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# Pragmatic tactics in diplomatic communication: a case study of Ola Rotimi's *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*

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## Abstract

This paper describes the features of pragmatic tactics in diplomatic communication in Ola Rotimi's play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*. The paper observes that even though some major characters employ various pragmatic tactics to achieve successful communication in the play, the tragic conclusion of the play derives mainly from a breakdown in communication between some other major characters. Using relevant extracts of dialogue from the text for illustration, and principles deriving from linguistic and literary pragmatics as analytical tools, the paper describes the features that enhance successful diplomatic communication in the play and also identifies those features that lead to breakdown in communication. Finally, the paper makes out a case for the pedagogical relevance of pragmatics to the understanding of the complexities of social interaction and literary interpretation.

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*Keywords:* Pragmatic tactics; Diplomatic communication; Literary interpretation; Voice; Drama dialogue; *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi*; Benin; Nigeria; TESL

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## 1. Introduction

Diplomacy is a major feature of social discourse. In a common sense, 'diplomacy' is the art and practice of establishing and maintaining relationship with people or nations (Hornby, 1995). Diplomatic skills require the power to persuade and influence others to do what one wishes. In a way, diplomatic tact engenders successful negotiations of power relationships in

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discourse events, even in the face of the asymmetries that Fairclough (1995) claims to exist between participants in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed in particular sociocultural contexts. Though diplomatic communication may sometimes not involve definite commitment on the part of participants initially, continued contact and constant probing and putting out feelers on topics of interest to either or both sides enable a participant to determine when to launch a specific initiation.

Social discourse is a discourse about interaction and exchange, about people, institutions, power and status, and about relationships and difference (Fowler, 1981, 1986; Birch, 1989). According to Fowler (1986: 70), the structure of social discourse reflects the whole complex process of people interacting in actual situations and within the structure of the forces of society. In the context of such interactions, success or failure in communication may depend on the application or misapplication of pragmatic strategies by participants relative to their intentions and to their orientations towards either the goal(s) of interaction or each other. 'Pragmatic tactics' in this paper refers to pragmatic strategies that are applied or misapplied in the context of successful or unsuccessful communication.

In this study, an attempt is made to identify and describe the pragmatic features that enhance the success or cause the failure of communication in some interactions in Ola Rotimi's play, *Ovonramwen Nogbaisi* (1974), (henceforth *OVON*). It is a study in both linguistic and literary pragmatics. As a literary piece, *OVON* is a mediated discourse, a fictional drama created by the author to depict a real historical event in the ancient Benin Empire in Nigeria. Literary texts are representations of social discourse because they reflect the real world upon which they are based. They reflect both historical and contemporary issues and problems of particular societies. According to Mey (2000: 329), the fictional working space is stabilized around an actant or happening.

Though, as a form of alienated data, a mediated discourse may lack the authenticity of natural conversation, Burton (1980: 102) has observed that even alienated data can provide a rich resource for the discourse analyst, as "they enable analytical thought to penetrate the otherwise intangible aspects of the everyday world". Burton further believes that "modern drama . . . gives us new ways of perceiving the world", apart from "forcing radical shifts in the perception of the structure of talk that is not possible when studying data collected under some mandate" (1980: 96, 113).

The choice of a drama text as the creative medium of analysis is further supported by the fact that it appeals to social reality as much as do other literary genres such as prose and poetry. The direct way of dialoguing imitates the structure of everyday conversation and also provides the best illustration of what Bakhtin (1992) calls the 'dialogic' orientation of discourse. The drama text selected in this instance is that of Ola Rotimi, a Nigerian playwright and artist whose plays have been read and performed both within and outside Nigeria.

Reading the text, I observe that even though some major characters in the play employ various pragmatic tactics to achieve successful communication, the tragic conclusion of the play derives from a disagreement between some other characters that fail to utilize appropriate diplomatic tactics. Thus, I intend to, first of all analyze those pragmatic features that have been utilized in the play to enhance either success or breakdown in interaction between some characters in the play. Secondly, I shall discuss the pedagogical

implications of the analysis for positive social interaction and literary interpretation, based on Candlin's (1976) suggestion that the knowledge of pragmatic principles is of great pedagogical relevance, and the observation by Short (1981) that the discussion of drama texts can make pragmatic analyses explicit.

## 2. Text summary and analytical framework

### 2.1. Summary of text

*OVON* is a fictionalization of a historical event. It depicts the reign of a monarch of the Benin Empire in Nigeria, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi. His reign was characterized by constant conflicts with (i) some of his chiefs at home, (ii) the surrounding kingdoms, and (iii) the British colonialists. A gruesome invasion by the Whitemen ensued, which led to a terrible war between the British army and Benin war chiefs and the king eventually had to relinquish power and go into exile.

Although many historians have portrayed Ovonramwen as a despotic ruler, the author's own comment in the background to the play (*OVON* 1974: 1) describes the ruler sympathetically as:

“... a man long portrayed by the biases of Colonial History in the mien of the most abominable sadist, but in actuality, ‘a man more sinned against than he ever sinned’”.

The pragmatic features of communication in the text are analyzed based mainly on four extracts of the play. The first extract introduces us to the character of King Ovonramwen. The second and third extracts present interactions between Ovonramwen and some elders and chiefs from surrounding kingdoms, on the one hand, and between Ovonramwen and the British officers on the other. The fourth extract presents a transaction between Okavbiogbe, the Chief Security Officer of the Benin Empire, and some visiting soldiers belonging to the Whitemen.

### 2.2. Analytical framework

The study provides an interface of linguistic and literary studies by integrating concepts and categories from linguistic and literary pragmatics in the analysis of conversations, on the one hand, and of a literary text, on the other. Two major pragmatic concepts pertaining to literary interpretation examined are those of ‘voice’ and ‘characterization’; the concepts of linguistic pragmatics examined are those relevant to analyzing dialogue in interactive discourse, viz. the cooperative principle and conversational maxims, the politeness principle, and relevant categories of conversation analysis (such as turns, contributions, interruptions, interaction, transaction, exchange, move and act). The category of context is central to both facets of pragmatic analysis mentioned above, as it concerns the conditions governing either speaker–listener or author–reader collaboration and the dialectics of text (fiction and dialogue) and society.

Mey (2000) discusses extensively the role of voice in the fictional narrative text. His views are relevant, with slight adaptations, to drama texts, as reflectors of dialogical situations. Voice is a central feature in the analysis of literary texts. Its dialogical orientation further makes it an essential feature of drama texts. An analysis of voice takes into consideration the different voices in the text—the author's, the characters', and the reader's. The author/playwright and/or director's voices are represented by background information, stage setting, including directions, background music, drumming, songs and chants and descriptions of characters' actions. From the voices of the characters, the points of view of different characters can be perceived and interpreted in relation to the situation created in the text, and to the social context of textual production and reception. The voice of the reader is perceived, not only through his/her active participation with the author in actively creating textual meaning, but also in his/her re-creation of the textual meaning by enriching it with the 'added on value' that may derive from the reader's experience of reading and understanding creatively (Mey, 2000: 262).

Although the author's background comment may seem to suggest the direction along which he wants the play to be read, his opinion is not sacrosanct. Instead, the interpretation of the text is a matter of negotiation and conversation between the author and reader; both of them belong to the same universe. According to Mey (2000: 327), voices may be produced, created by authorial decree, but only on the condition of being recognized and co-created by an active reader's acceptance. Thus, in order to complement the creative effort of the author, a reader has to re-create the text based on the narrative context, i.e., the ensemble of all the conditions (personal competence and experience, textual situation and social context) that make up the background for the dialectic relationship between author and readers (Mey, 1994, 2000).

Thus, our primary concern in this study is not to simply confirm or deny the author's comments referred to above. It is to explain, pragmatically, how the author has used the resources of language (as 'voices' in dialogical communication) to create meaning for us.

Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and maxims of conversation (quality, quantity, relevance, and manner) have been extensively discussed by scholars, and they still continue to be of relevance to pragmatic analyses. The observance and non-observance of Grice's maxims have also been discussed. Thomas (1995: 64–78) describes, with ample illustrations, five ways in which people may fail to observe the maxims, viz. by flouting, violating, infringing, opting, and suspending. The deliberate flouting of a maxim by a speaker generates an implicature, which prompts the listener to infer another meaning, different from what is said.

Scholars have formulated politeness principles in several ways in order to explain the social constraints governing utterance production and interpretation. Lakoff (1973), for example, opines that speakers should avoid impositions, give options and make their receivers feel good. Leech (1983) suggests five maxims: those of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, and agreement. Also, within politeness theory, the concept of face is utilized to describe how the individual's self image is damaged, maintained or enhanced in an interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). Positive face is reflected in the desire of participants to be liked, approved of, respected and appreciated by others, while negative face is reflected in the desire not to be impeded or put upon. According to Mey (2001: 75):

Acting cooperatively, people try to build up their interlocutors' positive faces, while trying to avoid posing threats to their negative face. This is especially important in linguistic interaction since every engagement in conversation opens up the possibility of losing face ...

Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that certain illocutionary acts, known as face-threatening acts (FTAs), are liable to damage or threaten another person's face. In order to mitigate the damage that the use of face-threats may cause, speakers adopt some strategies that are designed to avoid the conversational breakdown that they believe may occur if speakers neglect their addressees' face needs. Five strategies are available (a) performing the FTA on record without redressive action (bald-on-record acts), (b) performing the FTA on record with redress using positive politeness, (c) performing the FTA with redress using negative politeness, (d) performing the FTA using off-record politeness, and (e) not performing the FTA. To select the appropriate strategy, the speaker should assess the size of the FTA and should calculate it on the basis of the parameters of power, distance, and rating of imposition (for details, see Brown and Levinson, 1987; Thomas, 1995).

Performing the FTA without redress, also described as bald-on-record acts, occurs when external factors constrain a person to speak directly. Generally speaking, bald-on-record acts use imperatives, which may be followed by mitigating devices that soften the imposition. In Yule's (1996) view, bald-on-record expressions are suited to speech situations which give the speaker an assumption of power over the hearer and which make him/her want to control the behavior of the hearer through words.

An FTA is performed with redress when a speaker attempts to orient him/herself towards an individual's positive face (Thomas, 1995: 171). The politeness expressed here equals Leech's (1983) principles of politeness such as "seek agreement", "avoid disagreement", "be optimistic", and "give sympathy". These features, extremely positive in nature, go a long way in saving hearer's face in interaction. Performing an FTA with redress, negative politeness, manifests itself in the use of conventional politeness markers, deference markers and minimizing imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Thomas, 1995).

Brown and Levinson (1987) list 15 strategies for performing off-record politeness; these include "giving hints", "using metaphors" and "being ambiguous or vague". Non-performance of FTA happens when a speaker does not say anything because it looks too potentially face threatening. According to Thomas (1995: 174–175), saying nothing, or the "opting out choice", can be genuine or strategic; sometimes, saying nothing where there is a strong expectation that something will be said can itself be a massive FTA. Scholars have discussed the circumstances surrounding the reduction of face threats in different cultures (Talbot, 1926; Marcus, 1984; Duranti, 1988; Yankah, 1995).

### 3. Pragmatic tactics in successful diplomatic communication in *OVON*

In the early part of the play, the 'Oba' Ovonramwen (a monarchical ruler, whom we shall henceforth refer to as 'King' Ovonramwen) is perceived to lack diplomatic

tact in his interaction with all his subjects. For example, at the beginning of the play (see Text 1), the King, in his royal court, addressing some prisoners whom he has accused of murdering his Chief Adviser, issues (i) performatives, (ii) warnings, (iii) direct questions, (iv) abuses, (v) insults, (vi) threats, and (vii) orders to the prisoners (whom he calls rebels) before passing the final judgment of a death sentence on them. The prisoners themselves already seem to perceive the king as wicked and biased against them; thus they become defiant right from the beginning of the interaction and reply to the King's harsh speeches with "bald-on-record" disrespectful remarks.

## TEXT 1

IYASE. May the Home Leopard live long!

CROWD. I-s-e!

OVONRAMWEN [*weightily*]. Some birds . . . some birds dread  
water; ducks sleep in it! The same it is with men. Some  
men dread trouble. Others court trouble.

[*Directly to two of the prisoners.*]

Obaruduagbon! Esasoyen!

[*Two prisoners look at him, then turn away.*]

Why did you do it?

[*No reply---becomes more emotional.*]

Obaruduagbon, Esasoyen---I ask you why did you kill Uwangue Egiebo?

OBARUDUAGBON. We ask the Oba: why did he kill our  
brothers of the house of Iwebo?

OVONRAMWEN. Brothers, ha! Rebels---all: Obazelu, Obaraye,  
Eribo Osia---the whole rout: rebels!

[*To the chiefs*]

Or who was here so blind to the obstacles, which those scoundrels threw up on the  
occasion of my rising to the throne of Adolo, my father?

[*To the prisoners.*]

Your brothers threw ashes to the face of a rising wind; in  
reply the wind smothered them with the ashes from  
their very hands. And you---you killed Uwangue Egiebo.  
Why?

ESASOYEN. Uwangue Egiebo was your Chief Adviser.

OVONRAMWEN. And what offence, that?

OBARUDUAGBON. If

a provoked houseboy,  
cannot match his  
wicked master  
strength with strength  
he maims the master's favourite goat!

[*Gathering is astir.*]

OLOGBOSERE. Defiant words, those!

OTHER CHIEFS. Pray Your Highness, forgive their rudeness.

OLOGBOSERE. What is it that you all beg forgiveness for? Do they talk like men deserving mercy? They are themselves chiefs, and they ought to know better. First the murder, now rude words.

[*To prisoners.*]

Our brothers, a man does not test the depth of a river with both feet together

[*The Isikhien sing to placate the Oba.*]

<i>Omi, Omi---Omi-o!</i>	
<i>O-o-mi-o!</i>	Omi Omi Omi!
<i>Omi, Omi-o</i>	Now you all know who
<i>O-o-mi-o!</i>	Omi is . . .
<i>Omi r'amwen Oba,</i>	Omi is not
<i>Ugie a y'omi ki-e.</i>	the secret consort of
<i>Omi, Omi---Omi-o!</i>	the Great One.
<i>O-o-mi-o!</i>	No.
<i>Omi, Omi-o!</i>	Omi is simply a
<i>O-o-o-mi-o!</i>	woman

OVONRAMWEN. Because the moon is dim, the eyes of the little stars cast a carefree glitter. Obaruduagbon, Esasoyen, and the rest of you . . . your stars have this way consumed themselves in the heat of their own unwisdom. This night, you all die.

[*To the prison warden.*]

I have spoken.

[*Drum beats.*]

<i>Gi emwen Oba se.</i>	The Oba's will be done,
<i>Gi emwen Oba se.</i>	The Oba's will be done,
<i>Gi emwen Oba se.</i>	The Oba's will be done!

[*Okavbiogbe and warders pull prisoners up.*]

OBARUDUAGBON. Today is your day: tomorrow belongs to another!

ESASOYEN. Indeed: the Whiteman who is stronger than you will soon come!

[*Prisoners are hustled off, their chains clanking in somber counterpoint to the drumming and chanting of the Isikhien.*]

<i>Jawe! Jawe!</i>	Mortal that you are,
<i>A i y'akiko ru Ogun,</i>	you serve as tiny snails to
<i>Jawe!</i>	Ogun, god of iron,
	and to think you mean no
	no insult!

IYASE. Ikpema! Oba gha to o kpere!

CROWD. I-s-e

IYASE. But my lord . . . do they all have to die for the killing  
of one chief?

OVONRAMWEN. Let the land know this: Ovonramwen  
Nogbaisi is henceforth set to rule as king after the manner  
of his fathers before him. Some men there are who think  
that, by honour of years, or by power of position, or by  
too much love for trouble, they can dull the fullness of  
my glow and bring darkness upon the empire! But they forget . . .  
They forget that no matter how long and stout the  
human neck is, on top of it must always sit a head. Hence-  
forth, a full moon's my glow -- dominant, and unopen  
to rivalry throughout the empire.

[Gravely.]

Let everyone now go back to his home and ponder on my  
words!

[He departs supported again by his human props.]

Apparently perturbed by the manner in which King Ovonramwen has passed the  
death sentence on the prisoners, Iyase (The Prime Minister and War Lord of Benin)  
respectfully asked:

“But my Lord . . . do they all have to die for the killing  
of one chief?” (OVON, p. 6)

The implicature of this question is not just Ovonramwen's high-handedness; it is a  
subtle way of reminding the king that he has not observed the normal way of consultation  
with the chiefs before passing judgement. But instead of taking his cue from the chief's  
remark, Ovonramwen believes that his authority is being questioned. He therefore answers  
the chief thus:

Let the land know this: Ovonramwen Nogbaisi is  
henceforth set to rule as king after the manner of his  
fathers before him . . . Let everyone go back to his home  
and ponder on my words. (OVON, pp. 6–7)

This reply reveals King Ovonramwen's dictatorial tendencies at the initial stage of the  
play. In the cultural context of the Benin Kingdom, the king normally ought to have  
consulted with his senior chiefs before the delivery of judgement, to avert the kind of  
opposing comment uttered by Iyase above.

Talbot (1926) remarks that formal communication in Africa between people of unequal  
status involves physical distancing and avoidance in order to mitigate face threats. Yankah  
(1995: 233) also observes similar avoidances among the Akan in Ghana in order to preserve  
the sanctity of the royal space. Talbot (1926: 580) says about the Edo people (of Benin) in  
Nigeria that:

“Whatever any person would say to the king must first be told to the great lords who would then report it to him and bring the answer.”

The setting of Ola Rotimi’s play analyzed here is the Benin kingdom of the Edo people. The tradition in Africa kingdoms is that when any case is brought to the palace, it is the ‘King-in-Council’, rather than the King himself that decides it. All the chiefs in the council are allowed to comment on the matter, in the order of their rank from the least to the most senior, before the king gives his final verdict, guided by the earlier opinions expressed.

Uzazakpo (the king’s royal messenger and confidant) later advises the king against his undiplomatic relations with his people, including chiefs, thus:

“True, but your approach is fear – the instilling of fear. What you want is loyalty. Not fear.” (OVON, p. 12)

But Ovonramwen initially disregards this advice and continues to rule with a rod of iron.

When later in the play, the king decides, suddenly, to improve on his tactics of diplomacy in a subsequent interaction with the elders of Ekpoma (a vassal town of Benin), Uzazakpo does not fail to recognize this change. Uzazakpo comments thus:

“You handled that one well. But I still say that you were too hard on your own elders this morning.” (OVON, p. 12)

We shall now identify the pragmatic features, or tactics, that have been used to enhance the success of Ovonramwen’s interaction with the elders mentioned above. The interaction is presented in Text 2. The extract reflects the exact structure and lines in the book, but I have numbered the lines in order to facilitate referencing.

#### TEXT 2

[The elders of Ekpoma enter and pay homage.]

OVONRAMWEN. The snail pulls forward, the shell also pulls forward. Big town rebel, baby towns also thrust forward.

Or what is the cause of the present unease in little Ekpoma?

ELDERS [*together*]. It is not a rebellion---

5

The truth is---

All we want is

It all has to do with---

OVONRAMWEN. You don’t want another Enogie in Ekpoma.

Is that not so?

10

ELDERS [another nervous mass talking.] That is not the whole story, your---

That is part of it your---

That is part of it, your---

We wouldn’t mind if only---

We are getting tired of---

15

[*They stop short and look at each other.*]

- OVONRAMWEN [*calmly*]. And I say: in every land big or small,  
 there must be a Head. The Enogie of Ekpoma is no more,  
 so you now bear hatred towards his son, and resist his  
 becoming the next Enogie. What are you? Crabs? ---that you  
 seek contentment in just a belly and a back and no head? I  
 will have no human crabs in my empire. Ukueben, and you  
 Igbinigie, 20  
 [*Two Royal Guards come forwards.*]  
 You will follow these Elders back to Ekpoma. When you  
 come back here, I want it to be with the proof that the  
 eldest son of the dead Enogie has been crowned Head of  
 Ekpoma. Osunde, you too, go with them. 25
- AN ELDER. But, Your Greatness, what do we do if the new  
 Enogie rules badly? 30
- OVONRAMWEN. Ovonramwen Nogbaisi has ears, he will  
 hear . . . Ovonramwen Nogbaisi has eyes, he will see . . .  
 and he has a head also; he will know the moment that the new  
 Enogie embraces madness. And Ovonramwen will deal  
 with him handsomely. But first, give the Enogie a chance. 35  
 That is all I ask. You do not predict the temper of the  
 chick still in the egg.
- ELDERS. We thank Your Greatness.
- OVONRAMWEN. Do not go yet. Ibierugha.  
 [*A messenger comes forward.*] 40  
 You will lead these Elders to Edogun, let Edogun give  
 them presents.
- ELDERS [*very grateful.*] May your reign be long, Your Great-  
 ness---  
 And happy--- 45  
 And full of good rewards.  
 The gods protect you.
- OVONRAMWEN. With my hands I give you the chalk of  
 peace.  
 [*Handing a calabash containing some chalk to a court  
 attendant who serves it round to the Ekpoma Elders.*] 50  
 May the gods of our fathers grant you more wisdom to  
 hold peace in Ishan.
- ELDERS [*accepting the chalk of peace*]. Ise!
- OVONRAMWEN. Go well.  
 [*Elders pay homage and leave.*] 55
- UZAZAKPO. You handled that one well. But I still say that  
 you were too hard on your own elders this morning.

- OVONRAMWEN. I offended no one. I only told them what I am now, and what I expect from them; if they find me suddenly gone harsh, it is that the murder of Uwangue Egiebo has taught Ovonramwen to face the world teeth to teeth! 60
- UZAZAKPO. True, but your approach is fear --- the instilling of fear. What you want is loyalty. Not Fear. 65
- OVONRAMWEN. Loyalty! Ha! From the people of Benin? Not in our time.
- UZAZAKPO. You can get it.
- OVONRAMWEN. Like grass from the face of the sky.
- UZAZAKPO. Begin with Ologbosere. Secure first his loyalty, and see how smoothly others will follow. 70
- OVONRAMWEN. Why Ologbosere?
- OVONRAMWEN [*to Uzazakpo*]. Uzazkpo, you will go to Ologbosere, and bring him to me. 75
- [*To Evbakhavbokun.*]
- Daughter, I want you to be near by when Ologbosere comes.

The tactical features of this interaction are analyzed in terms of politeness and the implicatures of the utterances. The features of deference and politeness are noticeable in this interaction. Thomas (1995: 150) points out that although deference is connected with politeness, it is a distinct phenomenon: while deference refers to the respect we show to other people by virtue of their higher status (cf. Goffman, 1967), politeness is a more general matter of showing consideration to others.

Thus, as for the elders, they portray an attitude of deference, in recognition of the authority of King Ovonramwen. They pay homage (1.1). They use the address title 'Your greatness' to refer to him (11.5, 29, etc.). They distance themselves from the king, talking together to him rather than addressing him individually (11.5–8, 11–16). Also, when the king accuses them of being rebellious, they become nervous, perhaps out of fear of reprisal.

As regards Ovonramwen, two kinds of interpretation are possible. A positive interpretation in favour of the king will state that his discourse manifests politeness towards the elders through several acts of calm counseling (11.17–28), assurance (11.31–37), through the use of indirect instead of direct accusation (11.1–3, 9–10), through presentation of gifts to the elders, instead of penalizing them following his accusations (11.41–42), and by extending fellowship to them (11.48–51). The happy ending of the interaction, in which reciprocal expressions of prayers and exchanges of pleasantries take place, must have prompted Uzazakpo's second comment in the above extract (Text 2, 11.57–58).

A second and more critical interpretation, however, probes the reasons for the attitude of deference by the elders by considering the maxims of conversation observed or flouted here, and their implicatures. In this regard, Ovonramwen seems to flout the maxims of quantity and manner in many of his utterances (Text 2, 11.2–5, 17–23 and 31–37). His accusation in 11.2–5 is expressed indirectly via figurative expressions and elicitation that seek to confirm his views. Also, his response of assurance (11.31–37) to a question asked by

the elders (11.29–30) is a mixture of assumptive self-praise, directives and requests. He seizes every opportunity in his turns to impose himself and stamp his authority onto the elders. He does not even listen to the complaints of his visitors before imposing his decision on them. This discourse of dominance above, coupled with the face threat inherent in having direct consultation with the king, completely overwhelms the elders and cows them into speechlessness and passive acceptance of his opinions. Notice that Ovonramwen again does not utilize the option of seeking his chiefs' advice in this conversation. The reason he later gives for this breach of cultural norms is that he doubts their loyalty (Text 1, 11.66–67), although he later finds out that the doubts are unjustified, when he invites them to participate in his government. Many of the chiefs stoutly defend and even die in order to preserve his dignity and the glory of the Benin Empire during and after the ill-fated war with the British.

## TEXT 3

OVONRAMWEN [. . . *To the messenger.*] Let the Whitemen come in.

*[He crosses to the stool-throne and pulls out a scroll from a built in shelf under the throne. Messenger ushers in two Whitemen: Gallwey and Hutton, each bearing a parcel under their arms.]*

GALLWEY. We've come to say goodbye to his Majesty, and to thank him for everything he has done for us since we came here.

HUTTON. We are indeed very grateful for your hospitality,  
Your Majesty.

10

OVONRAMWEN. That is nothing.

GALLWEY [*untying a parcel*]. Your highness, our Queen, Her Royal Majesty Queen Victoria, asks us to extend her very best wishes to you; and she sends Your Highness these token presents, wishing you and the great people of this noble empire peace and prosperity.

15

*[Proffers a framed portrait to Ovonramwen.]*

Here, Your Highness, is the photograph of our Queen Herself.

*[Ovonramwen does not take it. Instead he asks Hutton who has pulled out an inner tube of a bicycle from his own parcel.]*

20

OVONRAMWEN. And what is that one?

HUTTON. A sample of the rubber product we discussed yesterday, Your Majesty. This one is called an inner tube.

*[Orally inflating it]*. You pack two of them inside what we call tyres. Tyres are made of rubber also - harder rubber. Then you fix them to a machine with pedals, you sit on the

25

the elders (ll.29–30) is a mixture of assumptive self-praise, directives and requests. He seizes every opportunity in his turns to impose himself and stamp his authority onto the elders. He does not even listen to the complaints of his visitors before imposing his decision on them. This discourse of dominance above, coupled with the face threat inherent in having direct consultation with the king, completely overwhelms the elders and crows them into speechlessness and passive acceptance of his opinions. Notice that Ovonramwen again does not utilize the option of seeking his chiefs' advice in this conversation. The reason he later gives for this breach of cultural norms is that he doubts their loyalty (Text 1, ll.66–67), although he later finds out that the doubts are unjustified, when he invites them to participate in his government. Many of the chiefs stoutly defend and even die in order to preserve his dignity and the glory of the Benin Empire during and after the ill-fated war with the British.

## TEXT 3

OVONRAMWEN [. . . *To the messenger.*] Let the Whitemen come in.

*[He crosses to the stool-throne and pulls out a scroll from a built in shelf under the throne. Messenger ushers in two Whitemen: Gallwey and Hutton, each bearing a parcel under their arms.]*

GALLWEY. We've come to say goodbye to his Majesty, and to thank him for everything he has done for us since we came here.

HUTTON. We are indeed very grateful for your hospitality,  
Your Majesty.

10

OVONRAMWEN. That is nothing.

GALLWEY [*untying a parcel*]. Your highness, our Queen, Her Royal Majesty Queen Victoria, asks us to extend her very best wishes to you; and she sends Your Highness these token presents, wishing you and the great people of this noble empire peace and prosperity.

15

*[Proffers a framed portrait to Ovonramwen.]*

Here, Your Highness, is the photograph of our Queen Herself.

*[Ovonramwen does not take it. Instead he asks Hutton who has pulled out an inner tube of a bicycle from his own parcel.]*

20

OVONRAMWEN. And what is that one?

HUTTON. A sample of the rubber product we discussed yesterday, Your Majesty. This one is called an inner tube.

*[Orally inflating it]*. You pack two of them inside what we call tyres. Tyres are made of rubber also - harder rubber. Then you fix them to a machine with pedals, you sit on the

25

- I thank you. And I thank your Queen. But I wonder why all this show of favour? I do not know your Queen. Yet she sends Ovonramwen greetings from Lagos, and greetings from England, more greetings from ... Calabar, from the Gold Coast, from every where, your people come with greetings. 70
- Now she wants me to sign a treaty [*indicates scroll his hand*] of trade, and she sends me gifts. My friends, it is not kindness but the need for a clean mouth that makes the hippopotamus open its mouth wide for the river bird to peck at. Why is your queen so ... open? 75
- GALLWEY. Our Queen only desires the friendship and progress of your great people, Your Majesty. 80
- HUTTON. The rubber trade is one of the many benefits which the peoples of Benin will gain from this trade treaty, Your Majesty.
- OVONRAMWEN. Ehenn ... 85  
 [*Considers that answer, but still not satisfied.*]  
 And you ... what do you gain that, like the early morning sun, uninvited, you venture from your home to light up places distant and unknown?
- HUTTON and GALLWEY [*embarrassed, silent*].  
 Your Queen must be very lucky to have such loyal subjects. Tell your Queen that Ovonramwen Nogbaisi admires her good luck. [*Hands scroll to Gallwey who takes it avidly, unrolling it. Enter Ologbosere, in company of Uzazakpo. He greets the Oba.* 95  
 Meanwhile Gallwey and Hutton are intensely scrutinizing the contents of the scroll. Suddenly Gallwey jerks up his head in utter bewilderment.]
- GALLWEY. Your ... Majesty did not sign the treaty! 100
- OVONRAMWEN. Gallwey.  
 [*Gallwey is too perplexed to answer*]  
 Show me your hand.  
 [*Gallwey extends a hand.*]  
 Give me the hand. 105  
 [*Gallwey reaches for Ovonramwen's hand.*]  
 White one, your face shows love, but does your heart?
- HUTTON. I don't think there is reason for doubts as to--
- OVONRAMWEN [*firmly*]. There is reason! I do not like the way your people go over my head and trade direct with Sobo and Ijekiri. Benin traders set one price for palm oil, your people impose another - higher. 110

machine, move the pedals with your feet, and these rubber tubes and tyres will carry you.

OVONRAMWEN [*fascinated*]. The rubber trees you say you want to buy in my bush can make this?

30

GALLWEY. Precisely, Your Majesty.

[*Hutton holds out the inflated tube to Ovonramwen, but he does not take it.*

*Ovonramwen's attention is drawn again to Gallwey who is now displaying the mounted portrait of Queen Victoria.*

35

OVONRAMWEN. You say that is your ruler?

GALLWEY. She is, Your Majesty.

[*Ovonramwen gestures Gallwey to move backward so as to allow for better appraisal from his vantage point. Then he gestures Gallwey to step aside - to the left. Gallwey obeys.*]

40

OVONRAMWEN. Hmm. The soft innocent face of a child who has just stopped crying.

HUTTON. She is a beautiful woman, Your Majesty.

OVONRAMWEN [*gestures Gallwey to come forward to about mid-distance; studies the portrait more closely*]. A full-bodied woman. Her husband must have plenty to fill the hands!

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GALLWEY. The Queen has no husband, Your Majesty.

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OVONRAMWEN [*directs Gallwey to the right*]. Why not?

HUTTON. Her husband is dead, Your Majesty.

OVONRAMWEN. I am sorry ...

[*With deferent concern*]

Then, let her take another husband from among her own people. A woman without a man is like rich farm soil without the feel of roots. A beautiful woman without a man is a crab - over protected by shells: selfish.

55

Tell your queen that Ovonramwen Nogbaisi says she must have another man.

[*Gestures Gallwey to come closer.*]

HUTTON. We shall tell her, Your Majesty

60

OVONRAMWEN. But she is old! [*Turns away.*]

GALLWEY [*proffers the portrait*]. It's for you, Your Majesty.

HUTTON. And this also, Your Majesty. [*Presenting the inner-tube.*

*Messengers come forward to receive the gifts, but Ovonramwen stops them with a gesture of his hand.*]

65

OVONRAMWEN. Caution!

[*Messengers step back; he addresses the Whitemen.*]

You will show me proof that the Whiteman's love for me  
and my people is deep. We cannot love someone who does  
not really love us in return. To love someone who does  
not love you in return is like shaking the huge Iroko tree  
to make tiny dew-drops fall. 115

[*Lets go of Gallwey's hand.*]

I shall not, with my own hand, sign that treaty. If it pleases  
you, put a mark on it yourself and call it my mark. 120

GALLWEY [caustically]. Very well, Your Majesty.

HUTTON. Goodbye, Your Majesty.

[*They depart.*]

*Ovonramwen paces about in deep thoughts, as the chanting  
of the Ifa Priest echoes over loudspeakers on to stage, in-  
dicating the focus of those thoughts.* 125

Text 3 illustrates diplomatic communication in the specific sense of presenting a discourse between cross-national participants. It also importantly shows the relatively equal power relations between the interactants, especially in terms of having equal pragmatic rights (Fairclough, 1995). It is observed that because of the correspondingly balanced power relations between the two sides, the attitude of politeness is called upon in the communication, instead of deference. Politeness is sustained in the negotiation of transaction such that the communication does not break down, even when the outcome of the interaction does not seem pleasing to the Whitemen, because their intention has not been realized.

The Whitemen, Gallwey and Hutton, have come to negotiate the signing of a trade treaty with King Ovonramwen. They demonstrate some diplomatic tactics of negative politeness in the transaction. First is the reverence they show to Ovonramwen through the use of the address title 'Your Majesty' and even the indirect personal reference 'his Majesty' (ll.6–10 and 12).

Second is their initiation of the interaction with acts of thanks and gratitude (ll.6–9). After this initial contribution, they do not go straight on to make the request; but, instead, express the best wishes of Queen Victoria (ll.12–16), give presents (ll.14–21), and go through series of indirect moves. When Hutton finally makes the request, towards the end of the interaction, it comes indirectly in form of a persuasion thus (ll.82–84):

"The rubber trade is one of the many benefits that the  
peoples of Benin will gain from this trade treaty, Your  
Majesty."

Lastly, the Whitemen allow Ovonramwen to initiate the exchanges most of the time, and they support, rather than challenge the latter's moves. Even though they feel bitter about the king's final refusal to sign the treaty, they have to accept his decision, but hope to come back some other time to persuade him.

Ovonramwen reciprocates the Whitemen's politeness. For example, the Oba says many complimentary things about Queen Victoria (whose portrait the men are holding) to

make the Whitemen happy. When he eventually refuses to sign the treaty, he gives long explanations and expresses protracted sentiments about love and sincerity in order to minimize the disagreement between him and the visitors. Lastly, in order to make his refusal to sign less painful to the visitors, Ovonramwen politely gives them the option of paying lip service, thus (II.119–120):

“I shall not, with my own hand, sign that treaty. If it pleases you, put a mark on it yourself and call it my mark.”

While the interaction above reveals several strategies of politeness on the surface, beneath the explicit and reserved expressions of politeness are implicatures arising from flouting, violating, and opting out of norms. The flouting of the maxims of quantity, relevance, and manner by the Whitemen at the beginning of the conversation (II.6–21) indicates the formality of the topic of discourse, the social distance in terms of position and familiarity, and also the level of their trust in King Ovonramwen. They offer gifts to the king to seek familiarity with him and present a portrait of Queen Victoria as a symbol of authority. Speaking with the voice of the Queen, rather than directly in their own voices, provides them with a leverage of power as regards the king. They violate the quality maxim (II.80–84) by emphasizing the gains of the other party while suppressing their own gains. At the end of the conversation, the quantity maxim is flouted because their parting utterances (II.121–122) do not match the bitterness in their heart.

Ovonramwen flouts the maxim of relevance by emphasizing the discussion about the Queen rather than the topic of transaction. He apparently sees the Queen, personified by her portrait, as a threat to his authority over his kingdom. His expression of concern about her is exaggerated, to the extent that his utterances reveal wrong assumptions of facts (I.47), as well as conflict between Edo and British cultural values; in other words, a ‘sociopragmatic failure’ (II.53–58; see below, Section 4).

Furthermore, his reservations about the gifts offered by the Whitemen is borne out of the fear that accepting them will connote bribery and a sell-out of his kingdom. Ovonramwen accuses the Whitemen of lack of sincerity in their dealing with the Benin traders (II.109–117), which is why he is unwilling to negotiate trade with them. He suspects that the action of the visitors amounts to double-dealing and becomes uncooperative, thus opting out of the maxims of conversation (II.119–120).

Lastly, it is significant to observe that the voice of the high chief, Ologbosere, is absent, despite his physical presence at the conversation. It seems absurd for Ovonramwen not to invite him to participate in such a crucial interaction, preferring to do the negotiation alone. Ologbosere’s voice is only heard after the visitors have departed.

#### 4. Pragmatic tactics in unsuccessful communication in *OVON*

Despite the disagreements that occur in the interaction above, we may observe that in a sense the communication has ended successfully, without breaking down. In contrast, Text 4, analyzed below, shows how pragmatic failure and other factors may lead to a breakdown of communication between cross-national interactants.

Pragmatic failure is conceived in the general sense as the “inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (Thomas, 1983: 91). It is a case of misinterpretation of utterances in communicative interaction. Thomas (1983: 99) identifies two basic types of pragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication, which she discusses with copious examples. There are ‘pragmalinguistic failures’, caused by differences in the linguistic encoding/decoding of pragmatic force, and ‘sociopragmatic failures’, caused by cross-cultural differences in linguistic behavior. Pragmatic failure need not necessarily result in agreement or disagreement in interaction, nor does it always lead to communication breakdown. The latter, when it happens, may be attributable to the inability of interactants to concede to each other, based on their respective inclinations in the interaction process.

## TEXT 4

IDIAGHE [*breathless*]. Master! Danger, master - we go back!

PHILLIPS. What is it this time, Mr. Campbell?

CAMPBELL. That drumming, Your Excellency. From my knowledge of native customs, I fear it is summoning the people to arms!

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PHILLIPS. I appreciate your anxieties, Mr. Campbell, even though in their expression you incline toward melodramatic alarm at the expense of demoralizing the rank and file!

CAMPBELL. On the contrary, Your Excellency---

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PHILLIPS. A little self-control might help in the present circumstances.

IDIAGHE. Ehenn . . . you hear it? Ijekiri drum warn Benin to be ready to fight.

15

BOISRAGON. I spy some men advancing hastily towards us from the direction of Benin, Your Excellency!

[*Phillips looks into the distance; is convinced.*]

PHILLIPS. Captain Boisragon, collect all the revolvers from the officers and lock them up, will you please. Also . . . warn the men that under no circumstances must they display their cutlasses.

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[*Boisragon goes to porters and gives them orders. Porters put down their loads and slouch down to relax.*]

IDIAGHE. I tell you --- the policemen of Benin, they come now!

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[*Enter Okavbiogbe flanked by two other Benin policemen, all armed.*]

OKAVBIOGBE. Idiaghe! So you are the head-toad leading these drifters to Benin at this time? You a Beninman!

30

Deny it --- deny you don't know that this is the period for the Ague ceremony. Deny it!

PHILLIPS. [*extending a hand for a hand shake.*] Good evening . . .

- OKAVBIOGBE [*with hostility*]. Salute yourself!  
 [*Again to Idiaqhe.*] 35  
 I want to know the reason for this invasion.
- PHILLIPS. Invasion, we aren't armed---
- OKAVBIOGBE [*directly to Philips now*]. It is invasion all the  
 same, Whiteman. I am Okavbiogbe, the Chief Policeman  
 of the Benin Empire. I know what I am talking about. 40  
 There is invasion, and there is invasion. You can invade  
 with arms; you can invade without arms --- like now,  
 unasked, without warning, you have come with all these  
 good for nothings ... [*charges aggressively at the porters*  
*who scamper off his path*] black goats and the whole land  
 is in panic. Who gets the blame? Me!
- PHILLIPS. We are only coming to greet the Oba.
- OKAVBIOGBE. You cannot see the Oba. Besides why have  
 you come to greet the Oba with so many riff-raff? And  
 what are in those boxes? 50
- CAMPBELL. Presents --- chop and presents for the Oba and  
 the people of---
- OKAVBIOGBE. Open them, let me see!
- BOISRAGON. What's the use? You said we couldn't see the  
 Oba anyway, so why ... 55
- OKAVBIOGBE. All right, no long talk --- go back to where you  
 came from!
- PHILLIPS. Will you take a message to the---
- OKAVBIOGBE. I take no message --- just go back.
- PHILLIPS. I'm sorry we have come a long way and we've  
 been sent by the Queen of-- 60
- OKAVBIOGBE. I said go --- you  
 [*To Idiaqhe.*]  
 Perhaps the Whiteman will listen better to you. Tell him  
 yourself --- the Oba is busy with the Ague ceremony, and  
 custom forbids him to see strangers White or strangers  
 Black. Now, if the Whiteman still determines to enter  
 Benin, well ... restless feet they say will one day walk  
 into a snakes' pit! 65
- IDIAGHE. Master --- let us go; we come again another time. 70
- PHILLIPS. When then can we come and see the Oba?
- IDIAGHE. Ague ceremony take seven day, master.
- PHILLIPS [*to Okavbiogbe*]. Chief, you tell us when we can---
- OKAVBIOGBE. Come back in ... two months!

Two features of pragmatic failure are observed in the interaction. First, there is the dispute over the meaning of the word 'invasion' (ll.36–41). Okavbiogbe uses the word in the social context of the negative implication of the visit of the Whitemen at the time of the

Ague ceremony. Phillips, a Whiteman, interprets the word literally (l.37), without taking into consideration the social context in which it is uttered. It is observed that this lack of understanding and consideration of the cultural tradition of the Benin people is a major source of conflict in the play.

Another feature is the misinterpretation of the force of Phillips' polite request (l.58) as a question by Okavbiogbe (l.59). If the latter had acceded to the request of the former instead of refusing it, the crisis that later erupts in the play might have been averted.

Some conversational maxims are flouted or violated by Okavbiogbe, Phillips, and Campbell in the interaction. The flouting of the maxims of quantity and manner by Okavbiogbe while explaining the word 'invasion' (ll.38–46) conveys the implicature that Phillips and his entourage are not wanted. Both Phillips and Campbell violate the quality maxim (ll.47 and 51–52) because in the view of Okavbiogbe, they are not being truthful. Thus, he suspects that the visitors' mission goes beyond Phillips' claim of wanting to pay a visit to King Ovonramwen and that what they have in their boxes is not just presents, as Campbell has claimed. The utterances of Phillips in ll.19–22 and Boisragon's refusal to open the boxes for Okavbiogbe to see, following the latter's demand for the boxes to be opened (l.53), justify the suspicion of Okavbiogbe that the visitors have an ulterior motive.

Meanwhile, the breakdown in communication can be attributed to (i) the disagreement between Okavbiogbe and Phillips' team and (ii) the inability of either party to concede to each other in order to resolve the disagreement. Apparently angered by the ill-timed unscheduled visit of the Whitemen, Okavbiogbe actually openly demonstrates too much hostility towards them. His attitude leads to the performance of many face-damaging acts such as (i) accusation (ll.31–32, 36 and 38–46), (ii) refusal of a handshake greeting (l.34), (iii) raining undignified abuses and insults on the guide and porters in the presence of their bosses (ll. 29–30, 43–45 and 49), (iv) issuance of directives and threats (ll.53, 57, 59, 68–69 and 74), and (v) constant interruptions of the other part (ll.52, 55, 58, 61 and 73).

Okavbiogbe is particularly embittered by the fact that Idiaghe, who is a native of Benin and is aware of the traditional custom of the people, is part of the team that is visiting Benin at a wrong time (ll.29–32). He thus has a negative attitude towards the latter and to the other Nigerians who are serving in the British army, perceiving them as traitors. Notice the effect of Okavbiogbe's accusation on Idiaghe as he, at the risk of losing his job, forces himself to advise his master, Phillips (ll.70).

Okavbiogbe violates several of Leech's (1983) politeness maxims:

- (i) modesty – by boasting of his position (ll.39–40);
- (ii) tact – by maximizing the cost of his time to the visitors (l.74);
- (iii) agreement – by maximizing his expression of disagreement with the visitors (l.48).

The visitors, on their part, reject this negative attitude of Okavbiogbe's. First, they tactically deny the accusation of 'invasion' leveled against them and prevaricate by claiming that they are not armed (l.37). Second, Boisragon challenges and refuses Okavbiogbe's order to open the boxes the porters are carrying (ll.54–55). Lastly, as the Ague ceremony lasts 7 days, whereas Okavbiogbe asks the visitors to come back in 2 months (l.74), the Whitemen infer that Okavbiogbe either carries a personal hatred of them, or is being pompous and obsessed with his position and power.

As we find out later in the play, following the extract presented above, the Whitemen do not obey Okavbiogbe's order. Instead, they advance towards Benin and are outnumbered and killed by the Benin warriors; this is the cause of the war between the British and the Benin people. Thus, the inability of the interactants to concede to each other further aggravates the disagreement between them and later leads to a breakdown in communication. Okavbiogbe would not take a message from them for King Ovonramwen and the Whitemen call Okavbiogbe's bluff. In contrast, we may notice that the disagreements (or disputes) in the texts analyzed previously were resolved via different forms of concession. Concession is thus a vital pragmatic feature, a kind of tact that can be employed to enhance successful communication where the different parties in an interaction have strong opposing interests.

## 5. Implications of pragmatic skills for language mastery and literary interpretation

It is essential that a comprehensive programme of language learning and teaching (LL/LT) in an English as a second language (ESL) teaching/learning situation should include a knowledge of pragmatic principles and tactics in communication. The goal of such knowledge is to enable learners to achieve pragmatic competence that will further enhance their linguistic performance in different kinds of communication. A possible outline of the content of a pragmatics course in the language programme is presented below.

### 5.1. Conversational implicature

This principle underscores the phenomenon of indirectness in communication, which means that interactants should be prepared to interpret utterances beyond the level of surface meaning. The focus of learning here is the motivation and contextual conditions for producing and interpreting indirectness (see Thomas, 1995: 119–148).

### 5.2. The cooperative principle

This provides the mechanism by which people interpret indirectness. An understanding of Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation as well as of the circumstances of the observance and non-observance of the maxims in terms of cultural differences will provide additional knowledge. Notice that Grice's maxims are based on Anglo-American cultural norms.

### 5.3. Politeness principles

Politeness principles are very useful in explaining the phenomenon of indirectness in communication, especially when there is non-observance or a clash in the observance of conversational maxims. In view of the importance of these principles in promoting or maintaining harmonious relationships between participants in communication, an understanding of the various means of expressing politeness or breaches of politeness

in English is crucial for ESL learners. Some possible areas that call for special attention are:

- (a) The use of modal auxiliary verbs in expressing politeness is a major problem of English language learners in Nigeria. Compare, for example:
- \*(i) Please, I want to sign my form.
  - \*(ii) Please, sign my form for me. (Direct translation from Yoruba, a Nigerian language)
  - √(iii) Could/can you sign my form, please?

Yoruba speakers, when learning English, wrongly assume the use of 'jowo', a word corresponding to 'please', in an utterance to be an adequate means of expressing politeness.

- (b) Another problem of learners is the tendency to interpret polite requests as questions, just as Okavbiogbe does in our analysis in Text 4, 1.59.
- (c) The (sometimes excessive) use of proverbs and figurative expressions is an elevated way by which Africans (especially older people or people of high status) express politeness in conversational interactions (e.g., Ovonramwen in Text 2, ll.2–4 and in Text 2, ll.114–117; Okavbiogbe in Text 4, ll.68–69).

Some, or all of this may not be appropriate in British or American English. A contrastive study of expressions of politeness in different circumstances by speakers of English from different cultures is thus essential for ESL learners.

#### 5.4. Pragmatic failure

Deliberate or unconscious breaches of pragmatic principles pertaining to linguistic or social competence, i.e., sociopragmatic factors, present greater problems for ESL learners. Learners need to be sensitized about cross-cultural differences in beliefs, practices and discursal norms. For example, Ovonramwen's utterances regarding the British Queen (Text 3, ll.46–58) are based on wrong assumptions about the British culture and might generate different reactions from less courteous listeners. Also, the tendency of the British military and colonial officers to place their business interest above the Benin cultural tradition is a major source of conflict in the play.

Pragmatic failure does not necessarily lead to breakdown in communication, as concessions made by participants may enable them to take care of cases of misinterpretation of senses or forces of utterances before such misinterpretations get out of hand.

#### 5.5. Breakdown in communication

Conversations are sometimes characterized by disagreement or disputes arising from conflicting interests in confrontational interactions. Conversations may break down not only because participants lack pragmatic competence, but also because of disagreement based on personal attitudes in terms of orientation towards the topic, towards participants

and/or their cultures, and towards the mode or medium of communication. Disagreements are resolved by participants in the end in conversations via concessions, whether forced (e.g., by the elders in Text 2) or voluntary (e.g., by the Whitemen in Text 3). But where either party in the conversation fails to concede, as they do in Text 4, conversation breaks down.

### 5.6. Pragmatic tactics and literary interpretation

Pragmatics contributes to literary studies because its various principles enable critics to describe the user angle to what has been called 'voice' (Mey, 2000: 379) in literary (novelistic, dramatic and poetic) texts. Part of the relevance of studying the use of (literary and other) language in literary studies resides in the knowledge of how to handle techniques that govern the use of voice. In a literary text, the use of language through the voices of the author/narrator, characters and reader, is governed by the same social forces that dominate the situations represented in the texts. Literary interpretation from a pragmatic angle may thus be seen as an attempt to:

- a. identify and describe the different voices in a text;
- b. interpret the voices in relation to the social context of text production and reception;
- c. identify the dialectic process of an author's innovative creativity and the readers' receptive activity within societal-established norms for literature.

## 6. Conclusion

Diplomatic communication is conceived as a form of social, intra- or cross-cultural discourse in which pragmatic tactics (or skills), which derive from knowledge of pragmatic principles, are utilized for transactional negotiations. This discourse is represented by the voices of (i.e., the dialogue between) some major characters in the text, which are interpreted in collaboration with the voices of the author (comment, background, setting, directions, etc.) and of the reader (as influenced by his/her linguistics and literary skills and attitudes). Pragmatic principles, such as the cooperative and politeness principles, and conversational implicatures are applied as tools to analyze the sources of pragmatic success or failure and breakdown of communication in the discourse.

The findings of the study reveal that conversational maxims are both flouted and violated in diplomatic communication. In view of the formality of the discourse, characterized by the business-like nature of the topic of transaction and the social distance between participants in terms of position, familiarity and race, participants speak indirectly and cautiously. They say less or more than they should say (quantity), conceal information from each other (quality), do not go straight to the point (relevance), and are hesitant, loquacious and sometimes rude (manner). Pragmatic failure is observed in the communication between cross-national participants; it is caused mainly by misinterpretation of the force of utterances and misunderstanding of other people's beliefs and cultural traditions.

The study further reveals that a combination of factors such as (i) the observance of the politeness maxims, (ii) utilization of negative 'on-record' with redress and 'off-record'

politeness strategies, and (iii) concessions of participants to each other in confrontational transaction is present in successful diplomatic communication. In contrast, the communication that breaks down is characterized by (i) breaches of politeness maxims, (ii) bald on-record face threats without any redress and (iii) the inability of participants to concede to each other.

Finally, the interpretation of the extracts from the text analyzed reveals the following as sources of conflict in the play:

- a. King Ovonramwen breaches the societal measures put in place to control royal availability for face encounters. He talks too much in public and engages so much in self-praise. He distances himself from his chiefs who should advise him because he doubts their loyalty. His people perceive him as a wicked king. His obsession with power is constantly threatened by the fear of rebellion within his kingdom and domination by the Whitemen.
- b. The Whitemen consider the business of trade negotiation without respecting the cultural values of their host community. The invocation of the Queen via verbal and non-verbal means is perceived as an imposition of the Queen's authority over the Benin Empire. The excesses of the British soldiers who visit Benin on a self-appointed date that is inconvenient for their host further indicate their insensitivity to the independence of the Benin people.
- c. The interaction between the Benin security officers and the British military officers breaks down because they do not employ sufficient tactics of diplomacy. The participants on both sides flout and violate conversational maxims, breach politeness principles and shun concessions to each other when they disagree. Of course, military and security officials are reputed more for physical force than language power. The question is: could civilians have better handled the negotiation in Text 4?

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