

## **PRAGMATIC REPRESENTATIONS OF CONFLICT IN HELON HABILA'S WAITING FOR AN ANGEL**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper undertakes a pragmatic analysis of Helon Habila's Waiting for an Angel, a novel which dwells on the horrors of military rule in Nigeria, specifically in the 1990s. Analysing three purposively selected extracts that bear out the thematic preoccupations of the text with the pragmatic tools of inference and presupposition, the paper reveals that social interaction between major characters in the fictional world of the novel is circumscribed the climate of fear and terror imposed by the military and hence characterized by tension, pain and agony, irrespective of the class to which they belong. The paper concludes that the novel is a repudiation of the horrors of military rule and the fate of those who resist it in hope for a democratic change.*

**Keywords:** conflict, pragmatics, presupposition, Helon Habila

### **Introduction**

Military rule in Nigeria, as in nearly every other African country that has experienced it, has been a horrendous experience. With coups and counter coups, men of the Nigerian armed forces who were originally trained to defend the country's territorial integrity took the nation by storm, imposing a style of leadership that negated all pretences to civility and democratic choice. It is therefore no coincidence that creative writing in the country has often explored the multifaceted dimensions of military adventurism in Nigeria. In particular, writers have explored the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) and the various tragedies that accompanied it, including a succession of despots who reversed the gains of the country's First Republic

while pontificating on the failures of the politicians. Against this backdrop, this paper undertakes a pragmatic analysis of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, one of the important creative works that have dramatized the horrors of military rule in Nigeria, from a pragmatic perspective.

A young writer of great repute, Habila has to his credit, the Muson Poetry Prize, the Caine Prize for African Writing and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for New Writing in 2003, and is currently an associate professor at the George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, USA. As a work of fiction, *Waiting for an Angel* marked the writer out as an important new voice in African literature (see Anyokwu 2008, Erritouni 2010). The work has also established him as a powerful voice among the third generation of Nigerian writers. Adesanmi and Dunton (2005:14) aver that Habila belongs to a new generation of writers born mostly after 1960, the emblematic year of African independence from colonialism. According to the researchers, "this generation, the first to be severed from the colonial event, came to be identified as writers of the third generation in Anglophone and Francophone critical traditions." In this connection, Jeyifo (2006) observes that while the first generation of Nigerian writers came into their own during the high tide of decolonization, the last two generations have been confronted with the spectres of arrested decolonization, failing or collapsed states, economic stagnation, widespread autocratic misrule and the delegitimation of the grand narratives of emancipation. In approaching Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* from a pragmatic perspective, this paper aims to unlock some of the linguistic resources used to communicate and document conflict within the fictional world of the text set in 1990s Nigeria, a period marked by tyranny. Pragmatics being perhaps the most context-sensitive branch of applied linguistics, its analytical tools, including

inference, presupposition and implicature, among others, can prove quite insightful in unlocking the meaning of literary texts.

### **Presupposition and implicature as pragmatic tools in textual analyses**

Pragmatics is quite an amorphous concept. Hickey (1993:2) observes that pragmatics is directly interested not in language but in what people do with language: its uses and users. He notes that it was the publication of Austin's *How to do things with words* in 1962 that made the basic principle of pragmatics accessible to a large public by showing that language-users do not merely speak or write to one another, but that they perform acts. Hickey further says that

The simplest definition of pragmatics says that it is the study of language usage (Levinson: 1983, p. 5), a phrase which conceals a divergence between the Anglo-American practice of the discipline (represented in Levinson: 1983 or Leech: 1983), which restricts it to certain fields of activity, and the continental European practice (exemplified in the *Journal of Pragmatics*), which regards a wide range of linguistic study as pragmatic, provided it is not a purely formal analysis of structure or meaning.

However, in a significantly broader view of pragmatics, Hickey (1998:4) posits that it studies what language users mean, as distinct from what their language means, the rules and principles governing their use of language, over and above the rules of language itself, grammar or vocabulary, and what makes some uses of language more appropriate than others in certain situations. Yule (2017: 141) defines pragmatics as the study of invisible meaning or how we recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said or written, while Leech (1983:15), in a slightly broader view of pragmatics,

conceives of it as “the use of language in a goal-oriented speech situation in which the speaker is using language in order to produce a particular effect in the mind of the hearer.”

Furthermore, in a definition which outlined the difference between formal, truth-conditional study of meaning (semantics) and the contextual study of meaning, Leech and Short (1987: 290) say that “the pragmatic analysis of a language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from the formal properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.” Against this backdrop, then, Osisanwo (2008:57) opines that ‘pragmatics has been said to be the study of language in use in particular contexts.’ On their part, Dare and Onadeko (2008:78) submit that “pragmatics is a theory that deals with correct use of expressions and constructions of a given language (sic).” In their view, this is because it “gives recursive specification of the conditions under which the use of a sentence is correct, relative to the information which the language users have.”

This view, which appears to narrow pragmatics down to a kind of situational pedagogy, is perhaps problematic. Even if by the term ‘correctness’ Dare and Onadeko mean ‘appropriateness’, their submission restricts pragmatics into a prescriptive philosophy. Indeed, if pragmatics were all about determining the conditions under which a sentence (again the authors should perhaps have used the term ‘utterance’) is situationally correct, then all that would be involved in a pragmatic analysis would be to assign situational truth-conditions, whatever that might mean, to ‘sentences’ and we are done. In that case, a pragmatic account of language games (including banter, irony and parody) and much of defamiliarization in literature would be quite pointless. A useful pragmatic theory should account for why interlocutors make sense of apparently (contextually) inappropriate

phenomena, for instance swear words on the pulpit, an account for how meaning is communicated even if unintended. Generally, then, pragmatics relates to the study of the factors which provide the interpretative context for an utterance; the assumptions shared by discourse participants in processing texts, and so on. Adegbite (2014:2) notes that pragmatics is studied as part of semantics, if the latter is concerned within (sic) the wider consideration of meaning, but if semantics is conceived in the narrow sense of linguistic meaning alone, then pragmatics will complement semantics to cater for the remaining contextual aspect of meaning. This latter view seems to inform most of the contemporary work on pragmatics.

With respect to presupposition, they may be seen as the basic assumptions are made by the speakers/writers concerning the listeners/readers in relation to the topic based on assumed common ground. For instance, two faculty members of the Department of English at a university may, in a discussion, mention how recent work by Sperber and Wilson seems to return pragmatics to a kind of cognitive psychology and how Bach and Harnish's work on inference may be invaluable in a pragmatist analysis, without either of them having to engage in a long-winded explanation each time any of the authors is mentioned. This is because being a language teacher presupposes familiarity with the authors. Osisanwo (2008:86) classifies presupposition into two major types: semantic presupposition, which is concerned with the logical relations that hold between sentences and pragmatic presupposition, which relates to "the conditions required before a speech act can be suitable for a given context." For instance, the text below, created by this writer, may be seen in terms of semantic and pragmatic presupposition:

A: You've read Sperber and Wilson, of course?

B: Yes sir. I've read a bit of relevance theory.

A: That's fine.

From this example, it can be seen that speakers A and B share some assumed common ground. Speaker A's contribution presupposes the following, among others: (c) There are theorists called Sperber and Wilson. (d) Speaker A has a point to make to Speaker B with regard to relevance theory.

Semantically, (A) presupposes (c), since naming Sperber and Wilson as theorists logically presuppose the truth conditionality of their existence, while pragmatically, A presupposes (d), since asking B if he/she knows Sperber and Wilson presupposes that A wants to mention a point about the authors, possibly in relation to B, who is most probably in a subordinate position to A in this context. Implicature, on the other hand, refers to the meaning of an utterance by way of pragmatic inference. As Carston (2004:2) explains, Grice's distinction between what is said by an utterance and what is implicated (implicature) is probably the best known instantiation of the explicit/implicit distinction Carston however that within the relevance-theoretic account of utterance understanding, the conceptual content of an implicature is wholly supplied by pragmatic inference.

From the foregoing, it is clear that pragmatics has something to offer in the analysis of literature. Using presupposition and implicature as analytical tools, this study probes the relationship (strained, smooth, etc) between the characters in the fictional worlds of *Waiting for an Angel*, revealing the connection between their mental states (anguished, troubled or otherwise) and the politically charged and oppressive socio-cultural environment in which they operate, as constructed by the implied author. In raising such questions, the paper unlocks the construction of meaning in the text using pragmatic tools. This, broadly, is what doing pragmatics in literature entails.

### **About *Waiting for an Angel***

In *Waiting for an Angel*, Habila is concerned essentially with life in Nigeria under the military, particularly the Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha years (1985-1998) that most Nigerians would not wish to remember. The novel dwells on the misfortunes of Lomba, a journalist and frustrated novelist. From this fictional present where Lomba has been detained on trumped up charges merely for covering a protest as a reporter, the novel deploys flashback to reveal his progression from a strictly non-political personality seeking refuge in fiction writing, girls and soul music, to a frustrated journalist who, together with his friends, is marked out as a rebel and hunted down by the state security apparatus. In terms of thematic preoccupation, *Waiting for an Angel* addresses the dilemmas of military rule in post-independence Nigeria, resistance and romantic failures. In this connection, Erritouni (2010:144) submits that in *Waiting for an Angel*, Helon Habila addresses some of the issues that have preoccupied African fiction since the 1960s: notably, despotism in postcolonial Africa, its etiology, its effects on ordinary people and dissident intellectuals, and popular resistance, while Feldner (2019:85) posits that the novel is a fictional exploration of the atmosphere of oppression in Nigeria under General Sani Abacha's military dictatorship in the 1990s.

### **Presupposition and Implicature in *Waiting for an Angel***

As pragmatic presupposition and implicature involve inference, they are considered together in this section. In *Waiting for an Angel*, presupposition and implicature are tools of meaning negotiation. As shown below, exchanges between members of the lower characters and officials of the state are marked by tension, a feature extended to the exchanges among members of the lower class characters themselves, revealing the pervasive climate of terror and

fear foisted on Nigerians by the military, especially during the General Abacha dictatorship. Consider the following extracts:

### **Extract 1**

‘A pencil!’ the superintendent said, shaking his head, exaggerating his amazement. The prisoners were standing in a tight, silent arc. He walked the length of the arc, displaying the papers and pencil, clucking his tongue. ‘Papers! And pencil. In prison. Can you believe that? In my prison!’

I was sandwiched between two hounds, watching the drama in silence. I felt removed from it all. Now the superintendent finally turned to me... “ I will ask. Once. Who gave you the papers?” He spoke like that, in jerky, truncated sentences. I shook my head. I did my best to meet his red-hot glare. ‘ I don’t know.’

‘I repeat. My question. Who gave you the papers?’ he thundered into my face. I shook my head. “I have forgotten.” I did not see it, but he must have nodded to one of the hounds. All I felt was the crushing blow on the back of my neck. I pitched forward, stunned by pain and the unexpectedness of it. My face struck the bars and I fell before the superintendent’s boots. I saw blood where my face had touched the floor. I waited. I stared, mesmerised...(Waiting for an Angel, pp12-13).

### **Analysis of Extract 1**

The extracts above illustrate the conflict in the novel: the people versus the military junta. In Extract 1, which is an exchange between the prison superintendent and the main character in the novel, Lomba, a journalist detained on trumped up charges, the superintendent’s pragmatic presupposition that a detainee should not be in possession of writing material (‘Papers! And pencil. In prison. Can you believe that? In my prison!’) is the genesis of the unequal clash between him



and the detainee. Although Lomba has actually forgotten the source of the papers, the superintendent believes the converse, and implicates that he (Lomba) is working with some rebels within the prison set up. Thus, his structural presupposition “**Who** gave you the papers”, suggesting the logical progression: “If you have papers and pencil in prison, then **someone** gave them to you”, is appropriately processed by Lomba, who replies simply: “I don’t know.” Here we notice a pragmatic presupposition marked by denial of the attributed thought that he (Lomba) is working with some rebels in the prison set up. But the superintendent dismisses this conclusion and sets his dogs on Lomba, thus suggesting that he (Lomba) is a liar and thus deserves to be punished violently for his crime.

The power relations in the text are made clear by the superintendent’s four turns as against Lomba’s two, the threat to Lomba’s face as he is being forced to admit to a false charge and is given very little, if any, space to express himself (“*I was surrounded by two hounds...*”). This brutal recourse to violence (“*I felt the crushing blow on the back of my neck. I pitched forward, stunned by pain*”) rather than concrete proof is, on a larger plane, the implied author’s vehicle for dramatising the suppression of dissent in the novel by the repressive state apparatus.

## **Extract 2**

‘We don’t know who Morgan was---some colonial administrator perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state. No, that name is too grand for us. We are a poor, neglected people. If we were to choose a name for ourselves, we’d choose a plain and simple one, something that reflects our reality. We do not know who Morgan is or was, but we do know what poverty is. We live with it daily.’ Joshua squeezed the paper and raised his fist high; amidst loud cheering from us, he finished his speech. “This is our decision: that our street, presently known as Morgan Street, ceases from this moment to be

known by that name. It shall, from this moment, be known as Poverty Street!”...He reached down and, in what appeared to be a pre-arranged move, took from a man below a placard and raised it. The people roared their approval of the bold words on it: POVERTY STREET. Even the clerks and secretaries on the balcony started to clap, catching themselves when they realised that they were supposed to be antagonists. He jumped down and was immediately surrounded by Mao, Brother and two men with tiny recorders in their hands; one of them was Lomba, the journalist...The first sign of trouble I saw was when a police van with only one passenger inside cruised and turned off the road towards the back of the secretariat....Now Mao was whispering urgently to Joshua. “They’ve no excuse. This is a peaceful gathering. And in any case, we are through,” Joshua replied. That was when the anti-riot police came...Someone, probably the Sole Administrator, must have sent for them a long time ago...At the appearance of the anti-riot police, with tear-gas guns and batons and helmets and bamboo shields, a wail went up among the women. But Joshua quickly climbed the drum and shouted, “Stay where you are, everybody. Don’t move---stand still. Don’t run!” (*Waiting for an Angel*, p.133).

### **Analysis of Extract 2**

Similarly in Extract 2, where Joshua, leader of the residents of Poverty Street and other members of the community are staging a peaceful protest at the Government Secretariat, the Sole Administrator deliberately interprets the protest as a militant challenge on his authority and sets the mobile police on the dissidents. Thus, the fact that Joshua, the subordinate in power relations, takes a long, uninterrupted turn, does not implicate a democratic climate where freedom of speech is respected. However, the social cohesion among members of the lower classes is still preserved, as the factive presupposition “Even the clerks and secretaries on the balcony started

to clap, catching themselves when they *realised* that they were supposed to be antagonists” presents a pragmatically different reality. The utterance presupposes that the clerks and secretaries on the balcony (at the Government Secretariat) are in tune with the agitation led by Joshua. Thus, even though the administrator has not come out to address the protesters, their fellow occupants of the lower rungs of the social ladder are enjoying the spectacle.

Interestingly, Joshua’s reassurances to his fellow protesters, namely: “*They’ve no excuse. This is a peaceful gathering. And in any case, we are through,*” turns out to be a false conclusion deriving from the pragmatic presupposition that a peaceful protest should not warrant official violence. Since Joshua’s claim that he and other residents are poor is not a direct accusation of the Sole Administrator’s government, how can his recourse to violence be explained? First, the utterance “*We do know what poverty is. We live with it daily.*”, among others, presupposes that somebody is responsible for this sad state of affairs. This implicated premise is probably interpreted by the Sole Administrator as a presupposition of his own administrative incompetence, hence he derives the implicature that his integrity is being called into conclusion. Indeed, Joshua himself has earlier said that “*in a sense, this address is an accusation of the entire regime*” although he and the other protesters have ostensibly come to the Government House just to “*pay our respects to the Sole Administrator.*” Thus, the administrator recognises this threat to his face and, being a non-democratic leader, responds with violence. By this recourse to violence rather than gentle persuasion, however insincere, the implied reader author x-rays the intolerance and brutality of the military regime in the country. In general, the exchanges between the lower-status characters and officialdom in *Waiting for an Angel* is characterised by tension. However, interpersonal communication between members of the

lower classes is just as marked by tension, as the shown in the extract below:

### **Extract 3**

“Stop Lomba, please.’ Her look was anguished; her hands were raised, as it to ward off the dart of his words. He stood up and paced the small pace in front of the log. “Why should I stop? I have waited too long to say all these things; I might as well say them now, because after today, it may be too late. I have waited, Alice, so long.”

“But you don’t understand. What you are asking is not possible.”

“Not possible? Why? Because he loves you more than me? Because he has more money? Why? Give me one reason, Alice, just one.” He saw the stricken look on her face and saw that he had gone too far. He returned to his seat. “I am sorry. I did not mean that.”

When she spoke her voice was impersonal, distant. “Don’t be. It is true. It is the money. Are you shocked? Do you know how much it costs to keep my mother here a day? Twenty thousand naira. This is the best cancer hospital in the country. ..she has been here over a month now. Ngai pays for everything---everything, including this dress I am wearing. Now, do you understand?” (*Waiting for an Angel*, pp.79-80).

### **Analysis of Extract 3**

Extract 3 is an exchange between the hero of *Waiting for an Angel* and his lover, Alice. The spatial context of the exchange is a General Hospital in Lagos; the discourse participants are Lomba and Alice, the exchange takes place in a charged emotional context where Alice tells Lomba why she cannot marry him though she is his lover. Lomba, a dropout from the University of Lagos, has recently reunited with Alice, his girlfriend in school who once promised him undying love and who is now a graduate while he is a poor journalist, but there are evident strains in their relationship as a result of economic

difficulties. In the exchange, Lomba is on the losing end even though he seems to control the conversation. He has been professing undying love for Alice, but she is unable to bear with him because of her emotional torment.

Since Lomba's free flow of emotions rattles Alice, she pleads that he should consider her feelings : *"Stop Lomba, please."* However, Lomba does not accept the implicit threat to his face in her request and implicates that she has no ground for interrupting him since his profession of love is ultimately to her benefit. However, in saying *"But you don't understand. What you are asking is not possible,"* Alice dismisses the attributed thought that being in love is enough reason to be joined in matrimony. Significantly in the extract, Alice's last contribution, involving about 10 acts contains a network of pragmatic presuppositions, being a direct response to Lomba's request for 'just one reason' why she is turning him down: because of the money. Pragmatically, it may be untangled as follows:

1. Don't be [sorry]: You have not hurt me by telling me the truth.
2. It is true: Your assumption that I accepted to marry Ngai because purely for economic reasons is in order.
3. It is the money: Just as you have suggested, money is the chief motivation of my choice.
4. Are you shocked? : It is naive on your part to be shocked.
5. Do you know how much it costs to keep my mother here a day? : My mother is precious to me and it is not your love that has sustained her life, but money.
6. Twenty thousand naira: This is what keeps my mother here a day and you cannot afford it.
7. This is the best cancer hospital in the country and she has been here for over a month: Someone has been paying this huge bill.

8. Ngai pays for everything—everything, including this dress I am wearing: Ngai has done a lot in my life.
9. Now, do you understand: I expect you to know that, in the circumstances, it would be impossible for me to marry you.

However, most importantly, Alice implicates that she cannot afford to turn Ngai down after accepting to marry him because doing that would amount to a betrayal on her part and an indication that she lacks integrity. Thus, “Now, do you understand?” is not a question but a plea for understanding. At the level of the implied reader, however, much more than this is communicated: Alice’s position illuminates the place of changed circumstances, communication breakdown and distance in intimate relationships. Instructively, Alice turns Lomba down the very day he makes his proposal, meaning that his acknowledgement of his tardiness (“I have waited too long”) is belated. At the same time, it communicates Alice’s moral ambivalence and duplicity, as the story would probably have been different if Lomba were well to do. Thus, within the larger structure of the novel, Lomba’s imprisonment by the military junta represents a double tragedy, since he has previously failed in love and thus suffered emotional distress.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis has revealed that as higher-level meaning signals in discourse, presupposition and implicature are vital tools for unlocking the tense social relationships in *Waiting for an Angel*. The novel represents an engagement with the Nigerian post-independence society, specifically how military intervention has proved to be a disaster on the Nigerian society, represented via the southern landscape. Significantly, even the emotional misfortunes of the lead characters in the two novels are partly influenced by the unfavourable political climate in the text.

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