

**SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF SPEECH ACTS AND SOCIAL POWER IN OLA
ROTIMI'S *THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME***

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Abstract

This paper explores the sociolinguistics of speech acts and social power in Ola Rotimi's "The Gods Are Not to Blame." It addresses the linguistic exchanges within the narrative reflect power hierarchies and authority within Yoruba cultural context. It aims to elucidate the intersection among language, social structure, and identity. Through a qualitative content analysis, there are more than 190 of the five major speech acts but 52 of them were randomly sampled for the sake of this study. The play was categorized using Searle's (1969) speech acts (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations) and Yule's (1996) direct and indirect acts, interpreted through Fairclough's (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis. Findings show a preponderance of directive (49.5%) and expressive (29%) acts, revealing how authority and emotion are linguistically exercised to negotiate social hierarchy. It concludes that speech acts are tools for asserting and challenging power, mapping themes of leadership and fate. It contributes a sociolinguistics model for analyzing power dynamics in African literary texts.

Keywords: *Sociolinguistics, Speech Acts, Social Power, The Gods Are Not to Blame, Yoruba Culture.*

Introduction

Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame* (1971) is a seminal Nigerian adaptation of the Oedipus myth. It transcends its classical template to become a profound exploration of power, fate, and agency within a postcolonial African context. While thematic and political readings abound, this article provides a systematic sociolinguistic analysis, arguing that the play's dramatic conflict is fundamentally mediated and enacted through language. Ola Rotimi's re-imagining of the Oedipus myth transposes the tragic hero into the context of a pre-colonial Yoruba society. It creates a rich tapestry where classical fate intersects with African cosmology,

politics, and social structures. Scholarly engagement with the play has largely focused on its thematic concerns: the critique of leadership (Adelugba, 1977), the tension between destiny and free will (Etherton, 1982), and its postcolonial allegory (Ogunba, 1975). However, the intricate mechanics of how these themes are enacted, through the verbal exchanges between characters remains underexplored.

This study posits language as the central battlefield in *The Gods Are Not To Blame*. It applies a sociolinguistic lens, specifically Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), to interrogate how power is linguistically performed, negotiated, and subverted. In the world of the play, words are not merely descriptive; they are performative. A king's decree alters reality, a prophet's utterance foretells doom, and a curse sets irreversible consequences in motion. This article analyzes these speech acts to argue that social power in Rotimi's universe is inherently discursive, reliant on a precarious consensus between speaker, hearer, and socio-cultural context.

The connection between language and social power construct has been a meaningful focus of research within the field of sociolinguistics, especially in exploring how speech acts function within various social contexts. The study of speech acts utterances that perform functions such as asserting, questioning, commanding, and promising, has revealed much about the intricate interplay between linguistic choices and social dynamics, especially in terms of authority and identity (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Speech acts are pivotal to understanding how language functions in literature and society. The exploration of the speech acts concepts from the perspective of literature is profound. As authors often utilize speech acts to articulate the complexities of power relations among characters, it offers insights into broader societal themes. Ola Rotimi's play, *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, explores the sociolinguistics of speech acts and the manifestation of social power within the framework of Nigerian cultural contexts. The play originates from the traditional Yoruba society and intricately weaves themes of fate, responsibility, and the tension between individual agency and communal expectations. Rotimi utilizes a robust tapestry of dialogue that

manifests the linguistic choices and demonstrates authority, power dynamics, and social hierarchies (Ene, 2016).

Speech acts extend beyond the literal meanings of utterances to display the intentions, power dynamics, and social functions embedded in dialogue. It exposes how societal norms and power relations influence the characters' use of language and communicates their intentions during interactions. Research in sociolinguistics underscores the importance of context in shaping speech acts and their implications for power dynamics (Holmes, 2013). Rotimi's dialogue illustrates how speakers navigate their social positions and assert their identities through language, and as a result, challenge the prevailing power structures. The sociolinguistics landscape of literature often reveals the intricate networks of power, identity, and cultural norms in post-colonial African contexts. Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* stands as a poignant illustration of how language functions as both a communicative tool and a medium of social power among characters intricately woven into the fabric of a traditional society. Prior research has established the significance of speech acts as a site of social negotiation and contestation.

Furthermore, existing literature often does not address the broader socio-political contexts that inform these interactions, particularly the historical and cultural settings of the Yoruba people. This article seeks to investigate how the sociolinguistics of speech acts in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* elucidates the nuanced ways in which characters navigate social power and authority. It aims to fill the existing research by examining the interplay between language, social structure, and cultural identity, thereby offering a more robust understanding of how Rotimi employs speech as a dynamic mechanism for articulating and challenging social hierarchies. Ultimately, this exploration endeavors to contribute to the broader field of sociolinguistics, particularly in its application to African literature, and to demonstrate the enduring relevance of language in the construction and deconstruction of power in the society.

This paper aims at exploring the sociolinguistics of speech acts and social power in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The specific objectives are to identify the speech acts used in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*; analyze the functions of the speech acts; and investigate how the speech acts in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* reflect social power among the characters.

The relationship between language and power has drawn significant attention in the field of sociolinguistics, particularly through the lens of Norman Fairclough's Analysis of language and power. According to Fairclough (2001), language goes beyond a medium of communication. It is also a crucial conduit for the exercise of power and domination in social structures. Fairclough's work emphasizes that discourse serves to construct, maintain, and challenge power relations within the society. It highlights the dialectical intersection between discourse and social practices. Fairclough's argument is founded on the notion that language produces social realities. He posits that discourse mirrors and shapes the world.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is a significant work that has attracted scholarly attention over time through the lens of speech acts and social power. The play's dialogue mirrors the power dynamics that reveal how language functions within cultural and societal frameworks. This review synthesizes notable empirical studies that highlight the role of speech acts in articulating social power within the narrative.

One of the foundational works in the analysis of speech acts in the context of Ola Rotimi's play is by Ashafa (2011). Ashafa (2011) examines how various speech acts such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations are utilized to establish hierarchies

among characters. Ashafa observes that the characters' speech acts often correlate with their social positions in which the high-status individuals employ assertive and directive speech acts to exercise control, while low-status characters often resort to expressive acts to convey their emotional states. This relational dynamic emphasizes the play's commentary on social stratification within a traditional African society.

Okeke (2020) explores the socio-political implications of language use in *The Gods Are Not to Blame* to extend the analysis of speech acts beyond interpersonal relationships. The study posits that the use of speech acts shapes wider societal tensions and conflicts in the context of colonialism and post-colonial identities. Okeke highlights such instances where characters' speech acts subvert traditional power structures, challenging the status quo and advocating for social change. Such instances demonstrate how language can act as a powerful tool for resistance and transformation. The application of Speech Act Theory in this context gives insights into how language constructs social realities. As highlighted by Searle (1969), the performative nature of speech acts enables individuals to enact changes in their social contexts, thus reinforcing the argument that language is inherently tied to power. The insights gleaned from Ola Rotimi's text resonate with the broader sociolinguistics discourse in comprehending how language mirrors and shapes structures of power.

Ojo (2024) explores the speech acts analysis of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. It was a descriptive, qualitative study. The data were analyzed based on the theory of speech acts proposed by Searle (1969) and Yule (1996). The study showed that Ola Rotimi utilized the direct speech acts more in his play, *The gods are not to Blame*, than the indirect speech act. The importance of speech acts is recognized in keeping steady progression of the story lines of the play. This reveals that social interactions cannot be detached from human life because this is what keeps a smooth flow of communication. The research also contributes significantly to

Speech Acts in Nigerian English and its interface with the Yoruba culture. This study recommends that pragmatics can be learnt and mastered within stylistics.

The focus of this study differs from the three reviewed articles by centering on a sociolinguistic analysis of how speech acts and social power intersect, rather than examining these elements in isolation. While Ashafa (2011) primarily uses speech act theory to map character hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics, this study adopts sociolinguistics as the overarching framework to explore how language both reflects and constructs broader social structures of power. In contrast to Okeke (2020), which concentrates on the macro-political context of colonialism and post-colonial resistance, this research examines social power in a more multifaceted way—considering dimensions such as tradition, class, and social stratification within the depicted Yoruba society. Furthermore, unlike Ojo (2024), which provides a taxonomic classification of direct versus indirect speech acts with pedagogical aims, this study is theoretically driven to explain why specific speech acts are employed based on characters' social positions and how these linguistic choices function to negotiate, maintain, or challenge power imbalances in the social world of the play.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was extracted from a detailed reading of *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. There are more than 190 of the five major speech acts but 52 of them were randomly sampled for the sake of this study. Each speech act was counted and analyzed in terms of function and speaker authority. The speech acts were then correlated with the speaker's social role and context to determine power patterns. This study adopts the speech act theories proposed by Yule (1996) in his theory of types of speech acts: direct and indirect speech acts, and Searle (1969) in his theory of the classification of speech acts. It also utilizes Norman Fairclough's (2001) *Analysis of Language and Power*.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The Speech Act Types and examples in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Directives

1. Narrator: what is it that the child has brought as duty to this earth from the gods? Pg.. 2
2. First citizen: what use are greetings to a dying body? Pg.. 9
3. Third citizen: when the chameleon brings forth a child, is not that child expected to dance? Pg.. 9
4. First chief: do you think we have no thoughts in our mind for your good? Pg..9
5. Second woman: What has the king done about it? Pg.. 10
6. Second citizen: when rain falls on the leopard, does it wash off its spots? Pg.. 10
7. Fifth citizen: how long must feverish birds tremble in silence before their keeper? Pg.. 10
8. Odewale: does the rain fall on one roof? Pg.. 10
9. Odewale: Sickness is in your houses? Pg.. 10
10. Fifth citizen: How long must feverish birds tremble in silence before their keeper? Pg.. 10
11. Odewale: does it fall on one body and not on another? Pg.. 10
12. Odewale: See... see the mucus on his nose? Pg. 11
13. Odewale: Soponna, the god of the poxes? Pg. 11
14. Second chief: Which of you knows where Aderopo is now? Pg. 12
15. Third citizen: Has the sickness killed him? Pg. 12
16. Odewale: where is Aderopo? Pg. 12
17. Townspeople: Where is he then? Pg. 12
18. Odewale: ...what have you now to say? Pg. 12
19. Odewale: Is that so? Pg. 12
20. Odewale: But what about you yourselves? Pg. 12
21. Odewale: Bring the children here. Pg.11
22. Odewale: Wake her up...Pg. 11
23. Odewale: bring them all. Pg. 11
24. Odewale: sacrifice, did you say? Pg. 11
25. First citizen: let us sacrifice ram to the gods. Pg. 11

Expressives

1. Townspeople: ...we shall go! Pg. 15
2. Townspeople: ...the royal shoes on your feet! Pg. 15
3. Odewale: private! Pg. 19
4. Second chief: A man! Pg. 20
5. Odewale and chiefs: king Adetusa! Pg. 21
6. Baba Fakunle: Don't come near me!
7. Baba Fakunle: You called me pig! Pg. 27
8. Odewale: Listen to that! Pg. 29
9. Baba Fakunle: bed sharer Pg. 29
10. Baba Fakunle: Indeed! Pg. 31
11. Baba Fakunle: the seer is sick in the head! Pg. 29
12. Odewale: No, you are a tortoise Pg. 34
13. Odewale: Oohh! Pg.35
14. Aderopo: ...out of this land! Pg. 35

Assertives

1. Priest: He said robbers lay in wait for them in the bush near Ede and killed the king. Pg.22
2. Odewale: There is the plague in this land...Pg. 26
3. First woman: Yesterday, my twins died- both of them. Pg.9
4. Second citizen: When the head of a household dies, the house becomes an empty shell. Pg.9
5. Second chief: We have also sent for Baba Fakunle, the greatest of all medicine men in this World. He will be here soon. Pg. 12
6. Priest: We have sent Aderopo to Ile-Ife...Pg. 12
7. Second woman: lemon grass, teabush, and some limeskins. Pg. 13
8. Second woman: I and my household drank the medicine, yet we do not get better, my lord. Pg. 13
9. Second woman: As soon as it boiled, I put it down... Pg. 13
10. Third woman: I boiled mine longer – a long time. I even added *dogo-yaro* leaves to it.

Commissives:

1. Odewale: Later then, later. The blood is still hot...later. Pg. 39
2. Odewale: Before Ogun the God of Iron, I stand an oath...I , Odewale, the son of Ogundele, shall search and fully lay open before your very eyes the murderer, I swear...Pg. 24

Declaration:

There is no declarative illocutionary speech acts in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to Blame*. It is 0% out of the 191 utterances.

Indirect Speech Acts:

1. Odewale: Do not cut in, I pray you. Pg.19

Table 1: The Speech Acts Distribution

Speech Act Types	Frequency	Percentage
1. Directives	25	49.5%
2. Expressives	14	29%
3. Assertives	10	20%
4. Commissives	2	1%
5. Declarations	0	0%
6. Indirect Speech Acts	1	0.5%
Total	52	100%

Sociolinguistics Classification of Speech Act Types

Directives as Instruments of Power

Directive speech acts dominate the speech act types. It accounts for 49.5% of all the utterances. These include commands, questions, suggestions, and requests primarily issued by Odewale and some other authority figures. For instance, the frequent use of directives illustrates the vertical power structure in Kutuje. Odewale's constant use of imperatives mirrors his role as king and his authority over others. In the text, Odewale does not hesitate to order the people to go and get cure for the illness ravaging the land. Odewale said:

‘Up, all of you into the bush. Go and get cutlasses go on! Go
and pick herbs from the bush, boil them, drink them! Get up,
go on in twos, threes, get up!’ (Page 14)

From the extract above, Odewale addresses all the citizens of the land there by exercising his authority over the people of Kutuje. This is evident in the use of the term, ‘all of you’.

Expressives as Emotional Identity

Expressive speech acts (29%) serve as the primary vehicle for revealing the emotional and psychological states of characters. They are often employed during the moments of crisis, grief, or confrontation. Examples include:

Odewale: so I am thief! (Page 46)

Olojo: Aha! (Page 46)

Agidi, Labata, Akilapa: Ah! (Page 55)

Alaka: ...a killer! (Page 57)

These utterances help to personalize characters, making them emotionally relatable while also illustrating societal expectations of gender, respect, and insult. The prevalence of expressives, particularly in the second half of the play, corresponds with heightened emotional tension and dramatic revelations. Assertives as the Construction of Truth

Assertive speech acts (20%) are used to state facts, beliefs, and observations that drive the plot forward. They establish credibility, narrate events, or legitimize actions. Assertive acts are largely tied to the priesthood, the narrator, and those disseminating authoritative knowledge (e.g., oracles and elders). They serve to build the narrative world and confirm the authority of other characters. In the play, the characters of Gbonka and Ogun Priest are significant because Ogun Priest is the mouthpiece of the gods whose operation is guided by the custom of the land. Attesting to this fact, when Odewale enquires to know who orders that he should be killed as an infant, Gbonka replies that it is Ogun Priest:

‘The man behind you, my lord, the priest of Ogun.’ (page 68)

Commissives as the Scarcity of Personal Commitment

There are only two commissive speech acts (1%) that are present. It mirrors that explicit promises or self-binding commitments are rare in the play. One of the rare occasions where King Odewale demonstrates this commissive speech act is on page 9 of the play:

‘If any man has a remedy for the plague of this land, let him come to me. I promise him riches, I promise him land, I promise him fortune.’ (Page 9)

While such promises are generally scarce in the play, the king commits himself to rewarding anybody who provides a solution to the calamity that has befallen the land of Kutuje. This scarcity underscores a broader cultural and political context in which leaders often speak authoritatively (directives and assertives) but seldom make personal vows. The reason for the paucity of explicit promise, perhaps, is to evade the responsibility that accompanies such

commitments. When they do, such as Odewale's oath, it marks a significant narrative turning point tied to fate and destiny. This is the case with the solution King Odewale seeks in the play as it reveals that he is the guilty one.

Declarations as the Missing Element

There is no declaration found in the data. Declarations typically change the institutional state of affairs (e.g., "You are hereby exiled"), and their absence might reflect a society where authority is performed through tradition, oracles, and communal rituals rather than institutional pronouncements.

Indirect Speech Act as Subtle Power Play

Only one instance of an indirect speech act was identified:

Odewale: 'Do not cut in, I pray you.' (Page19)

This polite construction masks a directive in the form of a plea. It highlights a moment of tension where Odewale tries to maintain authority without direct confrontation. This indicates how language softens power dynamics in moments of fragile legitimacy.

Discussion

Speech Acts and Social Power in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Sociolinguistics and the Critique of Power

Rotimi's drama offers a nuanced sociolinguistic critique of power. It demonstrates that:

Power is Dialogic: Even the king's most absolute decrees depend on the "uptake" and compliance of his subjects. When the communal uptake withdraws, his speech acts lose felicity.

Authority is Multipolar: Political authority (Odewale) constantly contends with other authoritative discourses—spiritual (Babáláwo), familial (Ojuola’s final revelations), and collective (the Chorus).

Knowledge is Power: The control of information directly influences the success of speech acts. Odewale’s edicts are powerful only while he is ignorant of the truth. The moment Aderopo and Ojuola utter their knowledge, his power crumbles.

The fragility of the Performative: The play exposes the fragility of performatives that lack a stable foundation in truth or collective belief. Odewale’s kingship, built on a misrecognized identity, is ultimately an infelicitous performance

The dominance of directive and assertive speech acts illustrates that *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is a play that is centered on command, obligation, and revelation. In the play, Odewale’s frequent use of speech acts places him as the central voice of power. To corroborate Odewale’s position in the play, Brown and Levinson (1987) note that "Power is often expressed through directness or indirectness in speech acts". This implies that speakers with higher social power tend to utilize direct forms of directives (p. 216). The words of King Odewale are not just mere words but the actions of the people of Kutuje are influenced in the direction of his words because of the authority and power he exercises as a result of his position as the king. The leader and the led-relation between Odewale and the people thus become evident. Holmes (1995) refers to when he notes that “[t]he use of imperatives may reflect a social relationship defined by unequal power” (p. 102).

From the assertive speech act, Ogun Priest (the mouthpiece of the gods) backs up his order with a higher authority (the gods) that must be obeyed according to the custom of the land and also tells the people that he orders the killing of Odewale at birth. This suggests why Dijk (1997) emphasizes that “assertive speech acts are means of exercising social power and control, and also informative” (p. 10).

Despite his authority, Odewale’s speech also becomes a cause of his downfall. His performative authority, manifested through commands, collapses when assertive revelations expose his identity. It is evident in Odewale’s fate and experience that power is challenged and asserted through speech.

The townspeople's responses, expressed through expressive speech acts, reveal suffering, thereby suggesting a horizontal, communal voice beneath the vertical hierarchy of kingship.

Conclusion

Through a sociolinguistic analysis grounded in Speech Act Theory, this article has elucidated the central mechanism of conflict in Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not To Blame*. The tragedy unfolds not merely through actions, but through the performative power of words, decrees, prophecies, curses, accusations, and collective judgments. Rotimi masterfully depicts a society where social power is enacted and contested in the linguistic realm, where to speak is to act, and to act is often to irrevocably alter one's world and the world of others.

The play's enduring resonance lies in this insight: that the "gods" or fate may set the stage, but human beings, through their speech and the social power it carries, enact their own tragedies. The final, speech act *The Gods Are Not To Blame* is a directive to the audience. It transfers the burden of responsibility from the cosmological to the sociopolitical, and urging a critical examination of how power is spoken into being, and how it can be spoken into ruin.

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