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9TH INAUGURAL LECTURE

LETTER AND SPIRIT
OF LANGUAGE

by

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LETTER AND SPIRIT OF LANGUAGE

By

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I reserve special gratitude for my children Debo, Darnola, Tolu and Sinmi for giving me peace, joy and the pride of parenthood at all times. Finally, I thank my girlfriend, wife, confidant and soul-mate, Elizabeth Adetoun Omole for past and present understanding, and for our continuous courtship in spite of all odds.

As we are all under the eternal influence and power of language, I urge us all to continue to explore and exploit its letter and spirit to the cause and benefits of humanity of which we are collectively a part.

I thank you all for making this lecture an event, and for your attention. Thanks, thanks and thanks.

God bless you all.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, sir, the epigraph above is a complex but profound philosophy in the Bible. To many it is a puzzle. The bothersome question it engenders is: how can the Word that was with God be God? I dare not, and will not attempt to answer the question. I would rather leave that to theologians like Pastor E.A. Adebayo and Bishop Oyedepo to explicate. Today, however, I am concerned with the letter and spirit of language, that is the words of a language and their actual meaning, especially in the English Language. The letter of a language is oftentimes distinct from its spirit. Beginning with the title of this Lecture, if taken out of context, the words that compose it, are naturally ambiguous. Each of them in their isolated forms can have many references, implications and applications. For instance, the word 'Letter' is ambiguous, 'spirit' is ambiguous, 'language' is ambiguous, 'ambiguous' is ambiguous. Even life itself is ambiguous. Today's lecture, therefore, is about the inherent ambiguity of language in general, and of the English Language in particular.

The accounts of two of the most influential religions in the world have it that the earth was created through the power of words. In the Bible, God said "let there be light" and there was light, and subsequently the earth was created. In the Qur'an, Allah said "Kun fa ya kun" (be and It is) and the earth came into existence. Ever since the earth was created by God and populated by humanity, the words we speak or write, that is our language, have continued to reflect our social, cultural, scientific and psychological experience. Most of this experience are inherently ambiguous; sometimes, simultaneously contradictory. What more, the language we use to express them has equally been contradictory or ambiguous.

For example, the phenomenon of birth features a mother who falls into labour, crying in agony. Then she is delivered of a baby. Under normal circumstances, she starts smiling radiantly almost immediately, and with the same mouth with which she has been crying, if not cursing. Meanwhile, in the same hospital environment where people are rejoicing over the birth of a child, others, probably in the same ward, are crying over the loss of another child or person. Yet our language enables us to express our emotions suitably and appropriately in the two contrary situations.

Such is the nature of our world that every good thing is accompanied by a measure of evil or negativities. The aeroplane can guarantee fast, comfortable journey, but it is also culpable for huge losses of lives. The internet facilitates knowledge accessibility in unspeakable quantum, but it has also been blamed for electronic crimes and globalised immoralities.

subjugating politics to academic and moral values. May divine light continue to disperse any darkness on your path.

I acknowledge the bibliographic and professional assistance of my pro-bono consultant in the Faculty of Law, Barrister Ehusiani. Thanks for your warmth and friendship.

My brothers and sisters have been pillars of support to me in all my pursuits; I thank them all for believing in me and identifying with me totally. They have been wonderful siblings. Ayo Omole and Funmi Omolohunnu, please pass on the message, especially to those of them who are not here.

I thank my friend and family doctor, Razaq Olanipekun, for his uncommon but sustained generosity to my entire family all these Abuja years. I honestly cannot thank you enough. I am convinced God will do that on my behalf. My friend, Dr. Banji Oyeleke, who always makes me laugh; may our laughter continue.

My Secretary, Mr. Benjamin C. Ezemmah, thanks for your patience and professionalism in typing this lecture.

My brother-in-law, Dele Omolohunnu, thank you for steadfast concern and care. Dr. Gboyega Kolawole, thank you for proving that a student can also become a close friend. Professor Mabel Evwierhoma, I appreciate your friendly good will from time to time. Your propeller function to me for this inaugural has been outstanding.

intellectual development. Although, my mummy is no more, yet the seed she sowed into my life has never gone rotten. I thank them.

I will also thank my uncle, Dr. S. O. Olorunfoba, OON., whose academic progress and subsequent attainment in those days fired my own ambition. Little did he know that he had been indirectly mentoring and guiding a sibling. I also owe a world of gratitude to the University of Ilorin authorities whose staff development programme facilitated my doctorate degree, and for providing me a focused, well textured foundation and exposure to standard University traditions, culture and practice.

Late Professor Sidney Greenbaum at the University of London, my teacher, mentor and advisor, was an academic fountain from which I was privileged to have drunk. And Professor Richard Cureton, now of the University of Michigan, did an excellent job transforming my grammatical acquisitions to stylistic utility. I thank the Department of English, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee for all the encouragement and opportunities they gave me, both as a post-graduate student, and as a lecturer. I deeply appreciate their contributions to my professional attainment.

I acknowledge all those whose inaugural lectures anticipated mine, particularly Professors Ologe, Olatunde, Ikeotuonye, Okwute and the others. They have set standards the rest of us will aspire to meet or beat.

I immensely thank Professor Nuhu Yaqub, the phenomenal Vice-Chancellor, University of Abuja, for his act of restorative justice, and for

All these contradictory, paradoxical and ambiguous experiences of man are adequately haboured in human language. Indeed, language will not be language if it lacks the facility to express the ambiguity that inherently characterizes life and the human situation. Thus, one appreciates the aptness of expressions like 'restrictive liberty' (the type enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden); 'dangerous pleasure' (the type promiscuous men and women enjoy in their spread of AIDS); and 'mercy killing' (that is still a hot moral debate in Europe). Further still, what someone accepts as a prayer is to another person a curse, For example, the armed robber who prays for a successful operation, is implicitly cursing his potential victim, wishing him ill-luck or misfortune. A casket maker who prays for huge daily profits is by implication cursing, wishing people death by all means and at all cost. This is a clear and typical illustration of 'one-concept-different-meaning' that generously adorns the human language.

This paradox or pragmatic ambiguity is not confined to expressions; it also features prominently in human experience. For example, fasting implies both physical weakness and spiritual strength; excessive light inhibits vision, while profound joy may lead to shedding of tears. In fact, we shed tears both in time of sorrow and joy.

Such is the frequent dual, even multiple, significance of human experience and the expressions we use to convey it that we often wonder about their exact meanings or implications. When we are surprised, baffled, perplexed or exasperated, the usual question is "what is the meaning of

this?" Incidentally, one question that linguists and philosophers have been unable to answer is: "what is the meaning of meaning?". However, since meaning is an attribute of language, whether verbal or non-verbal, it is proper to briefly examine the significance of language in human society.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Language is as important as the air we inhale, so commonplace and ordinary that we habitually take it for granted. But just as the denial of air can cause the cessation of life, so also can the disappearance of language arrest the advancement of human civilization, and even cause a substantial erosion of its history. Society is society because the fundamental factor of socialization is language. We use language to do things, and to cause things to happen. We use it to order society and to direct its course. We are able to do things because language is flexible, so flexible that it can be described as systematically ambiguous. It is therefore not only multifunctional but also omnificent.

Linguists are yet to agree on the different functions of language. For instance, in literary criticism, L.A. Richards (1929) identified four classes of function: sense, feeling, tone, intention. Jakobson (1961) identified 6 functions: referential (newspaper), emotive (casual conversation), conative (acquisition of knowledge), phatic (greetings and social relations) meta linguistic (technical). Another influential linguist, Halliday, acknowledges three (3) major functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual, while Brown and Yule talk of interactional and transactional functions.

to manipulate the letter and spirit of the language at all times. Personnel in the public and private sector must be sensitive to the implications of what they write, speak, read or hear. Misunderstanding is as dangerous as miscoding a message in any official or even interpersonal communication. It is therefore important that language be given its due attention as the hub of society.

These recommendations are made without prejudice to the indigenous languages which are the embodiment of our cultures. The bitter truth is simply that the English language has become irreplaceable in both our national history and development. Our culture must be vigorously preserved by giving due and appropriate attention to our indigenous languages, but our international status and technological development must also not be compromised by incompetent and inefficient use of the English language - the most powerful official language of the world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT SECTION

In conclusion, I wish to humbly acknowledge those whose thoughts, deeds, and actions have been instrumental to today's accomplishment.

First is the Almighty God, my Creator, my Protector and the designer of my fate, for being so specially, so selectively good to me and my family in every way. All glory, honour, and majesty be unto Him.

I thank my parents, His Royal Majesty, Oba Samuel Adewuyi Omole and Florence Onibipe Ornole, for their invaluable investment in my

It is indeed pathetic to observe that many Nigerian graduates, including some University Administrators and Lecturers, have rather disturbing writing competence.

Apart from sometimes alarming garbled communication and grammatical infelicities, many do write what they do not mean, usually a function of wrong diction and inappropriate syntax. If users of English as mother tongue are made to take at least a writing course before they graduate, as in the United States, then it ought to be a minimum requirement of students of English in a second language situation.

Another pertinent issue to language education is reading. Reading is one of the sources of language acquisition and improvement. Often, students' expressive ability or inability cannot be divorced from their reading attitude. Poor reading attitude amounts to lack of adequate exposure to the expressive form or potentials of the language, as reading enriches both imagination and vocabularies. The Reading Association of Nigeria should suggest ways of improving Nigeria's reading culture as a means of uplifting our students communicative competence and sensitivity to language use. This may include the suggestion by Ed Ball in *The Punch* of 4th January, 2008, p. 46 that -

"As parents we need to make reading a part of everyday life for our children - whether that is reading stories to younger children or talking about books and magazines with older kids"

Finally, since the English Language is Nigeria's official language with all its statutory implications, no effort should be spared in ensuring its proper and efficient use by educated Nigerians. Nigerians must be trained

Our focus is not on these functions per se, but how the systematic inherent ambiguity of language is exploited by its users to achieve different communicative purposes. Often times, however, speakers or writers end up saying more, or even less than they intend. In fact, they sometimes say what they do not intend. More intriguing, readers read much more meaning into a literary work than the author intends. In all these situations, it is obvious that there is a relationship between the letters and spirit of language. By letter and spirit we mean the relationship between what we actually say or write and what they essentially communicate or mean. That relationship may be one of concord or discord as we intend to demonstrate in this lecture, using literature, religion and law, three critical areas of language use in the society.

MEANING IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION

The area of linguistics concerned with the study of meaning is semantics. It is the most intractable of all linguistic disciplines in that it is yet to evolve a single codified theory that explains meaning in all its ramifications. Up till now, no one has yet come up with a satisfactory 'meaning of meaning'. It is therefore little wonder that people misjudge the intention of a message, misinterpret the message, and even quarrel over an otherwise innocuous or well-intended piece of communication. The problem can be either directly or remotely linked to the situational fluidity of conceptual meaning.

The fluidity has led linguists like Leech (1978) to identify seven types of meaning viz: conceptual, connotative, stylistic, affective, collocative, thematic and associative meanings. Sometimes, two or more types of meaning are present in one figure of speech. A metaphor, for example, is made up of both denotative and connotative meanings. Such a figure of speech is therefore componentially ambiguous. Although this issue will be examined in details later, the point here is that one major characteristic of meaning is its capacity for multiple implications and shifty potentials. Such multiple implications and shifty, inherently misleading concepts permeate the entire linguistic structure and are maximally exploited by writers and language users. The whole situation is clearly illustrated with this poem on the English Language extracted from the Internet:

Lets face it, English is a stupid language.
There is no egg in the eggplant.
No ham in the hamburger.
And neither pine nor apple in the pineapple.
English muffins were not invented in England.
French fries were not invented in France.

We sometimes take English for granted.
But if we examine its paradoxes
We find that Quicksand takes you down slowly.
Boxing rings are square.
And a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig.

If writers write, how come fingers don't fing.
If the plural of tooth is teeth,
shouldn't the plural of phone booth be phone beeth?
If the teacher taught,
Why didn't preacher praught.

If a vegetarian eats vegetables
What does a humanitarian eat!?

language education, especially in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, should be given a new structure and orientation. This becomes necessary, especially on account of its integral role in law making, governance and administrative controls, intelligence gathering, peace and conflict resolution, and international diplomacy. These are activities that not only require precise, accurate and calculated use of language, but are also sensitive to the linguistic, situational and pragmatic contexts of language use.

Therefore, as a way of making the English language more pragmatic and relevant to national needs, English Departments, in cooperation with relevant government agencies, should develop syllabi for: Language in peace and conflict resolution, language and law making, language and international diplomacy, language and intelligence gathering, English and the Media.

Beyond this, there should now be a clear demarcation between the omnibus **Use of English** and needs based English curriculum, such that certain English courses become mandatory in some Departments. Such courses should include technical English for Science, Technology and Engineering students; Business English or Business Communication for Business Administration, Accounting, and Management students, while Law students should be made to take a course in semantics and pragmatics of language to equip them for legal interpretation.

Allied to the above, Universities should make every undergraduate take at least a writing course either at 100 or 200 Level, before graduating.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, sir, ladies and gentlemen, the thrust of our submissions so far has been that all resources of language are, by their nature, capable of double meaning, and .. by application disposed to multiple significance or manipulations. As a tool in the hands of man, the same words, or indeed language, can be used in different contexts to achieve different communicative goals and effects. In the hands of an unconscious or undiscerning user of a language, it may lead to unintended consequences. Therefore the next question to address is how should Education Planners handle Language Education in Nigeria's tertiary institutions?

IMPLICATION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

. It has so far been shown that language is not only fundamental and critical to all human activities and interactions, but also generative and motivative. It is an institution that appears ordinary but complex in its functions. It can be used to create or to destroy. It can be used for organizing society and for giving order to human affairs. It is a major tool in the realm of peace and conflict resolution, an instrument for establishing human relationships. An expression can mean different things to different people in different contexts. It is omnificently manipulable. In short, language is so indispensable and delicate in human affairs that it should not be treated with any degree of indifference.

Given the normative variability of the forms and functions of language, and the shifty relationships between its letter and spirit, English

Why do people recite at a play
Yet play at a recital?

You have to marvel at the unique lunacy
Of a language where a house can burn up as
It burns down
And you fill in a form
By filling it out
And a bell is only heard once it goes!

English was invented by people, not computers
And it reflects the creativity of the human race
(Which of course isn't a race at all)

That is why:
When the stars are out they are visible
But when the lights are out they are invisible

And why is it that when I wind up my watch
it starts but when I wind up this poem
it ends?

The above poem makes certain statements about the English Language:

- a) Some English words have no relationship with what their written or phonological form suggests, e.g. quicksand, boxing ring, guinea pig; This is a typical case of dissonance between the letters of the words and their meaning;
- b) The morphological forms of words are irregular and unpredictable, in matters of tense and number.
teach - taught;
preach - preached
tooth - teeth
booth - booths
- c) a single expression can enter into at least two or more different collocations, e.g.
burn up
burn down.

d) idioms that are similar in form and contents may have contradictory meanings, e.g. stars are out
lights are out

Thus Lord Denning was right when he said:

"The English Language is not an instrument of Mathematical Precision. Our Literature would be much the poorer if it were". (Qtd in Badaiki p.2)

Ambiguity is frequent in speech and writing, and in various linguistic interactions. It is important in the formal description of language, prominent in its semantic study, critical in its pragmatics, and potent in its literary deployment. That aspect of linguistics devoted to the study of language in literary context is popularly known as stylistics or better still, literary linguistics, my area of teaching and research.

ASTYLISTICIAN'S EXPERIENCE

A stylistician enjoys the privilege of transversing the world of linguistics and literature. His capability is grounded in all levels, even branches of linguistics, and his main instrument is language. He is, therefore, sometimes perceived as a utility or multifunctional linguist. As a stylistician, I have been fascinated by the utilitarian capability and adaptability of language in literal and non-literary texts, particularly in the English Language. I have substantially concerned myself with linguistic features and categories and their implications in the various contexts of language use.

As a stylistician, I am interested not only in what is communicated, but also in how it is communicated either in speech or in writing. Indeed, that

The Supreme Court ruled in NPN's favour.

Similarly, the meaning of 'tenure' in the 1999 Constitution, became problematic when Peter Obi took over from Dr. Ngige as the Governor of Anambra State. One group believed that Obi's tenure should end when that of Ngige, from whom he took over ended. Peter Obi, however, held that his tenure started when he took his oath of office. The Supreme Court validated Obi's position.

In the past, many otherwise innocuous expressions have turned out as substantial issues of legal battle. These include "actual" (Okotieboh vs DPP) "shall" (Banjo vs Abeokuta Urban District Council) "property" (Oyakilome vs State) "same" (Alhaji Awe vs Afolabi). In view of the unpredictable meanings that ordinary words can assume in the ever unpredictable human experiential and legal configurations, Fatayi Williams, CJN in Awolowo vs Shagari, advised any interpreter of a word having two or more meanings thus:

"If the words used are capable of more than one meaning, then the person interpreting the Statute can choose between these meanings, but beyond that he must not go" (Qtd in Badaiki), He should not go beyond that so as not to veer into "judicial legislation" instead of legal interpretation. All these emphasize the neural, even umbilical interdependency of language, law and particularly legal interpretation, on which the carriage or miscarriage of justice subsists.

for the continuance of the mischief and pro private commodo, and to add force and life to the cure and remedy according to the true intent of the makers of the Act pro bono publico (Qtd in).

The essence of aU these citations is to empirically demonstrate that the law is awash with actual and potential ambiguities in matters of interpretation, not only of statutes but indeed in our constitutions, Two typical examples will suffice.

The constitutional crisis generated in 1979 by the figure 12 1'3 cannot be easily forgotten. Neither can the supreme court judgement on the gubernatorial tenure of Peter Obi be erased from Nigeria's political history. Section 126, sub-section (2) of the 1979 Constitution states that:

A candidate for an election to the office of President shall be deemed to have been duly elected where, there being more than 2 candidates for the election

- a) he has the highest number of votes cast at the election; and
- b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the States in the Federation.

As of that time, the Nigerian Federation consisted of 19 States. The question then arose as to the meaning of "two-thirds of all the States in the Federation", The UPN, led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, held that 2/3 of nineteen States had to be 13 States, while the NPN, led by Alhaji Shehu Shagari, insisted that it was 12 States plus 2/3 of votes in any other State.

which is communicated is meaning.- Inrationalizing how it is communicated, the stylistician must identify the features of the language used, why are these features, and not the others, used or preferred for that communicative event?

What is the effect of the linguistic features selected for use by the speaker or writer? In essence, therefore, the stylistician is interested in the meaning conveyed in a stretch of language and how that meaning is achieved.

However, that meaning resides at the various levels of language use. It exists at the level of the sounds of language (phonology). Thus we can distinguish between

{ pet { piss { pin { gain { cart { 'conduct
{ pot { kiss { pen { pain, { dart { con'duct

It also exists at the level of the linear relationships between the words in a sentence or stretch of language (syntax). Thus we differentiate between 'Men only watched the movie' and 'Only men watched the movie'. Meaning also exists at the level of individual words (lexis). For example, words like kill, murder, butcher, have a common meaning, but different emotional implications. Similarly, the word 'mother' generally attracts positive emotions, but to some others it may evoke really painful feelings and reactions, especially if it has to do with mother-in-law. Meaning also resides at the level of context of utterance. That is, the context surrounding a spoken or written sentence.

First, some ordinarily harmless words are being avoided in public discourse because of their emotional associations. Examples are erection, intercourse,

ejaculation. Secondly, a word like 'action', means different things to different people. To a soldier, it means firing; to a lawyer, a law suit; and to a film producer, activation of camera. It is even possible to distinguish between the meaning of a sentence and that of an utterance. For example, somebody asks her partner: 'Did you enjoy the dinner?' But the partner replied: 'The ice-cream wasn't bad', meaning she didn't enjoy the dinner (except the ice-cream).

These are some of the levels of meaning that writers or speakers do exploit for various shades of meaning and purposes. They are also the levels at which a stylistician has to correspondingly operate in order to get to the depth of meaning, purpose and beauty, especially of a literary work. And that is why he has to be a linguist more than just a literary critic. These are some of the intellectual pursuits in which I have engaged myself over the years, adopting what scholars have branded the sociolinguistic approach for my stylistic enquiries.

The sociolinguistic approach has been adopted principally because language is a social property, just as literature is a product of society. The writer is a member of society as much as the readers are. The impact of literature is best measured on the scale of its society. Therefore, in studying the language and meaning of communication, whether in speech or in writing, the stylistician can justifiably rely on how real humans of blood and flesh, empirically and socially use language. This also implies that my perception of language use in literature is identical with the real language use by men and women in different circumstances, for different purposes and functions. As

direct, 'natural' straight-forward unambiguous meaning in interpretation of statutes. I have been informed, however, by my friends in the Faculty of Law, that there are exceptions to this principle of interpretation.

(b) Golden rule - I quote:

It is a very useful rule in the construction of a statute to adhere to the ordinary meaning of the words used, and to the grammatical construction unless that is at variance with the intention of the legislature to be collected from the statute, itself, or leads to manifest absurdity or repugnance, in which case the language may be varied or modified so as to avoid such inconvenience but no further.

(c) Mischief rule - This is not a simple, one statement rule. It is fairly elaborate. Lord Coke made the following pronouncements:

That for the sure and true interpretation of all statutes in general (be they penal or beneficial, restrictive or enlarging of the common law) four things are to be discovered and considered:

- (1) What was the common law before the passing of the act;
- (2) What was the mischief and defect for which the common law did not provide;
- (3) What remedy the parliament hath resolved and appointed to cure the disease of the commonwealth;
- (4) The true reason of the remedy. And then the office of all the judge is always to make such construction as shall suppress the mischief and advance the remedy, and to suppress subtle inventions and evasions

- (i) The principles upon which the constitution was established rather than the direct operation or literal meaning of the words used measure the purpose and scope of its provisions.
- (ii) Words of the constitution are not to be read with stultifying narrowness.
- (iii) Constitutional language is to be given a reasonable construction, and obscured consequences are to be avoided.
- (iv) The language of the constitution where clear and unambiguous must be given its plain evident meaning.
- (v) While the language of the constitution does not change, the changing circumstances of a progressive society for which it was designed yield new and fuller import to its meaning.

This last principle is very important to this lecture. Like the literature and the Bible, the law attempts to capture not just the past or present, but even future sundry demeanour and misdemeanour of a given human society. Given the dynamism of human society at large, new mischiefs are being added virtually on a daily basis which render extant laws either obsolete or ambiguous. Consequently, lawyers have come up with some general guiding principles of legal interpretation as a way of solving the seemingly inherent, if not interminable conflict between the letter and spirit of the law. These several principles of interpretation are:

- (a) Literal rule - This refers to the application of ordinary meaning of words. The literal rule intends that words are to be given their

Fowler (1981) argues, there is no special literary language different from the language of society. All language use, whether literary or non-literary can be appreciated from the prism of sociolinguistics.

This approach has enabled me to see some aesthetic merits in some of Soyinka's acclaimed difficult works, particularly The Interpreters. Simply stated, the sophisticated English in The Interpreters is a suitable reflection of the personalities of the characters using the languages in the novel - characters who have stayed overseas for years and are just returning home after independence. It is also a reflection of the subject matter being enacted in the fiction. For example, the language of philosophy is typically elevated and ponderous. That is why the philosophy of voidancy, a satire on philosophy in the novel, appears obfuscating and impenetrable. Soyinka's language is aesthetically functional. Besides, the sociolinguistic approach to stylistic criticism has also enabled me to appreciate some of the linguistic experimentations going on in African literature (Omo1c, 1991 :589 - 599). I have been able to fathom the aesthetic potentials of the manipulable infinite possibilities of language, especially its rich characteristically explosive meanings. Linguistic experimentation in African literature is designed to bring language into an immediate revelatory relationship with the socio-political milieu of African writers.

While researching into these issues and teaching them to my students, I came to appreciate fully the inherent but not infrequent difference between the letters of a language or expression and the

spirit, intention or meaning of that expression. I have also immensely benefited from the stimulating responses of some of them. In fact, part of their enquiries provided the theme of this inaugural lecture. Is language an efficient and sufficient means of communication? In other words, is the verbal language adequate for the expression of every idea 'or experience one wants to express? Can the letters of a language be different from its spirit? If yes, is ambiguity a vice or a virtue in language? What is the implication of the multifunctional concept of ambiguity for communication in general and language education in particular?

THE CONCEPT OF AMBIGUITY

In the version of the Bible, where it is said of life, in spite of its attractions, beauty, luxury, lust and temptations, "Vanity of Vanity, all is Vanity"; the same may be said of language: "ambiguity of ambiguity, all is ambiguity". The operational concepts of this lecture clearly amplify this position.

First, the word 'letter' is ambiguous. It could mean -

- a) a conventional printed mark e.g. an alphabet
- b) a written message sent by post
- c) the strict literal meaning of words
- d) exactly or in details

Second, the word 'spirit' is also ambiguous. It could mean among several others:

- (a) a supernatural being without a body
- (b) a frame of mind, prevalent mood or attitude
- (c) the underlying essential meaning or intention
- (d) a distilled alcoholic drink e.g. brandy
- (e) the animating or vitalizing force that motivates or energizes someone.

from the cliché "letter and spirit of the law". We will now turn our attention to the nature of ambiguity in legal language.

LEGAL LANGUAGE

Language and the law are intertwined. Language is a major instrument not only of law making but also of interpretation of statutes. According to Badaiki:

"Lawyers and the courts in particular try to unravel the meaning of statutes, a task made difficult by the subtle relationship between law and language" (1)

This subtle relationship is notoriously ironic in the sense that the legal draftsman tries his uttermost best to avoid ambiguity, using punctuation marks sparingly and piling up phrases upon. phrases. Yet the end product has never been totally free of contentious interpretations. In the words of Crystal and Davy:

To speak of legal language as communicating meaning is in itself rather misleading. Of all uses of language. It is perhaps the least communicative, in that it is designed not so much to enlighten language - users at large as to allow one expert to register information for scrutiny by another (193-4).

The above is particularly relevant to conveyancing property, drawing up wills, contracting of agreements and drawing up statutes.

However, let me quickly add that the supreme court of Nigeria has established some principles of constitutional interpretation. Five of the 12 principles address language problems. These are:

Unfortunately, that was his reason for being an atheist, at least when we were together at Ilorin.

Again the problem with the young man is that he confused the letter of the biblical statement with its spirit. Yes, the letter talked of a mountain or even a tree which the exercise of faith can remove. But in reality, mountain or tree is a metaphor for human problems; crisis and pains, which I believe faith and prayer can remove.

One more injunction is found in Matthew 5 :29 and I quote:

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body .should be cast into hell.

I strongly believe that most Christians understand and obey the spirit more than the letter of this one injunction. This is evident in the fact that, apart from the reported incident, in the Phillipines, of a man who severed his manhood because he felt it was responsible for his maniacal sex exploit, I haven't heard many stories of a man physically dismembering himself on account of an offending part of his body.

What these biblical examples have shown is that, in communication, often times, there is a distinction between the letter and spirit of a given piece of language. We just have to be quite sensitive to the context of language use for us to have the right interpretation. It is this problem of interpretation that has created an unbridgeable doctrinal chasm between the Jehovah witness and other Christian groups. However, if we talk of a distinction between letter and spirit of language, with regard to certain statements in the Bible, in law the situation is notoriously one of conflict. Indeed, this lecture derives its title

Then, the word language is ambiguous. It could refer to-

- (a) a medium of communication, whether verbal or non-verbal;
- (b) It could apply to a variety of language or the speech and writing of a particular nation or social group as in: Yoruba, Hausa, Standard and non-standard language;
- (c) It could refer to-a manner or style of communication as in: feminist language, violent language, decent language, technical language;

Beyond these three key words, other relevant concepts such as 'meaning' and 'ambiguity' are equally ambiguous. For example the word 'meaning' may imply 'reference' as in La mere means "Mother". It may also refer to 'sign' as in Red means danger. Still it may mean 'intention' as in "I mean to make you laugh."

Then (and this is quite interesting), the word ambiguous is itself ambiguous. It may refer to an utterance or writing that has:

- (a) more than one meaning simultaneously in one context;
- (b) more than one meaning in different contexts;
- (c) meaning/intending one thing and saying another;
- (d) vagueness or uncertainty of any meaning at all.

The Encarta Dictionary of English, has the following entries as the meaning of ambiguous:

- (1) having more than one possible meaning or interpretation
- (2) causing uncertainty or confusion e.g. an ambiguous result.

For William Empson, the renown literary critic, ambiguity is "any verbal

nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" 7 Types Of Ambiguity: I

On account of its explanatory adequacy and referential elasticity, quite appropriate for this lecture, we wholly adopt Empson's definition, which he himself admits to be broad enough to seem "stretched absurdly far" (I).

Ambiguity can be linguistic or literary. From a purely linguistic perspective, there are four main forms of ambiguity: phonetic, grammatical, lexical and pragmatic. In the context of literary criticism, Empson identified seven types, viz:

1. when a detail is effective in several ways at once;
2. two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one;
3. two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously;
4. alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author;
5. a fortunate confusion such as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing or not holding it all in mind at once;
6. what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations;
7. full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind.

Although our main concern is linguistic ambiguity, yet we will look at its manifestations both in literary and non-literary texts so as to demonstrate

delegation from the Ilorin provincial office to come and investigate the incident. An argument ensued between the officials and the Christian converts which led to the slapping of one of the converts by an agent of the DO. As an act of commitment to the faith and in keeping to the biblical injunction of offering the other cheek, the convert turned the other cheek to the DO's agent, who again viciously slapped the man. This slapping was repeated up to two or three times on each cheek until blood started streaming out of one ear. The man, now late, died with one of his ears deaf.

This incident as dramatic and laughable as it was, and probably still is, happened because the convert fervently and faithfully understood the letter, but not the spirit of Jesus injunction. The letter refers to the physical cheek, but the spirit, the real meaning of the injunction, is that, rather than retaliate, we should continue to do good to our enemies, in spite of their malevolence.

The second incident happened to a colleague of mine when he was a young man living with some priests. He had an early, consistent and sustained exposure to the infinite power of faith. He was particularly convinced that if he had faith he could order a tree to be transfigured from its natural place unto the sea and the tree should obey. So one day, the priests he was staying with traveled. He ran out of money and became famished with hunger. Remembering the above assertion of the power of faith and believing it completely with childlike innocence, he picked some stones, washed them and put them in a pot and started cooking, expecting them to turn to yam. He did this for up to an hour to no avail. Then he gave up.

Nicodemus in turn queried, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" In spite of further explanations by Jesus that being born again means being "born of water and of the spirit", Nicodemus remained incredulous, asking "How can these things be?" This example has been cited only as one of those semantically knotty expressions in the Bible, which researchers in theology have now rendered thoroughly accessible and canonical in Christianity. Nowadays, being 'born again' means spiritual rebirth and moral transformation through repentance, baptism and rededication to the ideals of-Godly living.

However, as this lecture is not about the Bible, but about the occasional opacity or the multiple implications of its language, we will examine two typical cases in the Bible. First is the injunction by Jesus Christ that "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other;" (Luke 6:29a). Second is the assertion that " ... if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove: and nothing shall be impossible unto you." (Matthew 17:20; Luke 17:6). I have picked on these two portions of the Bible on account of two real life events that happened to two people to whom I am socially related, and of which I am aware.

The first incident happened to one of the pioneers of Christianity in my village, sometime in 1926. They wanted to build the church in my village and set about clearing the site. However, they felled a tree, an act that allegedly angered some officers in the District Officer's (DO) office. The DO sent a

it's all pervasive presence In human communication and language. As ambiguity is a semantic relation, whether in linguistics or in literature, we will take a look at linguistic ambiguity in its four dimensions.

LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY

Linguistic ambiguity can arise in a variety of ways. As already stated, it may be 'phonetic, grammatical, lexical or pragmatic. Phonetic ambiguity typically occurs in spoken language while the other three may be both spoken and written. It is absolutely necessary to examine each type in some details for us to be able to appreciate their role or consequence not only in language but in human communication.

(a) Phonetic Ambiguity

Phonetic ambiguity is a characteristic of the spoken language. It may occur at the word level or be caused by the phonetic structure of the sentence. At the lexical level, many English words share not just the same form but also the same pronunciation. Where they don't share the same form, their pronunciation is so close as to make users of the language mistake or approximate one to the other, particularly in a second language situation as in Nigeria. Examples of such words include *saw* and *sore*.

pull and *pool*

sun and *son*

rays and *raise*

scene and *sin*

Such phonetic similarities of words constitute a major graphological and comprehension problem for many undiscerning students while taking lecture notes. They end up writing the wrong words that are contextually meaningless. In addition, Phonetic similarities form the basis of uncertain, nearly esoteric communications of infants during the babbling stage. At the babbling stage, the mother is usually the first person to understand what the child is saying or trying to say. An empirical observation of some of my siblings children at the babbling stage yielded the following data:

Dog is pronounced as cog

Garlic is pronounced as Galilee

Guava is pronounced as Jehovah

Another feature of phonetic ambiguity is that it is interlingual or intercultural. Perhaps, in consonance with the Tower of Babel theory, many words are homophonous. They sound the same way though they belong to different languages, and have different meanings. Some even have the same spellings but different pronunciations. Examples abound in Yoruba and Igala, Yoruba and Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, Hausa and English, Yoruba and Idoma, etc.

<u>YORUBA</u>	<u>IGALA</u>	<u>ENGLISH</u>	<u>HAUSA</u>
Oko (hoe)	Oko (Money)	Nature	Nature (I push)

<u>YORUBA</u>	<u>HAUSA</u>	<u>YORUBA</u>	<u>IDOMA</u>
bawo ni (How now?)	baa woni (no person)	owo (respect)	owo (rain)

<u>YORUBA</u>	<u>HAUSA</u>
ala (boundary)	ala (land)

means of a coherent complex of metaphors. Myth also belongs in this category as it is well illustrated in Soyinka's use of Ogun in his poetry and novel, and in Ola Rotimi's representation of the Oedipus complex in The Gods Are Not To Blame.

THE BIBLICAL DIMENSION

All over the Christendom, the Bible is accepted as the word of God. Although it features the history and culture of the Hebrews, it is a book that is wide and deep, not only in epistemological scope, but also in its applicability to the past, the present and the future of humanity. Hence, many regard it as a book of life, of knowledge and of wisdom. Within its ethical framework and injunctions, humanity can attain sanity, focus and peace.

Religious books are known to be opulent in their use of language. The Bible, and even the Qur'an, are no exceptions. Their language is characterized by copious analogies, allusions, anecdotes, parables imagery and innumerable figures of speech. These are the platforms on which the elegance, richness, beauty and depth of the language are built. These are also the factors that challenge the interpretive and comprehension competence of believers or readers of the holy books. Indeed, certain aspects of the language become patently unfathomable to the extent that preachers and Imams give different but equally meaningful, though sometimes debatable readings to them. For example, in John 3:3-5, Jesus said unto Nicodemus "verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God",

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism is almost like proverbs in its semantic indirectness.

According to the Encarta World English Dictionary, it is the use of symbols to invest things with a representative meaning or to represent something abstract by something concrete. Symbolism thrives on the multiple significance of objects or ideas. For example, water can be a symbol of regeneration or destruction; fire can symbolize destruction or purification, while green can stand for immaturity or fertility. The implication of the symbol depends on its aesthetic projection by the writer.

Therefore, writers do exploit one or all the possible significance of these objects or ideas in their writings. In this context, symbolism also has metaphorical entailments. Essentially, it is an encapsulating mechanism for the artistic presentation of a theme or message by an author. In Osundare's The Eye of the Earth for instance, Agbegilodo (timbertruck) symbolizes the "exploitative improvidence" of timber merchants who relentlessly decimate our natural vegetation and forest resources.

Literary symbolism is typically derived from the objects of nature while others are artificially constructed in a process of intuitive perception, emotional experience, or rational reflection. Literary symbolism is verbal symbolism, and it is generally metaphorical as already stated. Thus the allegory, symbolically represents an idea by

Phonetic ambiguity is also realizable at the phrasal and sentence levels. 'The sun's rays meet' is identical in phonetic structure with 'The son's raze meat' just as 'les heros' (the heroes) is identical with 'les zeros' (the zeroes) in French. Another example is 'They found hospitals and donor agencies'. Here the word 'found' makes the sentence phonetically ambiguous. 'Found' can either be the past form of 'find' or the present form of 'found'. Thus one can say that the existence of homophones in the English language amounts to the existence of ambiguity in the language, the functions of which will be examined later.

(b) Grammatical Ambiguity

One of the most productive sources of ambiguity in the English language is its grammar. Starting with its morphology, some prefixes and suffixes have more than one meaning, which may, occasionally, create problems of usage or understanding for some learners of English as a second language. An example of such prefixes is 'in--' as 'in inborn', 'indent', 'inflamm', 'inbreeding' where 'in--' means into, within etc. This meaning contrasts with 'inappropriate', 'inexperienced' and 'inconclusive', where 'in--' expresses negation. So also is the suffix '-able' in desirable or readable different in meaning from eatable, knowable and debatable.

Apart from prefixes and suffixes, equivocal phrasing or certain combination of noun phrases often leads to serious ambiguity. The phrase 'old men and women' is a typical example. Is it only the men that are old or is it both the men and women? In order to disambiguate this, we may have two different versions of the phrase (1) women and old men or (2) old men and old women. Other examples of equivocal phrasing include: (3) 'They found hospitals or charitable institutions', (4) He saw the man with a telescope'. (3) has already been explained. The problem with 4 is: Did he use a telescope to see the man or Did he see the man who was holding a telescope?

Another source of grammatical ambiguity is the use of -ing participle as in the following often quoted examples (1) Visiting in-laws can be stressful or flying planes can be dangerous (2) The police were told to stop shooting on the campus.

In example 1, is it the act of visiting one's in-laws that is stressful or is it the in-laws that are visiting that are causing the stress? In (2) is it the act of flying planes or the flying planes (the objects themselves) that are dangerous?

In (3), is it the police themselves that should stop their shooting or they are to stop the people (may be cultists) shooting on the campus?

Yet another source of grammatical ambiguity, to which most of us users of English in Nigeria are not sensitive, is in the use of adjectives of provenance. Thus, the phrase the 'English teacher' may mean either 'a teacher of English' or 'a teacher who is English by origin'. Similarly, there is a difference between a stony path (a path filled with stones) and a stone path (a path made of stone).

traditional or cultural wise sayings that have both literal and connotative meanings. African literary writings are celebrated for their copious use of proverbs which typically serve as catalyst to their thought process.

Chinua Achebe is the best known of writers who generously deploy proverbs in their writings.

Because proverbs are culturally rooted, foreign readers of African proverbs may encounter difficulty in reconciling their letter and spirit.

For example, the following are taken from Things Fall Apart:

"Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad day light, then know that something is after its life" (209).

"A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm" (69).

The logic or thought process of the proverbs may appear questionable to people alien to the original culture of the proverbs. Sometimes, they may not even be able to appreciate the link between the occasion of application and the proverbial utterance. Even young men do encounter difficulty in decoding proverbs in their own language. That is, they are unable to determine the meaning of a given proverb purely on account of its lexical composition. Nonetheless, this problem does not detract from the communicative functions of proverbs. They can universalize incidents, reduce the harshness of an utterance, sharpen characterization (in literature), clarify conflict or indeed, focus on the values of the society.

at least, one Degree of Mercy towards their Tenants. Lastly, Of putting a Spirit of Honesty, Industry, and Skill into our Shop-keepers; who, if a Resolution could now be taken to buy only our native Goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the Price, the Measure, and the Goodness; nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair Proposal of just Dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it.

Therefore I repeat, let no Man talk to me of these and the like Expedients; till he hath, at least, a Glimpse of Hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere Attempt to put them in Practice.

In his own words, the proposal is "for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public" (1113).

In essence, therefore, the letter of the satire is wicked, sadistic and cannibalistic, but the spirit (import) is patriotic and benevolent, abhorring poverty, wretchedness, delinquency, hunger, joblessness, rot and oppression. The satirist's language is one of rage, resentment and vigour. That is why he rejects the rational options on the ground that there is unlikely ever to be "some hearty and sincere Attempt to put them in practice" (1119). The indictment' of the satire reaches out to contemporary Nigerians, who accept as inevitable man's inhumanity to man, who rest secure or complacent in their reason and morality without involving themselves in the horror of social inequity.

Another aspect of language that requires frequent alignment of letter and spirit by readers or hearers is proverbs. Proverbs are

In order to underscore the prevalence of grammatical ambiguity in day to day application of language, not only in a second language but also in mother tongue (MT) and foreign language (FL) situations, the following data have been elicited from the internet.

Advertisements

We don't just serve hamburgers, we serve people. [dish out people for consumption]

Slow children at play [comma omitted]

We exchange anything - bicycles, washing machines, etc. Why not bring your wife along and get a wonderful bargain. [is the wife to be exchanged too, probably at a cheaper rate?]

Automatic washing machines: Please remove all your clothes when the light goes out. [evacuate the machines] / [from the machines].

Norway Cocktail Lounge: Ladies are requested not to have children at the bar. -- (bring)

Moscow Hotel: You are welcome to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and Soviet composers, artists and writers are buried daily except Thursday. [visit the cemetery daily except Thursday]

Copenhagen Airline Office: We will take your bags and send them in all directions. [and take them to various destinations]

Rhodes Tailor: Order Summer suits early, In a big rush we will execute

customers in strict rotation.[customers' orders]

Paris Hotel: Please leave your values at the front desk. [valuables].

Unibuja Signboard: Trespassers will be persecuted (prosecuted).

In a bid to avoid verbiage and say so much in few words within a limited space, Newspaper headlines are highly prone to ambiguity.

The following are

some examples:

Reagan wins on Budget, But More Lies Ahead [verb/noun].

Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim [Dog-bite]

Enraged Cow Injures Fanner with Axe [a fanner carrying an axe]

Miners Refuse to Work after Death [death of. ...]

Stolen painting found by Tree [beside]

Two Soviet Ships collide, one dies [person]

Never Withhold Herpes Infection from Loved one [information]

Typhoon Rips through cemetery; Hundreds dead [people]

Kid Make Nutritious Snacks [prepare]

In all these examples, the arrangement of words, the choice of words and the omission of words and necessary punctuation marks are the observable factors of grammatical ambiguity. The third type of linguistic ambiguity is lexical ambiguity.

(3) **Lexical Ambiguity**

At the lexical level, the concept of ambiguity is as interesting as it is elaborate. First, many of the words (i.e. the same words) that we use are capable of multiple meanings (polysemy) e.g. board, grave.

Those who cannot distinguish between the letter and spirit of language often dissipate emotions on the import of satire. Jonathan Swift, one of its greatest practitioners, was once regarded as a misanthrope following the publication of his Gullivers Travels. As if to confirm this appellation, he went on to publish his famous 'A Modest Proposal'

"for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public".

In the proposal, he passionately advocated the slaughter, sale, eating and exportation of children's meat in the Republic of Ireland as an economic strategy to control poverty, diseases and deprivation. Having explained his scheme in very meticulous details and how the economic plan can help Ireland, he now goes on to reject such other economic alternatives.

He writes:

"Therefore, let no man talk to me of other Expedients: Of taxing our Absentees at five Shillings a Pound: Of using neither Cloaths, nor Household Furniture except what is of our own Growth and Manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the Materials and Instruments that promote foreign Luxury: Of curing the Expensiveness of Pride, Vanity, Idleness, and Gaming in our Women: Of introducing a Vein of Parsimony, Prudence and Temperance: Of learning to love our Country, wherein we differ even from LAPLANDERS, and the Inhabitants of TOPINAMBOO: Of quitting our Animositities, and Factions; nor act any longer like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very Moment their City was taken: Of being a little cautious not to sell our Country and Consciences for nothing: Of teaching Landlords to have'33

ellipsis, e.g. Mary! The food on the stove! Meaning 'Mary, pay attention to the food on the stove' rather than 'Mary bring the food on the stove'.

Though prominent in the study of semantics and central to pragmatics, context is equally cardinal in linguistic stylistics, a stylistics that is sensitive to social and cultural milieu of text. It therefore becomes germane for us to now survey ambiguity in the context of language use in literature, religion and law.

THE LITERARY DIMENSION

Literature, according to Fowler, is language. It provides a world where a reader can experience the infinite possibilities of language. Indeed many of the linguistic features already highlighted in this lecture are amply represented and demonstrated in any given literary work, be it fiction, poetry or drama. But we will avoid the repetition of such issues as metaphor, and other figures of speech of double semantic structure, including idioms and pun. Rather, we will take a cursory look at satire, a mode of fiction that naturally tends to put its few writers in trouble, especially with a mass of undiscerning readership. Satire is a literary composition or writing which holds up follies and vices for criticism, ridicule and scorn. Its instruments include sarcasm, irony wit and humour.

Some have identical pronunciation but different meanings and spelling (homophones).

Some resemble one another in form but have different meanings; still some even have the same spellings but different pronunciation and meanings e.g. refuse. The latter two may be generally classified as homonyms. What more, there are those expressions called idioms whose meanings are completely different from or illogical to the words that compose them (e.g. kick the bucket,

sit on the fence, do someone in). Then, we have the figures of speech, which we use not only to organize our thoughts and capture our perceptions but also to enrich and compress them. In discussing lexical ambiguity, therefore, attempts will be made to briefly highlight the reflection of ambiguity in the English lexicon, idioms and figures of speech.

The Oxford English Dictionary claims that each of the 500 word used most in the English language has an average of 23 different meanings. For example, the word round has 70 distinctly different meanings, based on its different possible collocations. Words like only, never, should, nothing and usually are sometimes applied in a manner in which a double meaning can be implied. Therefore, natural language is characterized by a remarkable variance of word meanings.

This phenomenon in semantics is sometimes called polyvalency. It may take two different forms.

- (a) The same word may have two or more different meanings; that is polysemy. Examples are

Board - a thin plank or table
Persons sitting/decision making body

bill - legislation
 cost/charges
 will - inheritance
 inner power
 rest - remainder
 state of inaction

(b) Two or more different words may be identical in sound; that is homonymy. It also includes words which sound alike but have different spellings. Examples are

mean - middle
 mean - inferior
 seal - piece of wax fixed on a letter
 seal - name of an animal
 site - place/location
 sight - vision
 cite - mention

It is important to note that both polysemy and homonymy are sometimes characterized by syntactic differences. A word like

double can be an adjective as in (double joy), an adverb as in (he worked double), a verb as in (is doubled) and a noun as in (He has double). Similarly homonyms may come from different word-classes:

grave (adjective)

grave (noun)

bear (verb)

bear (noun)

The point being made is that polysemy and homonymy are

B John: Did you visit Mr. Lecturer?

Mary: I couldn't get a recorder

In example A, Mary's meaning is that she will not marry. But literally she simply says she will like to be a boss. Similarly in B, Mary implied that she did not visit Mr. Lecturer because she couldn't get a tape recorder. Thus there is a distinction between literal utterance and actual meaning.

Third, pragmatics also deals with the problem of pragmatic inference, as opposed to logical inference. For example, if I say 'Obafemi has gone to the hospital', we may infer that Obafemi is ill and has gone for treatment. However, if the follow-up statement comes as "He is glad that his patients are responding to treatment", we will quickly realize the ambiguity of the first sentence, and conclude that Obafemi is a doctor. In the three instances cited above, we see how situational context is central to the study of pragmatics and how pragmatics in turn can substantially explain problems of meaning in discourse and natural languages.

In summary, whether linguistic or situational, context, as observed by Leech, (1978) can:

- (i) eliminate certain ambiguities or multiple meanings in a message, e.g. (when the chair in the Philosophy Department became vacant, the Appointments Committee chairman sat on it for six months);
- (ii) indicate the referents of certain types of word called deictic (this, that, here, there, now, then, you, I, he, it, the man, etc.)
- (iii) supply information which the speaker/writer has omitted through

- (v) the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding;
- (vi) the study of the role context plays in speaker - (or utterance) meaning (Strawson, 1964);
- (vii) the study of the ability of language users to pair sentence with the contexts in which they would be appropriate;
- (viii) the study of deixis (at least in part), implicature, presupposition, speech acts, and aspects of discourse structure.

These are only a few of about fifteen or more definitions of the discipline. In all the definitions, however, context is a prominent denominator. The question then is what has ambiguity of language got to do with pragmatics or contexts.

First, a major problem of pragmatics is deixis. Deixis or indexical words refer to those aspects of language that require reference to the users of the language, without which such words remain permanently ambiguous.

Examples are the pronouns I and You, here, now, this, that, etc. In the words of Levinson (2003:5), "Just as the interpretation of the words I and You relies on the identification of particular participants (or 'users') and their role in the speech event, so the words here and now rely for their interpretation on the place and time of the speech event." Without contextual reference, they are naturally ambiguous.

Second, pragmatics also concerns itself with what Grice (1975) calls implicature, a term used to account for what a speaker can imply, suggest, or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says. Example:

- A John: Mary, when will you marry?
 Mary: I wish to be a boss too.

prominent forms of ambiguity in language which enjoy considerable, even equally eminent stylistic uses in literature, especially as pun used for communicating valid multiple meaning in a single expression.

Idiom

According to Irmscher, Idiom refers to any expression that does not quite fit the customary grammatical or logical expectations of English, but has become established as a way of saying something in the language. Since it is a vernacular feature of language, native speakers have little difficulty with them. On the other hand, they always pose serious problem of comprehension to users of English as a second or foreign language. Some English idioms are: riding the crest of the wave, jumping the gun, a chip of the old block, do someone in, make heavy weather of. ... ,

One obvious characteristic of idioms is the opposition between their letters and their meanings, on the one hand; and between their literal and communicative meaning on the other. To that extent one may assert that idioms typically display a discordant relationship between the letter and spirit of language, and are therefore important manifestations of the ambiguity that characterizes the language we use.

Figurative language

Figurative language, an important element in stylistic studies, is also partly responsible for the existence of ambiguity in language. Besides the fact

that many figures of speech, by their composition, are innately ambiguous, they also have multiple radiant referents. A typical example is metaphor. As earlier stated, a metaphor is a figure of speech that carries two meanings: one literal, the other connotative. The critical point here, however, is the multiple metaphorical potentials of a term. In his article "Body-Part Terminology and Parallel Metaphors in English and Yoruba", Omole (1990) cited the example of the term 'eye' occurring in a number of metaphors such as the eye of a needle, the eye of a tornado, the eye of the earth (apology to Osundare). In addition the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cited other occurrences: the opening through which the water of a fountain wells up, the brightest spot of light, the centre of revolution, a loop of metal, thread or rope etc. Other examples of body-part metaphors include: nose of a car, foot of a mountain, hand of the clock, leg of a table, etc. According to Omole, the human body-parts, as a truth of language universals, are a very rich source of metaphors:

The possibility of their metaphorical transposition is fundamental to the working of language. A philosopher, W. M. Urban, says that:

The fact that a sign can intend one thing without ceasing to intend another, that, indeed, the very condition of its being an expressive sign for the second is that it is also a sign for the first, is precisely what makes language an instrument of knowing. This 'accumulated intension' of words is the fruitful source of ambiguity, but it is also the source of that analogous predication, through which alone the symbolic power of language comes into being. (Language and Reality: 112)

impinge on the meaning of an utterance at any point in time. It is this notion of context that has given birth to the branch of linguistics known as pragmatics, which factors into meaning the presuppositions of participants in a communicative event, which in turn can lead to a shocking unanticipated response or reactions from interlocutors. As a result, some linguists now make a distinction between sentence meaning and utterance meaning, sentence meaning being concerned with semantics, while utterance meaning is with pragmatics. This distinction, with its problems, is not our concern today; the issue here is to emphasize the role of context in both semantics and pragmatics.

In either case, context is not only a source of, but also a key to ambiguity.

Pragmatics and Meaning

What then is pragmatics? Pragmatics has been given different definitions by different scholars. The earliest definition is that of Charles Morris (1938), which considers pragmatics as the study of "relation of signs to interpreters" 6. Bar-Hillel (1954) modified this definition, viewing pragmatics as "the study of languages, both natural and artificial, that contain indexical or deictic terms". However, among the modern definitions are:

- (i) the study of language from a functional perspective .. that attempts to explain facets of linguistic structure by reference to non-linguistic pressures and causes;
- (ii) "those linguistic investigations that make necessary reference to aspects of the context" (Carnap);
- (iii) the study of those relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language;
- (iv) pragmatics is meaning minus truth conditions (Gazdar: 1979a:2);

conceptual scope of 'context' has somewhat varied from linguist to linguist. For instance Van Dijk, 1976:29 considers 'context' as "the selection of just those features that are culturally and linguistically relevant to the production and interpretation of utterances". Lyon (1977a:574) lists the following as those features;

- * Knowledge of role and status (such as speaker or addressee and relative social standing)
- * Knowledge of spatial and temporal location
- * Knowledge of formality level
- * Knowledge of medium (the code or style appropriate to a channel e.g. speech/writing)
- * Knowledge of appropriate subject matter

In view of all these features, Ochs (1979c) is of the opinion that "the scope of context is not easy to define ... One must consider the social and psychological world in which the language user operates at any given time" (p. 1). He therefore extends the notion to include minimally 'language users' beliefs and assumptions about temporal, spatial, and social settings; prior, on going, and future actions (verbal, non-verbal), and the state of knowledge and attentiveness of those participating in the SOCIAL interaction in hand' Cp.5). These two definitions, by no means, exclude linguistic features.

On account of the complex nature of context, semanticists have identified two types: linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts. Linguistic context refers to the verbal environment in which an expression is used while extra-linguistic context pertains to the non-linguistic or situational factors that

Let me at this juncture quickly and emphatically highlight the dominance and inevitability of metaphor in the daily existence of man. It is not an exaggeration that we, indeed, live by metaphors. This is what Lakoff and Johnson mean when they say that:

Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Metaphors We Live By: 3)

The above observation is clearly illustrated with the metaphorical concept of TIME IS MONEY. This perception of time as money is reflected in expressions such as:

wasting time

spending time?

investing time

budgeting time

borrowing time

Using time profitably

To cap it all, even the great thinker, Albert Einstein resorted to the use of a grand metaphor in explaining atomic fusion:

What takes place can be illustrated with the help of our rich man. The atom M is a rich miser who, during his life, gives away no money (energy). But in his will he bequeaths his fortune to his son M' and M", on condition that they give to the community a small amount, less than one thousandth of the whole estate (energy or mass). The sons together have somewhat less than the father had (the mass sum M' + M" is somewhat smaller than the mass M of the radioactive atom). But the part given to the community, though relatively small, is still so enormously large (considered as S₂₅)

kinetic energy) that it brings with it a great threat of evil. Averting that threat has become the most urgent problem of our time. (Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*) Quoted in Winterrowd p. 422 - 23

What else need one to say about metaphor when the historic scientific phenomenon of atomic fission is so articulately and effectively explained through its mode?

Other figures of speech that are characterized by double meaning are irony, metonymy, euphemism, synecdoche, oxymoron, personification, litotes and periphrasis. All of these are invaluable in literary communication. Indeed they are necessary in literature and rhetorics, particularly political texts, advertisements and propaganda. They are also fairly regular features of oral discourse and serve as useful tools of trade for comedians all over the world.

Before I leave the issue of lexical ambiguity, let me say something about those words that are popularly assumed to be unambiguous because they appear to be generally interchangeable. These are the ubiquitous synonyms. The English language has clearly shown that there is no absolute synonymy in language. For example, broad and wide are synonyms. Thus, a broad or wide street is acceptable. But while a broad smile is possible, a wide smile is not. Also while deep or profound love, or even deep water is possible; profound water is not. Big and large are also synonyms. Yet we can talk of a big sister but not of a large sister.

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, ladies and gentlemen, I consider this problem as one of subtle ambiguity. This means that even words that

appear similar may be context dependent in their choice and usage, especially the words that collocate with them. Otherwise, it will be like the case of a young Yoruba girl who, ignorant of the implication of her expression, requested her father to come and sleep with her instead of sleep beside her. "Daddy, se e ba mi sun nitori mi o Ie dasun?", she said. Translated, it means: Daddy will you sleep with me because I cannot sleep alone. The problem here is ba sun in Yoruba, which means, have sexual intercourse. Sun (sleep) in Yoruba can select from sun ti, sun pelu, sun legbe, ba sun. But the poor girl probably having frequently heard the expression 'basun' innocently chose that expression to the embarrassment of the clergy Dad who promptly corrected her use of language.

As already established, the effectiveness of lexical choice or any figure of speech in communication is closely knitted to the context of language use. Therefore, a prominent concern of linguistic study, be it stylistics or semantics, is context. Context is so crucial to the concept of meaning that it has in fact given birth to the field of linguistics popularly known as pragmatics. It has also expanded the scope of stylistic/analysis beyond obsession with forms to the socio-cultural contexts of literary language. I will therefore briefly discuss contexts, as a preamble to our exploration of ambiguity in literature, religion and law.

CONTEXT AND PRAGMATICS

Context refers to the linguistic and extra-linguistic circumstances in which a stretch of language is used. Without a context of occurrence, we cannot talk of clarity or ambiguity of any linguistic expression. The