Writer as Clairvoyant: A Pragmatic-onomastic Study of Soyinka’s *The Road* and Ibadan’s Socio-political situation in 1999-2009

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**ABSTRACT**

This study is designed to validate the claim that Wole Soyinka, the first African Nobel Laureate in Literature, is a clairvoyant. The work is based on events in *The Road* and socio-political situation in Ibadan (the largest metropolis in West Africa) between 1999 and 2009. Thus, the thrust of the research is to juxtapose the purposively selected character names in Soyinka’s *The Road* with the actual (nick) names in use in real life. The theoretical framework adopted is relevance theory. The study partly indicated that the playwright uses clipping, coinage, compounding and lexical borrowing as his naming strategies; and partly that the textual names parody certain bearers of such names in the larger society.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

In 1965, Wole Soyinka (the first African Nobel Laureate in Literature) wrote a play titled *The Road*. In the text, three principal characters feature prominently, among others. They are: Say Tokyo Kid (*Tokyo* for short), Chief in Town and Particulars Joe. Tokyo is the leader of the drivers and captain of thugs in the play. Chief in Town is the main politician in the text. He plays a godfather role to the thugs whom he recruits and pays for their assistance in destabilizing elections. Particulars Joe is the main police officer in the play. He is called this name because he is a corrupt law enforcement agent. He parodies the dishonest policemen in Nigeria who always demand bribe from motorists in the name of “particulars.” Addressing Say Tokyo on page 24 of the text, Particulars Joe says, “Give me your particulars.” The influence of these three characters on others sets the stage for the conflict and theme(s) of the tragedy.

Coincidentally, in 1999, Nigeria was on the road to democracy, having passed through different civil unrests and military incursions for almost two decades. Three principal gladiators emerged in the socio-political terrain of Ibadan, an ancient southwestern town and the capital of Oyo State in Nigeria. They were Lateef Akinsola Oluwatoki popularly called Tokyo, Lamidi Adedibu, a high chief in the town and Jonathan Johnson, the Oyo State police commissioner residing in Ibadan. Tokyo was the leader of the state’s drivers’ union. Apart from being a high chief in Ibadan, Adedibu was described as the garrison commander of Ibadan politics by the former president Obasanjo. He was also allegedly popular as the godfather of thugs who worked for him during the election(s) in the ancient town. As the number one law enforcement agent, Jonathan Johnson combined both pragmatonym (professional/product name) and eventonym (event name) with the textual police officer, Particulars Joe. This is because the latter’s “Joe” parodies Jonathan phonologically (in the first syllable) and contextually. Similarly, the influence of these three personalities could have contributed to the tragedy which befell Ibadan politics within the decade, 1999-2009.

The above interplay has, therefore, necessitated an onomastic conflict which can be resolved through an incursion into the historical, linguistic as well as lexicosemantic analysis of the players’ textual names in relation to the extra-textual bearers within the socio-political milieu in which they are found. The interface of names, as shall soon be discovered, further proves Wole Soyinka as a seer or a clairvoyant. This scenario thus informs the present study, “Writer as Clairvoyant: A pragmatic-onomastic study of Soyinka’s *The Road,*” which is predicated on the following questions:

(i) What naming typologies characterized Soyinka’s *The Road*?

(ii) What morphological strategies are used by the playwright in designing the names?
(iii) What are the lexico-semantic imports of the names textually and extra-textually?
(iv) Can we establish that the names impart on their bearers textually and extra-textually?
(v) Can we locate the text within the socio-cultural setting that produced it?
(vi) What are the contrasts between the fictitious names and the factual ones?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
Several studies have existed on onomastics (the study and science of names). These include the following:
Marshall (2009) considers “onomastic emphasis” in Julia Alvarez’s (2007) Saving the world. He discovers that the author invokes names on multiple levels to draw home her theme of identity. The study further emphasizes that there is a great link between the characters and their roles in the text. Finally, the study indicates that the author, through her use of names, is able to merge history and story. The study updates our knowledge of onomastic studies in a non-African text.
Odebode (2015) studies names in Ola Rotimi’s The Gods are not to Blame from a pragmatic point of view. He discovers that the characters’ names predict their future and roles in the text. Thus, Odewale (hunter comes home), the major character in the play, has to leave his ironical domain and travels home to fulfill his destiny unknowingly. The study is different from the present research because it is grounded in another text by another African playwright.
Odebode (2016) analyses the round characters in Wole Soyinka’s Death and the King’s Horseman from an onomastic point of view. The study uses the pragmatic theory of the ethnography of communication to benchmark the selected characters’ names. The work indicates that the events in the text revolve round Olunde, who proves himself as the real king’s horseman rather than his chauvinist father, Elesin. Moreover, the study reveals that instead of mere entertaining his reader/audience, the playwright is informing them; hence, the preponderant informative act in the analysis. Finally, the author uses the play to invoke the history of the Oyo (Yoruba) Nigerians. The study foregrounds the present work which aims at dissecting another text (TR) by the playwright, using a different theoretical construct.

In a related study, Odebode (2017) examines five major characters’ names in Wole Soyinka’s King Baabu. The data were analysed via the instrumentality of the SPEAKING acronym, i.e., ethnography of communication by Gumperz and Hymes (1972). The researcher discovers that the playwright uses nominal determinism in forming his characters. Furthermore, the study indicates that the preponderant setting and participants are Guatuna and Guatunans, respectively; the dominant act is informative, and the primary key is satirical. Finally, the study reveals that the major instrument is verbal, and the principal character is Basha/Baabu because every event in the text, revolves around him textually and extratextually. The study is insightful, and it provides the basis for the present work. It is different from the present research because it deals with a different text (by the author) and it is also grounded on a different theoretical framework. While we are using the relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) at present, Odebode (2017) uses the ethnography of communication.

Bughesiu (2019) exposes tarot as a useful tool in determining names and future of its players. The study is based on referential semantics, semiotics, and pragmatics. Data for the study were taken from sample names of cards in the major arcana from four tarot decks while the main analysis “is conducted on names from the Rider-Waite deck, due to its worldwide renown” (Bughesiu, 2019: 371). The study is different from ours in theory, data, and context.

3. METHODOLOGY
In carrying out this research, three principal methods were adopted. These are in-depth analysis of the primary text, participatory observation and internet sources. The researcher is a Yoruba man like the playwright. He also hails from Ibadan, the extratextual setting of the play. Therefore, he was at an advantage to witness some of the events praised in the situational contexts of the text. Furthermore, language was not a barrier at all as he is versed in the
local dialect. Moreover, internet and newspaper clips also proved useful in the study.

3.1 Contextualisation of the Text

The Road (henceforth TR) is a satirical tragedy that resonates with death as its dominant theme. The play is unique because all the characters are men. This, therefore, sets the stage for violence in the context. The subject matter has to do with a character, Professor, who is searching for the essence of life along a road; hence, the setting of the play, the road from life to death. This search takes him to the world of a compromised police officer (Particulars Joe), desperate politician, Chief-in-Town, (who recruits the thugs and touts) and drivers (Say Tokyo Kid, Kotonu, Murano Samson). As a fake don, he forges drivers’ licenses, owns a haven where human parts are sold (AKSIDENT STORE – ALL PARTS AVAILEBUL) and hypnotises the accident victims such as Murano. He removes sign-posts to increase accident casualty on the road. Eventually, he is murdered by the chief thug, Say Tokyo Kid. The following lines from the text, attest to the character of Professor, Particulars Joe and Samson (a driver cum thug).

PARTIC. JOE (blandly): That’s O.K … money has been left for me in more unlikely places believe me.

SAMSON: Well at least wait until I am back on the road before you collect tolls. (Particulars folds his arms and waits).

PROF.: How is the criminal world my friend?

PARTIC. JOE: More lucrative every day Professor. (TR pp. 74, 75)

3.2 Naming Strategies

As would be demonstrated shortly, the author adopts the following word formation processes summarisable in Yule (1985:64-72) as his naming strategies. Such word formation processes include clipping, coinage, compounding, and lexical borrowing. A thorough examination of all of these is our pre-occupation at this level.

3.3 Clipping

Clipping is an element of reduction which is noticeable “when a word of more than one syllable (facsimile) is reduced to a shorter form (fax)” (Yule 1985:66). In our primary text, there is one case of clipping, i.e., (Particulars) Joe. Joe, a monosyllabic word, is clipped from Joseph a disyllabic word. That he checks vehicle particulars on the roads is significant to our study, hence his full name, Particulars Joe. He is supposed to be faithful like the Biblical Joseph in Potiphar’s house. But, he is a corrupt police officer, a friend of thugs like Say Tokyo kid and an alibi in Professor’s shady deals. He has, therefore, diminished in virtue. This “reduction” in his character might have occasioned the contraction of his name to Joe as he is unparalleled to Biblical Joseph and Joseph in Death and the Kings Horseman (1975) who are faithful and loyal to their masters respectively.

3.4 Coinage

Coinage denotes the invention of totally new terms (Yule 1985). In TR, Chief-in-Town, as well as Particulars Joe, is a coinage. The former aids thugs and Professor in their evil deeds while the latter is a corrupt law enforcement agent. Furthermore, there is an allusion to the term “Batwere” in our text. Batwere is a coinage from the Yoruba saying “baton for the back of loony” where ‘bat’ denotes baton and ‘were’ translates to loony in this context. Intertextually, the name features in one of Wole Soyinka’s satirical plays, i.e. King Baabu (2002). King Baabu deals with the people of Batwere by cutting their hands bit-by-bit after beating them with rods. Soyinka alludes to ‘Batwere’ in TR in the following conversation between Particulars Joe and Say Tokyo Kid:

PARTICULARS JOE: Say Tokyo

SAY T: Thas me officer

PARTICULARS JOE: No dirty timber!

SAY T: Thas me kid.

PARTICULARS JOE: Igi dongboro lehin were!

SAY T: Yio ba baba e

(TR p.25, emphasis mine).

The expression underlined in the excerpt above clarifies the view expressed with the name “batwere” in King Baabu (2002). i.e., ‘Nothing like a sound club on the back of a looney’ (TR p. 99).
3.5 Compounding

This is another device used by the playwright to form names for his characters. Compounding denotes the joining of two separate words to produce a single form. Peculiar cases of compounding in TR are: Chief-in-Town, Particulars Joe and Say Tokyo Kid. Chief-in-Town is a politician who recruits thugs as his bodyguards for political meetings. It should be noted that thugs are got on the road and in motor parks. Through this character, we have a thrust at the violent political methods, which brought disaster to civilian politics in Nigeria (Jones 1973:71). Particulars Joe, who is the representative of the law, becomes a threat to order because of his total lack of integrity. He, therefore, becomes a friend of criminals and thugs as revealed by the following conversation from the text:

PARTICULARS JOE: Wey your particulars?
A THUG: Particulars Joe!
PARTICULARS JOE: I say gimme your particulars.

(Say Tokyo reaches out a stick of weed to him which he accepts behind his back. Darts back to the door and sits apart sniffing the weed...) (TR p. 24).

Say Tokyo Kid is the captain of the thugs in the text and a timber truck driver. He is a murderer and even kills Professor in the play (see TR p. 96). His attributes are best described with the following conversation in the text:

PARTICULARS JOE: Say Tokyo Kid!
SAY T: I’m all right boy
A THUG: The Captain!
SAY T: I’m say Tokyo Kid and I don’t fear no son of man.
PARTICULARS JOE: Igi dongboro lehin were!
SAY T: Yio ba baba e
PARTICULARS JOE: gbegi ma gbe ya wo!

3.6 Lexical Borrowing

This is the taking over of words from other languages. Yule (1985:65) identifies calque or loan-translation as a special type of borrowing in which “there is a direct translation of the elements of a word into the borrowing language” (Yule, ibid). It should be noted that in the texts under study, Soyinka adopts special borrowing by using the names of states or countries of the world as characters. The author uses this strategy to connect his characters with the image of these states or countries and to reinforce textual messages. This is peculiar to TR. Thus, Kotonu is borrowed from Cotonou, the commercial capital of Benin Republic, ‘a satellite economic country of Nigeria’ (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001:106). We also have Say Tokyo Kid. Tokyo is the capital of Japan, an Asian country which is adjudged the ‘world’s most powerful export-oriented economy despite lack of natural resources’ (Johnstone and Mandryk 2001: 370).

The character Salubi brings out the playwright’s message inherent in the name. Salubi is a borrowing from the English “salubrious,” which denotes a place that is wholesome and healthy to be (Webster’s Universal Dictionary and Thesaurus 2003:415). Such a place is better than the setting of the play (i.e., Nigeria) where many lives are claimed on the road by reckless drivers, touts and their godfathers like the politician, Chief-in-Town and Professor. Soyinka, therefore, uses Salubi to amplify the message that...
there are salubrious places in the different parts of the world (Oregon, Oman, Cotonou, and Tokyo) where anybody (including strangers) can stay and still be physically healthy and economically fulfilled without any fear of death or molestation from the powers that be or thugs. Salubi speaks: “You are just like a haggling market woman. Why don’t you go and get your fresh air… of peace before the others start to drift…” (TR p.31).

3.7 Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) is grounded on Grice’s (1975) maxim of relevance in the Cooperative Principles. Grice highlights the principle of communication summarisable in Bloomer et al. (2005:95) as follows:

(i) Maxim of Quality: Do not say that which you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence.
(ii) Maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required, but not more, or less, than is required.
(iii) Maxim of Relevance: Your contributions should be relevant to the purpose of exchange.
(iv) Maxim of Manner: Your contribution should be perspicuous, clear, brief, and orderly.

But Sperber and Wilson (1995) hold a divergent view. They believe that an utterance is relevant if it characterises pragmatics in terms of cognitive processing rather than contextualised actions or usage principles (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Therefore, unlike the cooperative principle which must be followed or violated to achieve special effects, interactants ‘do not “follow” the principle of relevance; and they could not violate it even if they wanted to’ because human cognition is intrinsically relevance-oriented (Perkins, 2007:20). The import of this is that an utterance is seen as ‘relevant’ to the extent that it guarantees enough ‘effects’ to merit the hearer’s attention while simultaneously putting the hearer to no undue effort in order to achieve this goal. The principle of relevance, therefore, emphasises that we assume that any utterance addressed to us takes the form it does for a good reason and that any extra effort required to process it (e.g., working out the punch line of a joke) guarantees some kind of pay-off (e.g., amusement).

Relevance Theory has been criticised for modeling communication from the hearer’s perspective, failing to take sufficient account of the collaborative and reciprocal nature of communication (Clark, 1987; Wilks, 1987) and for not recognising pragmatic impairment (Leinonen, E., Letts, C. & Smith, B.R. 2000). Leinonen et al. (2000:178) say “the principle of relevance is not working appropriately”, especially in the case of people with communication defects. This shortcoming notwithstanding, Sperber and Wilson have successfully developed a theory of pragmatics, which claims that an assumption of relevance is really the only principle that is necessary for communication negotiations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Contextually, one situation that aptly illustrates the relevance principle as replicated in TR was the political imbroglio that engulfed the Oyo State of Nigeria on “the road” to democracy in 2007. The text parodies three principal actors who were at play. First was Chief Lamidi Adedibu who was described by many people and the media as “the strongman of Ibadan politics, the garrison commander of Ibadan politics, the chief and the only father of the Peoples Democratic Party” among others (see Nigerian Tribune, Monday, November 12, 2007). Another figure was the then state police commissioner, Jonathan Johnson. The last was Lateef Oluwatoki popularly called Tokyo (a contraction cum interpellation of his last name). He was the state chairman of the drivers’ union known as the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW).

With the support of Jonathan Johnson, Adedibu was reported to have conspired with Tokyo (and his men) to cause mayhem in Ibadan and the entire state at large during the election. (See Nigerian Tribune of July 21, 2007, on Johnson’s conspiracy). The situation persisted until Johnson was redeployed and Adedibu died. Tokyo’s reported nefarious activities had to provoke newspaper headlines like:

“Murder: Police arrest Oyo NURTW boss, Tokyo.” (The Punch, August 9, 2007, p. 9)

“Oyo NURTW …chief seeks bail in murder trial”
If we recall the events in *TR* and the roles played by the trio of Chief in Town, Particulars Joe and Say Tokyo Kid, we may establish that Soyinka is relevant to the socio-political situation in Nigeria as a clairvoyant cum onomastic writer who is using his power to name interpellatively. As postulated by Adams (2008:214), interpellative (nick) naming suggests the intersection of goals as represented in politics and government.

Finally, we may submit that the playwright uses compounding, clipping, coinage, and lexical borrowing as his naming typology and morphological strategies. This proffers answers to our research questions one and two. He also deploys a few names that capture the array of players and problems replicated in his work. Thus, he can be said to have used an economy of words, hence, his submission to the manner maxim which stresses brevity and orderliness. Furthermore, the present study has demonstrated that Soyinka uses names that parody certain recognisable individuals in the larger society. This thus answers our research questions three and four.

Moreover, the fact that the setting, the plot, and characterisation replicate the events and principal players in the aftermath of Ibadan politics extratextually, actually answers our research questions five and six. With this in view, it can be established that textually and extra-textually, the name-bearers act true to their identities.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has been able to establish Izevbaye’s (1981) submission that “whatever difference exists between literature and life can be explained as a difference of the contexts in which naming takes place” (Izevbaye 1981:168). By juxtaposing selected names in Soyinka’s *The Road* with the actual (nick) names in use in real life, the study indicates partly that the playwright uses clipping, coinage, compounding and lexical borrowing as his naming strategies; and partly that the textual names parody certain bearers of such names in the society. From the preceding, we may infer that the names (as used by the playwright) guarantee enough effects to merit the hearers’ (readers’) attention as they invoke our sense of history and satirise the socio-political situation in Nigeria while at the same time amuse the (reader) audience when they are dramatised. With these in view, we may conclude that the names are effectively deployed in line with Sperber and Wilson’s (1995) Relevance Theory as well as aspect(s) of Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idowu Olusola Odebode is an Associate Professor of English in Redeemer’s University, Nigeria. His areas include Onomastics (the study and science of names), Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis and Stylistics. He is a versatile scholar who has a good number of publications locally and globally to his credit. Idowu is also a Commonwealth Scholar who has been privileged to carry out research in the University of Glasgow and Anchor University, among others. He is the founding president of the Society for the Study of Names in Nigeria (SSNN) and the first recipient of the American Name Society’s Emerging Scholar Award.

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