

The Interdisciplinarity of Pragmatics and Politeness Theory with Reference to Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*

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This paper explores the relationships between Pragmatics and Politeness Theory as an apparatus for accounting for the dynamics of post-colonial texts whose intention is to redefine and reshape post-colonial societies. The paper proceeds from a plenary talk presented at the 17th Triennial Congress of the FILLM held in Novi Sad in Yugoslavia in August of 1990 by Professor Roger Sell of Abo Akedemi University in Finland. The first part of my paper is an extrapolation of the definitions about Pragmatics¹ and Politeness Theory which he offered to the gathering and which he illustrated with reference to the poetry of T.S. Eliot. It occurred to me that this theory, new to me, might be applied to Achebe's second novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960). I chose his second novel because the application seems as if it will work most obviously. On reflection it further seems that all of Achebe's fiction, the novels and short stories, might be further illuminated by the application of the Cultural imperatives of the Pragmatics/Politeness conjunction. The stringing together and defining of the inter-connectedness—the inter-disciplinarity—of pragmatics and politeness theory produces an etiolated syllogism which, when applied to Achebe's writing, extends our understanding not only of his method as artist but also of the relationship of that art to its historical placement and therefore to the purposes Achebe assigns to his writing.

¹ See also the edited collection of essays by Sell (1988).

Professor Sell says in two places in his FILLM paper that the aim of the Literary annexation, conjoining and application of the linguistic theories embodied in Pragmatic and Politeness theory is to attempt to

reconcile various branches of specialist knowledge in a widely intelligible language of scholarly discourse and so provide an antidote to the compartmentalising fragmentation so typical of the humanities in this century

Since Pragmatics is that branch of linguistic scholarship which studies the ways in which language utterances acquire meaning and interactive force through being used in particular contexts, it is most useful to break through these disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinarity is therefore unavoidable: the writing and reading of literary texts are in dynamic relationship to the linguistic and sociocultural context in which the processes take place. An illustration which comes to mind from recent reading in American fiction is from Owen Wister's classic novel of the American west, *The Virginian*. The Virginian, described as dressed in muted blues and greys, is on a cattle drive with, among other cowboys, his good-hearted friend Sonny, dressed in light colours and the evil cowboy Trampas, dressed all in black—appropriate to the situational convention for evil (sic.). On one occasion and in response to some action of the Virginian, Sonny calls his friend a 'son of a bitch' and the comment occasions no response from the hero. Shortly thereafter and again in response to some action taken by the Virginian, Trampas calls him a 'son of a bitch'. 'Smile when you say that!', the Virginian responds aggressively. The effect that the utterance produces varies, depending on who the speaker is, his relationship to the person spoken to and the social convention determining the relationship.

As 'the study of people acting verbally in a socio-cultural environment', Pragmatics, therefore provides an important avenue to the study of literature. It is often called Discourse or Discourse Study—when it is practical—because it focuses on the production and process of language and takes place when participants are in each other's physical presence. (It is not possible that it would be otherwise—people cannot engage in discourse, according to Pragmatic Theory, unless they share the same time/space configuration.)

Juxtaposed to 'Discourse' is 'Text'. Text relates to the transient character of language and in its application to literature it denotes a piece or a body of writing which transcends limits such as time and space barriers under which discourse/speech operates. In a novel such as Achebe's, 'text' supplies the field against which discourse operates. Discourse in the novel promotes the novel's meaning.

Considering the question on where politeness functions in relation to

pragmatics in the discourse/text oppositional mode, politeness enters through the pragmatics of the situation or through the communally shared evaluation of social behaviour. The reasons why politeness considerations are important in literary activity is that they are fundamental in social behaviour of any kind. Sell says:

... for the literary pragmatist, the reasons why politeness considerations are important in literary activity is that they are fundamental in social behaviour of any kind. Politeness can be thought of as a communally sustained spectrum of evaluation ranging from extreme offensiveness, through neutrality, to extreme obsequiousness or flattery. In a given culture, all actions, including all use of language, will assume some or other position on the politeness spectrum; a behaviour or type of expression which does not register somewhere on the spectrum is impossible. This applies to literary activity ... no less than to any other linguistic activity.



Any theme, no matter what, has a politeness dimension which will register on the politeness spectrum and will be to a greater or lesser degree positively welcome or to a greater or lesser degree unwelcome, perhaps even taboo. Between these extremes are degrees of neutrality and themes which are ordinary, acceptable or hardly worth discussing. These conditions apply to Eliot's poetry which Sell uses to illustrate his theoretical postulations. Even though it may appear as if they do not apply to Achebe's novel I will argue below that they do.

Eliot's poetry, especially the early poems, those on which his reputation was established, presents materials which were initially thematically offensive. Sell draws attention to Eliot's fastidious personal politeness—in an anecdote conveyed by Richard Aldington of a time when he and Eliot were walking past St. James's Palace and Eliot tipped his bowler hat to the guardsman on duty; and in the attitudes held by Virginia Woolfe and her circle as embodied in an invitation to her brother-in-law: 'Come to dinner. Eliot will be there in a four-piece suit'. These are all acts or utterances which can only be understood if one understands them in terms of their social dimensions.

Eliot's fundamental unpleasantness is also found in, for example, the opening lines of *The Waste Land*. Here he subverts the assertions of the father of English poetry that contrary to the usually joyful associations of spring, April is not the time of 'shores soote' but rather it is the 'cruellest month'. He continues in the same vein and talk of human life and the human mind as a heap of broken images—and that is only the beginning. There is as well the sordid sterility and blank despair of Pruefrock, the unpleasantness made the more telling through associations with fleeting lyrical hints of beauty and love and fulfilment.

Juxtaposed to these and at the other end of the politeness spectrum are themes which are wholly self-deprecating—of poetic alter-egos caught up in masochistic humility: Pruefrock, for example, whose inferiority complex makes him see ‘the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker’.

Together with considerations of themes there are questions of literariness—of style and presentation, of diction, allusions, quotations and of treatments associated with themes.

The sequeway from Eliot into Achebe is in the title of the latter’s novel. *No Longer at Ease* takes its title from the familiar lines in Eliot’s ‘The Journey of the Magi’:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death

I think it would be possible to extend a comparison between Eliot and Achebe along a number of lines, (or extend those few comparisons which have been published to date) suggesting how Achebe, through his close contact with Eliot’s poetry and prose writing during his degree years at the University College Ibadan, recognised how Eliot’s proscriptions and examples could be made coincident with his own aims as artist and social pragmatist—how, for example, thematic offensiveness in Eliot’s poetry is mitigated (as I have suggested) with occasional hints of love and beauty and fulfilment.

Rather than developing this argument, I want to test the proposition that Achebe, recognising the applicability of what we define as pragmatics and politeness and the inter-relatedness of the two to his own artistic purposes, writes a novel which offends considerations of communal expectation with reference to politeness to focus his readers on questions of society and humanity as trenchant as did Eliot and uses considerations of politeness as an artistic device to achieve these purposes.

What makes Achebe’s achievement different from Eliot’s is that there is virtually no neutral ground in the politeness spectrum in *No Longer at Ease*. There is no hint of love, beauty or fulfilment. There is only sordid sterility and blank despair together with an almost endless confrontation in the discursive parts of the novel.

Written somewhere between 1954 and 1960 (the year it was published), *No Longer at Ease* initially formed part of but was eventually exempted from a novel which was published as *Things Fall Apart*. 1960 was the year of Nigeria’s Independence. This was the year when two ‘old dispensations’ came into question—the dispensation of the recent ‘alien gods’ of British Imperial-Colonial rule which was about to give way to

autonomy in Nigerian national affairs and the older dispensation of a people who, ambiguously, would/might continue to clutch not only the gods of their forebears—call them pre-colonial gods—but also possibly, in modified form, the proscriptions of the alien gods of the erstwhile colonial masters. The modern heirs of traditional culture would have to confront both these dispensations. *No Longer at Ease* is an examination of what is to be done with these alien gods.

Achebe might have been expected to write a novel which would advocate positive possibilities at the time of Nigeria's gaining of independence. Indeed, initial responses to the novel indicated that in the eyes of many he had wasted an opportunity or worse. He might have written a novel in the Horatio Alger mode—a bright young man, the best his village has produced, proceeds from humble and modest beginnings and through the application of intelligence, hard work and integrity achieves a position of leadership in his community and nation, thus becoming a model for those who come after and whose successes they will wish to emulate.

Achebe did not do this. Instead, he offended such expectations. He constructed a plot which acts in the opposite way. *No Longer at Ease*, as most of you will recall, tells the story of Obi Okonkwo. The son of a Christian chatechist and the brightest boy in his village, he has obtained an overseas education. This was paid for by members of his village, Umuofia, and most notably by the Umuofia Progressive Union (U.P.U.)—an organisation of villagers who live in Lagos, the capital city of Nigeria, and who band together to protect their interests and those of their kinsmen who have left the home village. When Obi returns to Nigeria he wins a prestigious 'European Post' as Secretary to the government's Scholarship Board. He sets out with high principles and idealism. But the very nature of his position means that he accumulates a series of crippling debts: he must repay his loan to the U.P.U., pay for an expensive flat, repay a car purchase loan and pay for expensive car insurance. He must assist his parents with their expenses (taxes and bills and medical care for his mother). He further agrees to pay school fees for a junior brother. While he lives extravagantly, his education and European job place unusual pressures on him; indeed he is expected to live up to his position as a mark of success—success which will reflect on the U.P.U. and which they take as their due. Obi's life is further complicated by his love for Clara, a nurse, whom he met on his homeward journey from England. Clara, however, is an *osu* and considered among the Ibo to be an outcast because she is descended from slaves within the community. The Union and Obi's father strongly disapprove of this relationship and Obi's mother threatens to kill herself should he marry Clara. The relationship is further complicated by Clara becoming pregnant by Obi. As pressures on Obi mount, Clara goes through a nasty abortion and disappears from Obi's

life. Obi's moral, intellectual and ethical convictions collapse. He accepts bribes, is found out, tried in a court of law and found guilty. A promising career comes to a sad and humiliating end.

Such are the bare bones of the story. As I have mentioned, it did not please many Nigerian readers. The early responses suggested that Achebe ought to have presented a better picture of Nigerian potential than Obi, especially at a time when Independence was upon them. They were offended by Achebe's lack of politeness because his treatment did not match their expectations—expectations deriving from the hortatory euphoria declaimed by political leaders and announced in the popular presses at the time.

What a general and popular readership thought of the book is perhaps not apposite to what can be inferred from the book itself in terms of Achebe's intention. In one sense the book is self-contained and reveals in internal ways its own purposes. On the other hand reader response may also be seen as legitimate—this is what I see in the book and therefore that is what the book means. Collaboration, give and take, trade-off, reveals intention and legitimatises interpretation and therefore meaning.

For present purposes I am prepared to consign that sort of debate to another place and time. What one can see in the novel is Achebe/Obi—Achebe as writer making the text work externally and Obi, Achebe's agent, making the text work internally—unremittingly offending agreed upon canons of collaboration.

However, the question arises: how does a person from a foreign culture know that these canons of collaboration are offended? or how does one know that these are playing a role in the novel at all? At this point I have to pause because I find myself teetering on the edge of the hermeneutic gap. One is concerned with the interpretability of a text, a distinguished text by an author of international reputation, not to say renown. Interpretability proceeds from comprehension and comprehension in turn proceeds from the ability of the receiver—some say receptor—of a text to create a text-world around the text in which the text makes sense. The space between the receptor's real world—place, culture, time—and that of the text being addressed, equals the hermeneutic gap. Hermeneutically speaking, the gap is always there (just as there are, in terms of literary communication, different readers with different purposes) and it is only a matter of how wide the gap is. But the question remains: can one bridge the broad cultural gap between for example Canada and Nigeria for interpretability purposes? Does the fact that I have lived in Nigeria only a half dozen years after the publication of the text and know with some familiarity those parts of Lagos that Achebe writes into the text—Ikoyi, Victoria Island, Lagos Island, Obalende, Apapa, Surulere, Isale Eko—assist me in coming to an understanding of the text? The same question can be raised concerning the fact that ~~that~~ I have visited

Achebe's village, Ogidi, which cannot differ much from Obi's Umuofia; that I met on several occasions Christopher Okigbo whose temperament is almost at one with the Christopher of the text; that I have read countless novels presenting colonial Nigeria (and a good many historical and other non-fictional texts describing the period as well) and so am pretty familiar with the context Obi is concerned with at the incipient dawn of Independence. Does all this experience of the actual scene closes the gap sufficiently for me to be able to thoroughly understand that world for purposes of literary communication? Or does one need to close it: can one simply follow the line of the Formalist and the New Critics and say the text is timeless, self-contained and at the same time amenable to universalist animadversions? One may also add the use of Reader-Response or Reception Theory. My contention is that there is something missing in these approaches.

One can argue that the experience of having been there and of having some knowledge of the circumstances in which the novel is situated does assist me in understanding it. I may even be able to anchor a commentary of the text to some extent in knowing not only a good deal of the biography of the author—which some critic/theorists say is necessary to comprehension and interpretation—but also that I know him personally very well (since 1965) and have shared discussions with him which in their various ways may supplement a reading of all of his writing. I want to ~~X~~ argue that this is not sufficient if one wants to understand the novel's dynamics or pragmatics.

It is against this background that the determinants of politeness discourse may be brought to bear on *No Longer at Ease*. Sell derives his literary appropriations of politeness theory from the work of two studies by two probably familiar anthropological linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson. Their two seminal studies are based on their enquiries into the language cultures in Afghanistan, Papua New Guinea and Kenya. This research allowed them to pose with a certain confidence a prototypical model person, linguistically realised and universalised in terms of politeness across history and geography. This prototypical model person has two endowments: the person possesses a *practical reason* which enables the person to work out what means the person can use to achieve any given end and *face*. Face, Brown and Levinson say, has a negative and a positive aspect: negative because the person wants to be left free to do what he wants and to be left alone; positive because the person seeks approval from other people and wishes to be included in their circle. Because of his practical reason, The Model Person knows that other people are also endowed with negative and positive *face* as well and that the person's own goals are more likely to be achieved by taking this into account. Politeness aspects and options arise when the person wishes to say and/or do something which threatens another person's *face*. In Brown and Levinson's terminology, such

a person commits a Face-Threatening Act—an FTA!

There are basically four forms of face-threatening acts. The person cannot avoid committing the FTA, desirable as this is in theory, because to do so reduces the likelihood and possibility of the person realising stated goals. Secondly, Politeness and the FTA connect in the way in which the Person commits the FTA—the Person can commit it ‘off-the-record’, as it were by couching the FTA in hints, or metaphor, or irony, or understatement so that another person is not forced to recognise it; OR the Person can go ‘on-the-record’ and perform the FTA explicitly but in such a way as to acknowledge the other person’s positive and negative face so this is still a form of deference. Finally, the Person can employ a bald-faced on-the-record strategy in which the FTA is performed with no polite redress at all. For the sake of brevity and clarity we can adopt the sort of formulaic shorthand characteristic of certain kinds of contemporary theory/criticism and call these FTA1, FTA2 (a) and (b) and FTA3.

The structure of *No Longer at Ease* follows a pattern from FTA1s through various kinds of FTA2s (both the (a) and (b) types) and ends with a series of FTA3s. (Conversely, Reader-Responses to the novel as calculated by a careful and systematic assembly of discourses on the novel since its publication in 1960, reveals a reverse pattern—that is, from a general series of FTA3s through both types of FTA2s and ending with FTA1s which is where its current critical position is found. It is, that is to say, where Eliot’s early poetry—*Pruefrock* and *The Waste Land* reside.)

We have determined that text, in terms of the interdisciplinarity of pragmatics and politeness concepts and these in relation to their aids to interpretability, has a basic internal oppositional character: it is made up of text and discourse (as we have defined them). The important distinctions are enhanced by levels or gradations of FTAs.

In *No Longer At Ease*, the neutral ground is Text—matter consequent to discourse is provided. Earlier scholarship would call this ‘background’. Paradoxically, narrative movement is not provided by narrative—this is text—but by discourse. In *No Longer At Ease* forward movement working towards resolution is essentially made up of FTAs.

I provide a few examples. Obi’s first encounter with the U.P.U. after his return to Nigeria from abroad is an FTA1: he fails to dress formally and he deliberately fails to use ‘impressive English’ as is expected of an educated man, especially from someone with a B.A. Hons. in English. His second meeting begins safely with an FTA1 but moves quickly through FTA2 (a) and (b) to an explosive FTA3 where he storms out of the meeting. We have been prepared for this sort of action through references to Obi’s impulsiveness and impetuosity as a schoolboy, for example, when he wrote a letter of support to Hitler. Achebe, further, employs an endless

number of words which imply confrontation from the beginning to the end of the book—betrayal, treacherous, disrespect, insult, blame, self-willed, shame, disgrace.

The most critical FTA situation in the novel is when Obi on his second visit to Umuofia tries to win the support of his family for his plan to marry Clara. The fact that he would make such a plan is also possibly an FTA3 because he knows that his parents, despite their Christian beliefs, still accept the concept of *osu*. His father's lengthy defence of *osu* (an FTA against his alleged Christianity) through the elaborate analogy he draws between the place of the leper in King David's time and *osu* as a residual in modern Igbo society is plainly facile.

But Obi's mother commits the most devastating FTA3 in the novel when she announces simply that if Obi marries Clara she will kill herself. At this point Obi's will breaks. He finds he has no inner resources with which to confront the situation. From here he falls from fame and when his mother dies, all restraints are removed, his conscience is cleansed, he deserts Clara, renounces his responsibilities to the Union, takes bribes, is charged, tried, found guilty and ... the novel ends as Obi has unwittingly predicted it will.

With one exception, all of the discursive encounters in the novel are confrontational. The exception is Obi's relations with Mr. Green's secretary, Miss Marie Tomlinson—and even this looked at the outset as if it might become confrontational as revealed in Obi's reflection that she may be friendly to him in order to report any verbal misdemeanours.

I believe all of Achebe's fiction can be discussed, described, defined in terms of the binary oppositions implied in pragmatic/politeness and discourse/text formulations. Okonkwo is constantly committing FTA3s—the lesser sort are unknown to him from start to finish; Ezeulu commits the most monstrous FTA of all—he confronts the very source of life by denying his people food. The most recent novel is more complex but by now you have doubtless recalled those passages where FTAs can be ascribed.

This brief overview of the use of pragmatics and politeness theory within the context of interdisciplinary studies provides possibilities for not only the reading of Achebe's but also other novels. These concepts definitely provide an important contribution to contemporary critical discourse. They do not only provide opportunities for the cross-cultural understanding of literature but also form part of the critical purpose of foregrounding the socio-cultural situatedness of human action and interaction which function in both fiction and real-life intercourse. It is a matter to be pursued.

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