba that he (Oba) thinks he is a fool.

PD9 ...I reminded him that my poverty couldn't salt soup to taste and my palm couldn't go round the head of my cutlass (p. 40)

The setting is Osaze's house and the scene is during the naming ceremony of Omon's son. Osaze is explaining the extent of his poverty to Iyasere in view of the fact that he is unable to provide entertainment for the people who came to the naming ceremony of Omon's child because he did not receive anything from the Oba. The participants are Osaze and Iyasere with Osaze as the addresser and Iyasere as the addressee. The goal is to inform Osaze how poor he is as he is not able to provide food and drinks for the guests who have come to grace the occasion of the naming ceremony. The act sequence is appropriate as it links Osaze's level of poverty to that of someone who cannot provide ordinary salt to make his soup tasty and someone who is so lazy that he cannot work to fend for his family as his palms cannot go round the head of his cutlass. One can infer here that Osaze's poverty stems from his laziness. However, we are told later in the play that Osaze's laziness is as a result of the economic hardship in Owodoland. The utterance is in a declarative form and the tone is in a manner of self-mockery, serious and self-condemnation for allowing his daughter, Omon, to marry Oba Owodo of Owodoland who has failed in his obligations to him as a son-in-law. Pragmatically, the utterance can be said to be polite to the hearer as it does not in any way pose a face threatening act to him. However, it poses a face threatening act to the positive face of Osaze. His desire to be approved of is violated by this utterance. The politeness strategy here is bald on record as he does not minimize the face threat on himself.

PD10. After the hoe has faithfully served the farmer, its head is knocked against a stump. (p. 52-53).

The scene here is Oba Owodo's court after Oba Owodo has finished eavesdropping on the conversation between Iyasere and Omon. What prompted this speech is Oba Owodo's accusation that Omon and Iyasere are having affairs. The physical setting is the king's court. The participants are Owodo, Omon and Iyasere. The utterance is made by Iyasere and it is directed at Oba Owodo. The end here is to drive home the point that he, Iyasere, is being wrongly accused and being paid with a bad coin by Oba Owodo after all the good he has done for him. The act sequence is appropriate. In the farming aspect of most Nigerian culture, the hoe helps in digging

holes during planting. After digging the holes, the farmer knocks the head of the hoe against a stump. Though this is usually done to take away sand from the hoe, the writer appropriates the knocking of the head of the hoe as an unjust treatment after what it has done for the farmer. Thus, the false accusation by Owodo is seen as knocking of Iyasere's head against a stump. This is expressed in an angry and seriousness manner.

Pragmatically, this proverb is an infringement and an imposition on the positive face of Owodo. Though proverbs are said to mitigate in interaction, in this instance the analogy used is so obvious in the event of the previous accusation by Owodo. As can be gleaned from the text, Iyasere as a minister is not a sycophant to the king. He states things as they are and in this case he uses this proverb to threaten Oba Owodo's positive face without any sign of mitigation. It is a direct imposition on the face wants of the king, performed bald on record.

The analysis reveals that ethnographic features of speaking and politeness routines appropriately guide the usage of proverbs in the sociocultural context of the plays and they ensure that there is no breakdown in communication. It is also discovered that proverbs help in maintaining interpersonal relations in the texts and also ease tension in their mitigating roles. In addition, proverbs are a means of cultural communication to manage social conflicts.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown the relevance of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING and Brown and Levinson's concept of "face" as politeness strategies in the study of proverbs in literary texts. It has shown in particular the extent to which the ethnography of communication and politeness routines are appropriated in the use of proverbs in Sam Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *The Placenta of Death* in particular and modern African drama in general. The interrelation between Dell Hymes's SPEAKING and the concept of "face" in the study of ethnographic materials like proverbs has been made clear. An aspect of the appropriateness of proverb in a socio-cultural context lies on its observance of face as a politeness strategy.

On genre, proverbs are aspect of folkloric cultural materials. Though our texts are literary texts, the proverbs used are aspects of Owa folklore as it is obvious in the frame of reference and the objects referred to in the proverbs. For instance, pears roasted (SW 1) mashed yam (SW 2), pounded cocoyam (SW 3), a mound of excreta (PD 6) and hoe

(PD 10) call fort imageries that are associated with the Owa cultural tradition of the playwright. On the age of the participants, readers have no access to the actual age of the users but can infer that they are adults. What is obvious is the social gap between the Oba and his Chiefs in both plays and the spiritual gap between the Oba, his Chiefs on one hand and the Oracle Priest, Obu on the other hand in *The Slave Wife*. In all, the use of proverb is appropriate with regards to the social status of the participants in both texts. On channel of communication, since proverbs are cultural materials, they are transmitted orally from the cultural tradition of Owa people and appropriated here by the playwright as features of modern African drama. In this context, they are written as if spoken with the speech norms of Owa cultural tradition transliterated into English.

References

- Adegbite, W. (2004). Pragmatic Tactics in Diplomatic Communication: A Case Study of Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. *Journal of Pragmatics*. 1457 – 1480 Doi: 10.1016/j.pragma.2004.12.001.
- Agho, J. A. (1999). The dialectic of them and us: Power play in Sam Ukala's *The Placenta of Death*. In Steve Ogude and Benji Egede (eds.) *Eagle in Flight: The writings of Sam Ukala* 9 – 21 Ibadan: Safimos.
- Akporobaro, F.B. (2006). *Introduction to African Oral Literature*. Lagos: Princeton.
- Arewa E. O. & Dundes, A. (1964). Proverbs and ethnography of speaking folklore. *American Anthropologist*, 66(6) 70 – 85. Doi: /pdf/10.1525/99.1964.66.suppl_3.02900040
- Bello, I. (2013). Sam Ukala: African tradition in his plays. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 6 (5). 115 – 131.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals in language use: Politeness phenomena. In Goody Esther (ed.) *Questions and politeness*. 56 – 311. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. New York: Cambridge University press.
- Ehiemua, K. (1999). Crisis of selfhood and alternate reality: Towards a post- structuralist reading of Sam Ukala's *The placenta of death* and the last heroes. In Steve Ogude and Benji Egede (Eds.) *Eagle in flight: The writings of Sam Ukala* 52 – 63 Ibadan: Safimos.
- Fasold, R. (1990). *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

- Ibhawoh, B. (1999). Literature as history: Oral historical tradition in Sam Ukala's *The slave wife*. In Steve Ogude and Benji Egede (eds.) *Eagle in flight: The writings of Sam Ukala* 64 – 74 Ibadan: Safimos.
- Kramsch, C. (1998) *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, R. (1977). What you can do with words: Politeness, pragmatics and performatives. In Rogers et al (Eds.) *Proceedings of the Texas Conference on Pragmatics, Presuppositions and Implicatures*. 79 – 104. Arlington: Centre for Applied Linguistics
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Lindfors, B. (2002). *Folklore in Nigerian literature*. (2nd ed.), Ibadan: Caltop Publication.
- Obeng, Samuel Gyasi (1996). The proverb as a mitigating and politeness principle in Akan Discourse. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 38.(3) 521 – 549. Retrieved from <http://www.hdl.handle.net/2022/3165>
- Odebode, I. & Eke-Opara, C. (2015). Ethnography of communication in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame: A pragmatic study*. *British Journal of English Linguistics*, 3(1) 13 – 23 Retrieved from www.eajournals.org
- Odebunmi, Akin (2008). Pragmatic functions of crisis-motivated proverbs in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*. *Linguistic Online*. 33 Retrieved from <https://www.linguistikonline.net/3308/odebunmi.pdf>
- Ogude, S. and Egede, B. (Eds.). *Eagle in flight: The writings of Sam Ukala* Ibadan: Safimos.
- Opara, C. (1999). Hunters and gatherers: Poetics as gender politics in Sam Ukala's *The slave wife and the log in your eyes*. In Steve Ogude and Benji Egede (eds.) *Eagle in flight: The writings of Sam Ukala* 38 – 51 Ibadan: Safimos.
- Tugbokorowei, U.E., & Anyanwu, C. (Eds.) (2018). *New aesthetic dimensions in African drama and theatre: A festschrift in honour of Prof Sam Ukala*. Delta: BWright Integrated Publishers.
- Ugwu, I. & Orjinta . A. (2013) folkism and the search for a relevant Nigerian literary theatre: Sam Ukala's *the placenta of death and akpakaland* as paradigms. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(13)79 – 85.
- Ugwu, I. (2017). The poetics of revolution, the logic of reformism and change management in Nigeria: Sam Ukala's two Folkscripts. *Nigerian Theatre Journal*. 17(1)1 – 12.
- Ukala, S. (2004). *The slave wife*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Ukala, S. (2007). *Two Plays: The placenta of death and the last heroes*. Lagos: Kraftgriots.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2000). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (3rd ed). Oxford: Blackwell.