

Original Article

Illocutionary Aspects of Charactonym in Achebe's Selected Novels

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Abstract - The aim of this study is to explore illocutionary acts in the names of characters in Chinua Achebe's selected works. Specifically, it identifies the illocutionary acts performed with the names of the major characters in Achebe's selected novels and further identifies the pragmatic-linguistic implications of the acts. Data are collected from three novels written by Achebe. The selected novels are *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*. The data comprises the names of the major characters in the novels. The selected names are analysed qualitatively to identify the illocutionary acts performed with them and the cultural, contextual, and significant backgrounds that inform the names. The analysis is anchored on Searle's (1969) Illocutionary Act Theory, which identifies five types of illocutions in utterances – commissives, directives, assertives, expressives, and declaratives. However, this study only identifies the use of three illocutionary acts in the selected names. The identified illocutionary acts are assertives, directives, declaratives, and expressives, but assertives are used the most. It is also observed that the selected names adhere to Igbo cosmology, indicating that Achebe adapts the names of his characters to align with the culture of the setting of his novels, which happen to be the Igbo culture in the three selected literary works. On this, recommendations were made that more studies be done on the pragmatics of names and the naming significance in relation to the background knowledge in other African literary works to expose the assumed hidden technique in African literary works.

Keywords - Names, Speech Act, Illocutionary Act, Charactonym.

1. Introduction

Language is a social process. This implies that language is part of society and a socially conditioned process. Language has great potential to influence and shape public ideas and knowledge. Being the most distinctive attribute of man, language has often exerted a lot of influence on the whole gamut of human affairs: political, social, educational, economic, cultural, etc. As noted by Adedimeji (2005), language mainly serves to form or deform, inform, reform and transform man and his society, all of which are harmonious with the goal of communication, making the two concepts symbiotic.

It is significant to point out that literature is a mere study of the language of imagination. Language is a powerful weapon, and literature is in itself concerned with so many things of human engagement. These include the projection and maintenance of the culture of a certain people. Authors, such as Chinua Achebe, imbibe this style in their literary works, especially regarding characterization. One of the discursive strategies he adopts in this case is the alteration of the Standard English to enable him to utilize the native naming tradition as well as name symbolization.

Another important function that is performed by literature is that it can be used as a cultural transmitter. This is so because authors, including African authors, set their stories in specific cultures and backgrounds and, as a result, adapt their narratives to align with the aspects of the depicted cultures. One of the aspects of cultures that is usually portrayed in literature is the personal name. Scholars, such as Olaluwoye (2016) and Yong and Kris-Ogbodo (2024), have noted that the characters in Chinua Achebe's novels are named to reveal their social class, cultural identities, and



destinies. Hence, from their names, a reader can discover the author's narrative context and gain a deeper insight into certain messages that are not explicitly delivered by the author. Put differently, the names Achebe assigns to his characters align with the central theme and background information of his novels. In other words, the names of characters in his works are significant to the central story.

Despite the interest many researchers have shown in the strategies used by Achebe to name characters in his novels, much attention has not been given to the illocutionary aspects of the names. This oversight creates a gap in the literature, which would have enabled the identification of the actions Achebe performed with the names of his characters, which are significant to the understanding of his novels. Identifying this strategy gives more insight into the strategies used by the author in his works, as well as points out the naming practices of the depicted culture.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the illocutionary aspects of charactonym in Achebe's selected novels. Put differently, the study identifies the illocutionary acts in the names of characters in Achebe's literary works. Its objectives are to identify the illocutionary acts performed by the characters' names and the pragmatic-linguistic contents of the strategies. As a result, this study answers these research questions: (1) What illocutionary acts are performed with the names of the main characters in selected novels? And (2) what pragma-linguistic contents are deployed in the naming strategies?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualising Charactonym

Charactonym is a concept that reveals that the name an individual, an animal, or a thing bears performs functions that are beyond simply tagging them. Sari and Saptaningsih (2023) explain that the concept is commonly found in literary context, whereby the proper names of characters are connected to the narrative and central theme of the work. They explain that the concept refers to the use of proper names to hint and describe certain aspects of the narrative, story or the concerned character.

According to Rostami (2022), charactonyms simply refer to significant names, which express and reveal the characteristics of the bearer. He explains that in literature, authors use this concept to create deeper meaning and further contextualize their narratives. Put differently, literary authors who adopt the concept of charactonym in their works not only allow their readers to identify the context of their stories through the names of the characters but also help them achieve a deeper understanding of the stories. Nevertheless, Rostami cautions that the translation of charactonymy names can distort the actual characteristics of the fictional personality the author intends to display.

Coates (2015) states that charactonym can be described as 'speaking names' because it involves names that tell readers about the bearer. He maintains that such names are symbolic because they reveal the story behind them. Umamah (2024) states that a charactonym is the proper name that is given to a fictional character, which contains the character's attitude, lifestyle, physical appearance, behaviour, and any other features or traits that mark the bearer. This means that charactonym acts as an identity marker. This explains why Tuti et al. (2019) explain that charactonym is simply the name of characters in literature, which is used by writers to demonstrate and project the prominent traits of their characters. This study, therefore, identifies charactonyms as the names of fictional characters in a literary work that enable the identification of the character's identity, behaviour, personality and relationship and further reveal the context of the narrative.

2.2. Understanding Illocution

When people speak, they use language to communicate intentions. This intention may be to deliver information, make a request, give directions, seek information, and make declarations (Kissine, 2009; Dewi, 2021). When the intent behind what is said is actionable, it is referred to as illocution (Sbisa, 2009). Illocution, according to Putri et al. (2020), is the utterance that contains certain conventional power to do actions. They explain that the actions performed by the utterances are the key functions of the utterance, which the listener must identify to achieve interpretations.

Herman (2015) states that an illocution is what a speaker is doing as he speaks. This means that the utterance

performs the specified action the very moment it is spoken. Dewi (2021) also describes the concept as the act of doing something with language. Rahayu et al. (2019) maintain that illocution is the intended meaning of an utterance. Nevertheless, Sbisa (2009) states that an illocutionary act is conventional, indicating that the intention of an utterance means different things in different cultures or to different people in different contexts. This study, therefore, perceives illocution as the action performed with language within the right culture and context.

2.3. Previous Studies on Charactonyms in Achebe's Works

The works of Chinua Achebe have attracted the interest of several scholars, and some of these scholars have further evaluated the use of names in them. Among these researchers are Yong and Kris-Ogbodo (2024), who pragmatically examined the use of names in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Their focus was on the use of names as cultural identities and destiny markers in the concerned novels. Their study reveals that the names of major characters in the selected novels are adaptations of Igbo cosmology.

Another study that examines the names of characters in Achebe's works novel is conducted by Odebunmi (2008), which examined the names of characters in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. The study reveals that Achebe uses four types of names in the novel, which are nicknames, first names, official names, and title or institutional names. He also discovers that the names are formed through different techniques, which include names coined from indigenous language, adding affixes, clipping, and coinages. These findings make him conclude that the names used in the novel are created to fulfil thematic as well as stylistic purposes.

Olaluwoye (2016) examines the discourse values of names in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* through the lens of Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) register theory. Findings reveal that names are used as identity, social class, expressive and stylistic markers. The study concludes that Achebe uses names strategically to achieve the narrative and ideological purposes of the novel.

Though Debrah et al. (2016) do not specifically examine the strategy used by Achebe to construct names for his characters, their study reveals that Achebe chooses names that suit characters' experiences to depict the social struggles they face. They also discover that he only uses names that are native to the environment where he set the story. This explains why Mokbel (2024) maintains that the characters in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are used as cultural symbols.

The works reviewed in this section identify the features of names in Achebe's works, especially *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. These studies show that the names of characters in these novels reflect the theme, ideology, culture and narrative purposes of the novels. However, none of them examined the illocutionary aspects of names or charactonyms in Achebe's novels.

2.4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Searle's (1969) Speech Illocutionary Acts Theory as its theoretical anchor. This theory postulates that language is not only used to deliver information but also to perform actions. It is one of the tenets of Speech Acts Theory (SAT), which was first propounded by Austin (1962) and further developed by Searle (1969). Illocutionary Acts Theory argues that the actual meaning of an utterance or written text is derived from the speaker's intention and not from the meaning of words that make up the utterance. In other words, communication is successful only when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker's meaning from it (Sperber & Wilson, 1986; Mey, 2001). As Lawal (1997) explains, identifying the intentions behind an utterance is a way of identifying the action the speaker or writer performed with the utterance.

Searle (1969) identifies five acts people perform with utterances. These are representative or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declaratives. **Representatives or Assertives** refer to the speech act that commits a speaker to the truth of the expressed proposition. It includes reciting, asserting, claiming, describing, concluding, reporting, suggesting, predicting, and stating. **Directives** are the speech act that causes the hearer to take a particular action. These are found in cases of requesting, commanding, advising, questioning, pleading, inviting, and

warning. Further, **commissives** are the speech act that commits a speaker to some future action(s). They are utterances, such as promising, threatening, offering, guaranteeing, vowing, betting, and challenging. An **expressive** speech act is found when a speaker expresses their attitudes and emotions towards a proposition. Examples of such are congratulating, thanking, apologising, appreciating, complaining, condoling, greeting, and scolding. Finally, **declaratives** are speech acts that change the reality of the receiver in accordance with the proposition of the declaration. They include expressions used for baptising, pronouncing someone guilty or pronouncing someone husband and wife, arresting, appointing, dismissing, promoting, and demoting.

The five illocutionary acts identified by Searle (1969) provide this study with the perspective for studying the names collected from selected Achebe novels. With them, the study is able to identify the names used by the author to perform certain illocutionary acts.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design. Descriptive research design is employed in the sense that the study collected its sample from a selected population and analyse them through a discursive means, using some pragmatic elements; elements of the illocutionary act by Searle (1969). The study randomly selected, as its data, some names used in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *Arrow of God*. These randomly selected names were analysed based on the illocutionary act by Searle, and a discussion of the analysis was also made. The results obtained from the analysis were generalized to all the African, Nigerian, and Igbo names, and a conclusion was made from them.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Data Presentation and Analysis

The analysis of data collected for this study is segmented into two to enable the answering of the two research questions posed by the study. Hence, the first section focuses on the illocutionary acts found in the characters' names, while the second section is concerned with the pragmatic-linguistic contents of the naming strategies. Searle's (1969) Illocutionary Act Theory provides the lens for this analysis.

4.1.1. Illocutionary Acts in Selected Names

Illocutionary acts are found in the names of the major characters in selected Achebe's novels. Examples of these names and their illocutionary acts are captured in Table 1. This segment answers the first research question.

Table 1: Illocutionary Acts in Selected Names

S. No	Names	Meanings	Type of Illocutionary Act
1.	Okonkwo (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	A man born on "Nkwo" market day.	Assertives: Describing
2.	Nwakibie (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	A child above every other child.	Expressives: Praising
3.	Nwoye (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	A male child born on the "Orie" market.	Assertives: Describing
4.	Ikemefuna (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	May my strength not be in vain	Directives: Prayer
5.	Unoka (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	Household/family is greater.	Assertives: Claiming
6.	Ezinma (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	Real beauty	Declarative: Blessing
7.	Oduche (<i>Arrow of God</i>)	Young thought	Assertives: Stating
8.	Ezeulu (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	Ulu chief priest	Assertives: Claiming
9.	Obiajulu (Obi) (<i>No Longer at Ease</i>)	The mind at last is at rest	Assertive: Claiming
10.	Obierika (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	The home is many	Assertive: Claiming
11.	Chielo (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	God's thought	Assertives: Asserting
12.	Ojiugo (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	The kola-nut for the eagle	Expressives: Praising
13.	Nwafo (<i>Arrow of God</i>)	One born on the Afor market day	Assertives: Stating
14.	Uchendu (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	Thought of life	Assertives: Claiming
15.	Ekwefi (<i>Things Fall Apart</i>)	Gong of the cow	Assertives: Asserting

The names of the major characters captured in Table 1 show that Achebe adopts more assertive illocutionary acts for his character names. The identified assertives show that the Igbo culture gives names that claim, describe, state, and assert. There are also instances of directives and expressives as the illocutionary acts performed with names in the selected novels, which are set in the Igbo culture.

4.1.2. *Pragma-Linguistic Contents of the Names*

This section answers the second research question. It identifies the pragma-linguistic implications of the names presented in Table 1. Hence, this section reveals intention of Achebe's intention in assigning the names to the characters and how such names align with Igbo culture and context.

4.1.2.1. Unoka

Literally, Unoka is composed of uno ika, uno standing for 'house' in Igbo and ika, which means 'to be greater'. Therefore, it can be assumed that his name means: Household or family is of greater importance. Unoka is Okonkwo's father, who defied typical Igbo masculinity by neglecting to grow yams, take care of his wives and children, and pay his debts before he dies. However, the readers soon find that it is in contrast with Unoka's real meaning of his name. As the novel reveals Unoka was not a firm man to rely on "the strength of his arm" to support his family and owed a lot of money to many people postponing to pay them back through adopting a kind of cynicism in behaviour plus a witty language; a language very common in "trickster" Igbo tales-like that of the turtle in the story of birds' feast in *Things Fall Apart* (Nwosu 2016). Hence, with regard to such an irony revolving around the distance between the significance of Unoka's name and his real character, Achebe must have intended to portray something important, which is a mismatch in appearance.

4.1.2.2. Nwakibie

This literally means 'A child above every other child'. In the story, following the description of the character he played, it can be concluded that the coin age and naming conform to the personality he displays. Nwakibie is described as one of the personalities who are rich and who have possessed large yam banks. He is the one whom Okonkwo goes to for yam seedlings, and he gives even more than Okonkwo demanded. He is really great among his mates, like Okonkwo's father, Unoka.

4.1.2.3. Okonkwo and Nwoye

These two names –'Okonkwo' and Nwoye' – have one thing in common, and that is belonging to the same category of Igbo names: names that refer to the 'Time of Birth' or an occasion since 'Nkwo' and 'Orie' signify two Igbo Market days. In fact, the name 'Nwoye' – which is composed of Nwa + Orie – stands for the boy or the child born on 'Orie' market day, as the Igbo equivalent for 'male', 'boy' or 'child' is 'Nwa'. Similarly, the name 'Okonkwo' means 'the male child of Nkwo'. This category of names has a lot to say about Igbo cosmology and can, in sequence, aid the development of this study. According to Abanuka, (2000) "The market days were originally established by the supernatural beings bearing different names sent by God as messengers to earth" which were in fact given as a reward to Nri, the historical god-like king and the founder of Nri (Igboland), who was successful in revealing the names of the four market-day spirits without disclosing their names (Ebuziem 2011) as such an act could make it possible form an kind to possess them. This shows why these four market days were somehow sacred for Igbo people and justifies in advance the reason for children born on each of these days to be named after them.

Actually, the sacredness of market days in Igbo culture and the myth-like story of Nri are good clues to help readers grasp a better understanding of the historical importance of the place within an agrarian culture which flourished in a land with little fertile soil and long dry seasons. Indeed, going through ages Igbo people had found that yam cropping and a dynamic economy revolving around this product was the only way to survive an agricultural product which was to be gained only by hardworking men and not by irresolute men like Unoka who would stay home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil instead of going out with axe to cut down virgin forests in search of a more fertile soil to plant new year yams (Achebe, 2010:15). Thus, Okonkwo's efforts early in the novel form a kind of share-cropping contract with Nwakibie (p.16) and his permanent endeavors to make Nwoye a good yam farmer, unlike his

grandfather, can be interpreted as a kind of existential identity search or self-realization matching the demands of what their culturally-defined name simply.

4.1.2.4. Ikemefuna

Ikemefuna's name signifies 'May my power not be in vain'. 'Ike' denotes 'power' in Igbo (Onumajuru, 2016); 'm' in this context is the Igbo possessive adjective for 'my' (Emenanjo 2001); 'efuna' is interpreted as 'may not be in vain' (Williamson, 1972); while the negative primary auxiliary in Igbo, 'na' (Onumajuru 2016), connotes 'May not!' when used in prayers. Ikemefuna is a boy from the Mbaino tribe. His father murders the wife of a Umuofia man, and in the resulting settlement of the matter, Ikemefuna is put into the care of Okonkwo. By the decision of Umuofia authorities, Ikemefuna is ultimately killed, an act which Okonkwo does not prevent, and even participates in, lest he seem feminine and weak. Ikemefuna became very close to Nwoye, and Okonkwo's decision to participate in Ikemefuna's death takes a toll on Okonkwo's relationship with Nwoye.

4.1.2.5. Oduche

Oduche of Achebe's *Arrow of God*. Referring to the matter of 'name symbolization' can shed light on the fact. 'Oduche' can be broken into odu+ uche; uche standing for 'mind' or 'thought' and 'odu' for the last or the youngest when added as a prefix or suffix to another word. Therefore, this name can be translated into 'the young mind' or 'the young thought', which can be read as quite significant with regard to the present study. Like Isaac, Oduche faces many conflicts as he is the only member of his family sent to a Christian missionary.

4.1.2.6. Ezinma

The name commonly means 'real beauty'. Ezinma is Okonkwo's daughter, born to him by his first wife, Ekwefi. Ezinma is described as a paragon of beauty. Therefore, in confirmation of her name. Her beauty is as much as making her have a tie with the spirit world, just as it is believed in the then Igbo society that a woman who is so beautiful is likely to have come from the spirit world. Hence, the name is in relation to the description and the role.

4.1.2.7. Ezeulu

Ezeulu is the chief priest of the 'Ulu' deity. His traditional background significance can be likened to that of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*. Ezeulu in Achebe's *Arrow of God* is situated in a form that he took responsibility for all that happens that connects to 'Ulu' as a deity in that work. Invariably, the name is directly related to the role played by the character.

4.1.2.8. Obiajulu (Obi)

In *No Longer at Ease*, Isaac's first four children were girls, and it seems that he was feeling unrest. He had no son and could not marry another wife like his father and forefathers, as he was bound by new religious limitations. Therefore, the act of choosing a native Igbo name for his fifth child, who is a boy, can be quite ironic: Obiajulu (Obi): "the mind at last is at rest" (157). In truth, this name plays a key role in the development of the whole novel, as portrayed by its title, and Achebe has relied much on it to construct his discourses incites a complex narrative framed on the basis of Obi's character and the story of his tragic downfall as the of the grandson of the very Okonkwo committing suicide in *Things Fall Apart* despite his western education and modern values or ideals he has in mind.

4.1.2.9. Obierika

The name entails that one's home can be beyond just one's home. This is a common belief in Igbo society. That is why one does not relent when one notices a misnomer in a neighbour's home. The character of Obierika represents his name fully. Obierika is Okonkwo's best friend from Umuofia. Unlike Okonkwo, Obierika thinks before he acts and is, therefore, less violent and arrogant than Okonkwo. He is considered the voice of reason in the book and questions certain parts of their culture, such as the necessity to exile Okonkwo after he unintentionally kills a boy. Obierika's own son, Maduka, is greatly admired by Okonkwo for his wrestling prowess.

4.1.2.10. Chielo

A priestess in Umuofia who is dedicated to the Oracle of the goddess, Agbala. Chielo is a widow with two

children. She is good friends with Ekwefi and is fond of Ezinma, whom she calls “my daughter.” At one point, she carries Ezinma on her back for miles in order to help purify her and appease the gods.

4.1.2.11. Ojiugo

Ojiugo is Okonkwo’s third and youngest wife, and the mother of Nkechi. Okonkwo beats Ojiugo during the Week of Peace. Ojiugo, as earlier noted, can be literally said to be ‘eagle’s kolanut’. As precious as the eagle is, whatever concerns the eagle must be precious. And that is why, Okonkwo, even as her husband is sanctioned when he beats her up, for he has beaten up a precious being.

4.1.2.12. Nwafor

This means a child born on the Afor market day.

4.1.2.13. Uchendu

The younger brother of Okonkwo’s mother. Uchendu receives Okonkwo and his family warmly when they travel to Mbanta, and he advises Okonkwo to be grateful for the comfort that his motherland offers him lest he anger the dead—especially his mother, who is buried there. Uchendu himself has suffered—all but one of his six wives are dead, and he has buried twenty-two children. He is a peaceful, compromising man and functions as a foil (a character whose emotions or actions highlight, by means of contrast, the emotions or actions of another character) to Okonkwo, who acts impetuously and without thinking.

4.1.2.14. Ekwefi

Okonkwo’s second wife was once the village beauty. Ekwefi ran away from her first husband to live with Okonkwo. Ezinma is her only surviving child, her other nine having died in infancy, and Ekwefi constantly fears that she will lose Ezinma as well. Ekwefi is a good friend of Chielo, the priestess of the goddess Agbala.

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of data collected for this study shows that illocutionary acts are performed through the names assigned to characters in Achebe’s literary works. The most used illocutionary act, as observed by this study, is assertives, which the author uses to claim, assert, state, and describe. The study also observes that the selected names are adopted from a native Igbo background. To this effect, the names are, in one way or another, reflecting the etymological formation in existence in the Igbo society. An instance is the fact that in those days in the Igbo society, there were four market days that the community members identified with respect. This respect drives people’s willingness and desire to identify with the day of their birth. Hence, some Igbo names are dedicated to the days of these notable markets – Orie, Afo, Nkwo, and Eke. In the selected Achebe’s literary works, names, such as Okonkwo, Nwafor, and Nwoye, indicate that the bearers were born on Nkwo, Afor, and Oye (Orie) days, respectively. Hence, their names describe who they are by culture and further lay claims to their days of birth.

The study also observes that people’s names can state their title, profession and religion. Examples can be found in the cases of Ezeulu and Chielo, who hold different positions in their traditional religions. While Ezeulu’s name proclaims him as the ‘chief priest’ of a deity, Chielo’s name indicates that she is ‘thought’ of the deity. Achebe, therefore, used these names to alert his readers to his intent with the two characters. Another example of his use of illocution is in the case of Ikemefuna, whereby he used a directive (a prayer of desperation) that would alert his readers that the life of the young man is likely to be cut short. The opposite of this name is Ezimma, which he used as a declarative to state that the girl bearing the name is a blessing.

5. Conclusion

The names of characters in Achebe’s selected novels show that the writer does not assign names haphazardly. Apart from the names having significant meanings, they also align with the culture of the narrative’s geographical settings. He uses names to reveal the intent of his stories and plans towards the concerned character. By so doing, he does not only depict the practices of the reflected cultures but also allows his readers to picture the context of his stories and the background information that influences certain actions that unfold in the novels.

While Achebe adopts cultural practices of the setting in naming his characters, he also performs certain actions with those names. The names his characters answer can determine if they will encounter a tragic fate, whether they are considered a blessing, their offices in society, and their social class. These observations indicate that illocutionary acts make names more significant in Achebe's literary works.

6. Recommendations

Based on the observations made during the course of this research, this study recommends the following:

- More studies should be done on the naming etymology in Chinua Achebe's works.
- Researchers should examine the use of illocution in the names of characters in other African literary works in order to extend the understanding of African philosophy and cosmology to the non-African readers of African literature.

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