

**CONTEXT AND POLITENESS IN OLA ROTIMI'S  
*THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME***

HANNATU KWASAU

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND DRAMA,

KADUNA STATE UNIVERSITY, KADUNA.

AND

PAUL ADAMU

KADUNA STATE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION,

GIDAN WAYA, KAFANCHAN, KADUNA.

**Abstract**

This paper is a critical examination of context and politeness discourse features used in *the gods aren't to blame*. The features isolated for discourse include variations in contextual discourse and their implication on politeness. Hence, the study identifies a number of excerpts based on Halliday's three variables of situation in relation to other conversational maxims like face saving acts (FSAs) and face threatening acts (FTAs) as proposed by Yule, and are analysed on the bases of age, social status, individual role and personality. Findings reveal that even though the play is a reflection of a typical Yoruba community, the variation in context shows that it may be difficult to always be polite particularly in relation to the aforementioned factors. Also, the findings reveal that in the event that one's face is threatened, the reaction often varies depending on the subject matter, the participants involved and where the conversation is taking place among other linguistic parameters. Therefore, this pragmatic approach is used to establish how different participants and particularly in different contexts negotiate and communicate meaning while trying to be polite (or impolite) within a given communicative sphere.

## **Introduction**

According to Yule (1), “pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning communicated by the speaker, (or writer) and interpreted by listener (or hearer)”. This definition highlights the place of the participants in a meaningful exchange between persons in a particular context or situation. This submission also shows how people, being the users of language, are pivotal to the context or situation in which a communication takes place in relation to other contextual factors.

He further dismisses pragmatics as the study of invisible meaning and that interlocutors must depend on shared assumptions and expectations which should provide some insights into how more gets communicated than said (Yule,127). The emphasis here is on implicature-that more is meant rather than what is merely communicated.

Levinson (10) agrees with Yule’s submission on implicature when he remarks that “any definition of pragmatics that excludes one of its presumed focal phenomenon, namely conversational implicature, is unlikely to be attractive”. In a way therefore, the following are relevant in defining pragmatics according to Yule’s (1996) submission: interlocutors, shared meaning and implicatures.

Another scholar however examines pragmatics in relation to the society when he suggests that pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society (Mey, 2001); thus, he is of the opinion that there are other issues to be considered other than just the participants or interlocutors like shared meaning and implicature as proposed by Yule above. In his view, social context must or is expected to be put into consideration in the definition of pragmatics because, according to him, the definition of pragmatics is constantly changing.

Again, Morris (1938)-quoted in Schmitt (74)-is however of the view that pragmatics is the science of the relation of signs to interpreters. In other words, pragmatics is concerned not with language as a system or product *per se*, but rather with the interrelationship between language form, (communicated) messages and the users. It explores questions such as the following:

How do people communicate more than the words or phrases that their utterances might mean themselves, and how do people make these interpretations?

Why do people choose or say and/or interpret something in one way rather than another?

How do people's perception of contextual factors (for example, who the interlocutors are, what their relationship is, and what circumstances they are communicating in) influence the process of producing and interpreting language?

### **Context**

Context from Halliday's perspective (36) is likened to an environment because "language comes to life only when functioning in some environment". We do not experience it in isolation-if we did, we would not recognize it as language-but always in relation to a scenario, some background of persons and actions and events from which the things which are said derive their meaning. From Halliday's submission, it can be deduced that context refers to the environment or situation in which the language we use comes to life and becomes meaningful.

But then it must be stated emphatically that is the participants who manipulate language within a context as Holmes (239) remarks that "language varies according to its use as well as its users, according to whether it is used and to whom, as well as according to who is using it. The addressees and the context affect the choice of code or variety, whether language, dialect or style". It can be inferred therefore that the communicative

boundaries with which the concept of context or context of situation spans knows no bounds, even if they were, they will certainly be limited in scope.

It is also imperative to comment on the different types of context that there are. Yule (129) is of the view that there are two types of context: linguistic context or co-text and physical context.

Malinowski (1923)-quoted in Verschueren (75)-seems to be oblivious (or appears to be) of the existence of physical and the general knowledge context in his correspondence:

Exactly as in the reality of spoken or written languages, a word without linguistic context is mere figment and stands for nothing by itself, so in the reality of a spoken living tongue, the utterance has no meaning except in the context of situation

Verschueren (23), however, debunks this view, “while we should not accept the implicit message that written language may not have a context of situation, Malinowski’s observation can be seen as one of the pillars of any theory of pragmatics. Indeed, language use is always situated against a complex background with which it is related in a variety of ways”. This claim put forward by Verschueren to the effect that both written and spoken discourse can be situated in a context is of immense importance to this work because this is not unconnected to the fact that the aspect of context investigated here is concerned with the written rather than the spoken aspect of discourse.

The place of context as the ongoing discussion reveals can indeed not be taken for granted nor lightly, “ after all there is a social and contextual dimension to every naturally occurring use of language, and it is always these social factors that determine the choice and form of what is written or said or understood” (Schimitt, 150).

This paper however addresses just some specific aspects of the speech situation as the theoretical frameworks permit, and the term politeness and context are also expected to shed more light on the relationships between the participants in this play. Thus the concept of politeness is also central to this investigation. Yule (134) remarks that:

There are several ways to think of politeness. These might involve ideas like being tactful, modest and nice to other people. In the study of linguistic politeness, the most relevant concept is 'face'. Your **face** in pragmatics is your public self image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. **Politeness** is showing awareness of another person's face.

Thus the term *face*, in this paper, is used in terms of age, social status, individual role and personality characters in the play perhaps Schmitt's (150) submission gives credence to this stance:

Identity: this is an important social factor. Not only do linguistic patterns signal social and individual identity, but people's conscious awareness of their personal, ethnic, geographical, political and family entities is often a factor in their language use. Allegiance and membership of different social groups can be expressed by language patterns, and sometimes those groups are even defined by these patterns...

It goes without saying that when one's image is threatened, the social hierarchy that is expected to be a necessary precondition for the level of formality or technicality may or may not be adhered to; this again is investigated in this paper. Therefore it must also be stated rather emphatically that even though the text under investigation is more of an organized discourse in written form, the data collected show that the conversational pattern adopted is not too far removed from everyday use of words and expressions.

Leech-quoted in Schmitt (76) proposes a set of politeness maxims, such as the maxim of modesty and agreement which are in consonance with the co-operative

principle, and some of the basic tenets include: “minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self, minimize disagreement between self and other, maximize agreement between self and other”. Regardless of these maxims, interlocutors may choose to be polite or impolite depending on the context of discourse.

Mey(80) subscribes to this view when he remarks that “the issue of politeness cannot be devoid of the context of use, describing it as an abstract quality residing in individual expressions, lexical items or morphemes”. Again he puts forward the claim that sometimes the so called circumstances that govern their use may or may not even be put into consideration.

Also, Grice (1989)-also quoted in Schmitt (75) – agrees with this when he remarks that “conversation is governed by a set of rules, and that social factors can only be analyzed in terms of the context”. But Mey (80) debunks this claim in his submission below:

Such a view is wrong on two accounts. First, the social position of the speakers may indicate different politeness values for individual cases. The existence of a social hierarchy (as in institutionalized contexts such as the schools, the military, religious communities etc.) often pre-empts the use of politeness altogether. Rather than claiming that an order in the military is polite whenever the command structure is right, I prefer to say that an order is vindicated in its own right, if it conforms to the demands of the military hierarchy; commands are neither polite nor impolite. The same goes for institutionalized situations...

### **Context and Politeness in *the gods are not to blame***

Longe and Ofuani (104), drawing from the work of Halliday, summarise the functions of context to include the ideational function (field) concerned with what the participants are engaged in, the interpersonal function (tenor) concerned with the social participants of the characters and the textual function (mode) concerned with the medium

of discourse. Consequently, to validate the application of these functions, some characters in the play will be paired to examine how the context and the level of politeness are often influenced by the age, role relationship, social status and personality of the characters paired: Odewale and king Adetusa, King Odewale and Baba Fakunle, King Odewale and Prince Aderopo and King Odewale and Alaka

### **Case 1**

**Interpersonal function:** *Odewale and the former King of Kutuje*

**Ideational function:** *the land dispute*

**Textual function:** *the oral medium*

The conversation under review (46-47 of original text):

**Odewale:** The elders of my tribe have a proverb: ‘because the farm owner is slow to catch, the thief, the thief calls the farm- owner thief!’

**Old Man:** [*bursting with laughter*]. You from the bush tribe come to these parts and boldly call me ‘THIEF’?

**Odewale:** where am I from?

**Old man:** [*calling his men*] .Gbonka...Olojo-come, come, come quickly-come listen to this man’s tongue.

[*Two men run over with their hoes*]

**Odewale** That is the end. I can bear insults to myself, brother, but to call my tribe bush, and then summon riff-raff to mock my mother tongue! I will die first.

**Old man:** Say your proverb again.

**Odewale:**     *[furiously stripping off his uppergarment]*. Get out of my land! All  
of you! Now!

### **Data Analysis**

The climax of this conversation is the duel and the resultant effect is the death of King Adetusa, and Odewale in turn while running from the land wherein he has spilt blood, returns home to his birth land. The *field* of discourse is the 'land issue' as everything that happens afterwards is directly tied to this issue, and as it appears that is what the participants are engaged in, all of them; thus the quarrel, the duel and Odewale's flight in this scene are connected to the ownership of the land.

In terms of the *interpersonal function*, the social relationship between King Adetusa and Odewale can be described as unequal powers at best, and in terms of the *mode*, the oral medium is the channel in which the discourse takes place. In the context of this conversation, a pertinent question must be asked in relation to politeness. Does King Adetusa have the right to insult his tribe, and does Odewale have the right to call the King a thief given the difference in their ages?

Another important question to ask is: "who first violated the politeness principle in the discourse, is the Old man or Odewale?" Nonetheless, it is clear from the discourse that when the social identity of interlocutors is concealed in a discourse, the principle of politeness can be violated and one's public self image threatened. Consequently, given the circumstances surrounding this conversation, since King Adetusa's social identity of



being king is concealed, it can therefore be inferred that the public self image of Odewale not the king is threatened.

This is the situation between Odewale and the king where the hierarchical structure is not adhered to because both participants have no prior idea of each other's identity.

Perhaps, the story would have taken a different dimension if Odewale had known the identity of the Old man. In fact, referring to the king as the Old Man in the play is a deliberate ploy by the playwright himself not just to conceal the social identity of Adetusa, King of Kutuje and Odewale's biological father but how being polite cannot completely be tied to age. Again, the view that politeness may be inherent, as put forward by Mey, without regard for contextual factors can be misleading as this is hardly the case in the encounter between the participants in the discourse because if it were so the conflict that ensued in the play would have been averted or better still managed.

## Case 2

**Interpersonal function:** *King Odewale and Aderopo*

**Ideational function:** *Aderopo wrongfully accused*

**Textual function:** *the oral medium*

The conversation under review (32-33 of original text):

**Aderopo:** My lord may I come in?

**Odewale:** If you think that you can drum for my downfall, and hope that drum will sound, then your head is not good

**Aderopo:** [nonplussed]. What was that, my Lord?

**Odewale:** what is the matter, fellow aren't you a Yoruba man? Must proverbs be explained to you after they are said? Aderopo, if you think like a tortoise you can plot against me without my cutting you down first with my own tortoise tricks, then, fellow, madness is in your liver.

**Aderopo:** Is that supposed to be a new form of greeting?

**Odewale:** [irked]. Aha! I said if you think that you can uproot a tree that has been planted by the gods...hmm...my brother... [*gestures at his head to imply madness in the other's*]

**Aderopo:** So be it. I shall greet you like manner then...[*prostrating himself*]  
You highness, if you think suspicions is wisdom, then your head is not well.

**Odewale:** Enn! Ojuola! O.j.u.o.la! Come and listen to you son!

**Aderopo:** Why call my mother? You are a man, I am a man: let us talk man to man.

### **Data Analysis**

From the conversation above, to say that politeness is inherent without reference to contextual factors is misleading particularly in relation to the conversation between Odewale and Aderopo above.

The emphasis here is that given the institutionalized or hierarchical structure of the monarchical system which places the King above his subjects, does Odewale have the right to be impolite to Aderopo as the conversation above shows? On the contrary, to say that Odewale is rude in the context of the conversation above negates the argument put

forward and also subscribes to the argument put forward by Mey also in the quotation above.

Again if this argument is to be taken based on its substance, then, the issue of being polite or impolite in relation to Odewale's utterances cannot be measured because his status as the King gives him certain powers of speech that cannot be considered impolite.

Yule (134) argues in favour of this proposition that "if you say something that represents a threat to another person's self image, that is a **Face threatening act**. For example, if you use a direct speech act to order someone to do something...you are acting as if you have that social power, then you are performing a face threatening act". Nevertheless, this proposition also begs the question: is having the social power a enough reason to threaten people's self image or does belonging to a particular class gives one an exclusive right to insult people's self image?

In the context of this discourse, can Aderopo be said to be impolite in the manner in which he responded even though his public self image was threatened? The truth is that it is hardly the case that Aderopo should act otherwise given that "your **face** in pragmatics is your public self image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. **Politeness** is showing awareness of another person's face" Yule (134).

Besides, given that everybody or individual has both a negative and a positive face, and what leads to their outburst is the condition of the social interaction between the interlocutors is something equally relevant in this regard. Besides, Aderopo's indirect response is connected to a **Face Saving Act** because an indirect question removes the

assumption of social power, and makes one's request less threatening(Yule,134) as when Aderopo asks the king: "what was that my Lord?" in the conversation above.

Another argument is that given the circumstance and their social rank, can Odewale and Aderopo be said to operate on a social ladder that places both of them on the same level of social command? Does a prince have the social power to question the verbal utterances of a king in a heated debate even if the prince's face is threatened particularly in the circumstance presented above?

Given the institutional structure of the monarchical system of governance, it would certainly not be out of place to say that a prince can engage a king in a verbal outburst as their social rank is not so far apart, but that is not to say that they can exhibit the same social power, and this certainly explains the verdict given by Odewale:

**Odewale :** Get out of this land

**Aderopo:** For what offence?

**Odewale:** Two rams cannot drink from the same bucket at the same time!  
They will lock horns.

Thus, as stated earlier, even though Aderopo belongs to almost the same circle as the king, the social power that a king can demonstrate knows no bound. This is perhaps the reason why Odewale can neither be said to be polite or impolite because it is simply a show of force emanating from the social structure, and this is a case of identity.

Furthermore, Odewale, in terms of personality, is aggressive in nature therefore it can be inferred that it is his personality in display rather than the new "kingly" nature of the office he now occupies. This is because it is in the nature of kings to display a high sense of discipline and courtesy but it appears that Odewale, by nature, is simply lacking

in these virtues; besides, many characters in the play have attested to this character flaw in the personality of Odewale:

**Baba Fakunle:** Your hot temper, like a disease from birth, is the curse that has brought you trouble. (29).

**Odewale:** These thieves were digging up my sweat. The blood rose hot. But ... 'I must be calm', I said to myself, 'calm and careful'.

**Alaka:** I am glad to see that your youthful, hot temper is still with you, my brother. Scorpion! (61).

Having given the instances in the play where Odewale's personality is undeniably tied to his outburst of emotions, it is equally important to assert here that it is his personality not his social status that is responsible for his unfounded accusation against prince Aderopo, and as such, on this account, the prince can be excused for having retaliated in the manner in which he did. The point made here is that apart from the social power that an individual exhibits, variations in individual personality could be a likely cause of being impolite or polite as this text reveals.

### **Case 3**

**Interpersonal function:** *Odewale and Baba Fakunle*

**Ideational function:** *uncovering the death of Adetusa, former King of Kutuje*

**Textual function:** *the oral medium*

The conversation under review (27 of original text)

**Baba Fakunle:** Rage all you can, King, I shall speak no more.

**Odewale:** Don't beg him. He will not talk. The murderers have sealed his lips with money. Hmmm, our race is fast falling, my people. When the elders we esteem so highly can sell their honour for Devil's money, then let the pigs eat shame and men eat dung.

**Baba Fakunle:** You called me pig! You are the murderer!

### **Data Analysis**

From the conversation above, it can be said that Odewale violates the conversational principles of politeness and not necessarily that Baba's silence provokes the act particularly calling him a pig. This name calling forces Baba to act in total deviance of the "social equilibrium and friendly" relations that are expected to govern conversations.

Similarly, the conversation between Odewale and Baba Fakunle shows to a great extent how role relationship can affect the issue of politeness. In the conversation below, because Baba Fakunle's face was threatened, he retaliated not minding his supposed role of being an intermediary between the people and the gods of the land:

Having violated the conversational norm of tactfulness, Odewale can be said to have got what he deserved. Perhaps, it would have been most appropriate to say that Odewale's inability to be tactful in his conversation is to be blamed, and this trend is a recurrent leitmotif in the text.

The point being made here is that “tact” if a foreground in a conversation can help militate against impoliteness but where the reverse is the case, and one’s face is threatened, the issue of social identity or the identities of the interlocutors would be of no consequence whatsoever.

#### **Case 4**

**Interpersonal function:** *Odewale and Alaka*

**Ideational function:** *uncovering the death of Adetusa, former King of Kutuje*

**Textual function:** *the oral medium*

The conversation under review (61)

**Alaka:** I don’t know why you are getting troubled, my brother. [*Chuckles*]. I didn’t know that that was why you ran away from home, I would have tied you down,

**Odewale:** [*losing his temper*]. You would have tied me down would you? Tied me down so you could laugh as you are laughing qua-qua-qua! Laugh at me while I killed my own father and married my own mother. Is that your wish? If you think that is a laughing matter, may the gods curse you to-

**Alaka:** They are not your father and mother, anyway.

**Odewale:** [*speaking at the same time*]. Kill your own father and share a bed with your own-what did you say?

#### **Data Analysis**

The set of verbal exchanges that later follow do not end well for both interlocutors who were hitherto supposedly best friends all because the personality roles have been altered. Perhaps it is better to say that since Odewale’s personality changed, he is no

longer the man Alaka used to know or thought he knew. Thus the issue of friendship or intimacy also is inconsequential at this point.

### **Conclusion**

This paper dwells on the pragmatic concept of context and politeness revealing their relevance in achieving effective communication. It is quite obvious from the ongoing discussion that politeness can be contextually determined as well as construed in any exchange between interlocutors, and being polite may not always be in consonance with age, social status, role identity and personality. It therefore becomes imperative for people to be tactful in a bid to save their public self image and those of others in any meaningful exchange between persons or risk jeopardizing same. It is hoped that using this literary text, the place of context, politeness and face in the place of communication are buttressed and how participants in a discourse negotiate and communicate meaning revealed.

### **Works Cited**

- Halliday, M.A.K. *Language as social semiotics*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978. Print.
- Holmes, J. *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. USA: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Levinson, S. C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 1983. Print.
- Longe, V.U, and Ofuani, O. A. *English Language and Communication*. Benin City: Ilupeju, 1996. Print.
- Mey, J.L. *Pragmatics*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Print.
- Ola, R. *The gods are not to blame*. Ibadan: University press PLC, 1971. Print.
- Schmitt, N. *Applied Linguistics*. London: Hodder Education, 2010. Print.



Verschueren, J. *Understanding Pragmatics*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2003. Print.

Yule, G. *The Study of Language*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.