Language, Cognition and Tragic Constraint in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*

By

Jacinta Ndidi Okey-Agbo (Ph.D)
Department of Linguistics/Igbo and Other Nigerian Languages
University of Nigeria Nsukka
jacintaokeyagbo@gmail.com

Agatha Obiageli Medolu (Ph.D)
Department of Linguistics/Igbo and Other Nigerian Languages
University of Nigeria Nsukka
agatha.medolu@unn.edu.ng

&

Joy Adaeze Onuoha
Department of Linguistics/Igbo and Other Nigerian Languages
Humanities Unit, School of General Studies.
University of Nigeria,
08035503964
adaeze.onuoha@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper is an application of Teun van Dijk's social-cognitive approach to discourse analysis on a literary work, namely Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*. Considering the world of the text as a social space, the essay traces the origin of the conflict and tragedy in the novel to language in the social mass. The study adopts qualitative research design, using sampling technique. Following the postulation the varying discourses that construct socially shared cognitive representations are replicated in production and comprehension of speech and interactions in general, the essay submits that differences, misunderstandings and consequently conflicts are bred, incensed and consolidated as a result of differences in the discourses the characters are or have been exposed to. The cause of the conflict and tragedy goes beyond the mechanical behaviour of Okolo, as well as the stiff-necked disposition of Chief Izongo and the people. It is concluded here that to understand the tragedy of the novel, one has to understand

how discourse, either by constructing divergent mental representations or by defying single conclusive meaning and then yielding multiple conflicting interpretations, engenders (social) disharmony.

Keywords: language, tragedy, social representation, cognition, model.

1. Introduction

When Nicholas Akwanya speaks of literature as "a site of encounter with language, an (2011:13), the essence of the literary is captured; for in literature, the infinite potentialities of language are made manifest. In literature, we encounter, not just language speaking and performing, to borrow from Heidegger and Barthes, (2001) but also language thematised, problematized and philosophised upon. Such is the quality that Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice* possesses. Any moment one reads it, as an art of language, the workings and presentation of language attract one endlessly. In the novel, language speaks more or less about itself. Part of its attractiveness in this regard is offered by the unusual syntactical structuring, as well as the semantic mapping across languages. To understand the phrase from the novel, "Okolo' s eyes were not right, his head was not correct" (Okara, 1979: 23), one has to take recourse to the meaning system in some Nigerian vernacular, say, Igbo and Ijaw. Beyond these grammatical issues raised by the novel, and other critical observations already made about the novel, there is a fundamental statement the novel makes about language which is yet to be attended to by critical investigations, namely; that language constrains man. Therefore, the thesis of this essay is that the constraint instituted by language results in the tragedy of man. Simply put, language is the cause of the conflict and eventual tragedy of the novel.

To live, as the microcosm presented by the novel shows, is to be enslaved by language. Studies oriented to the communicative function of language understand it as an activity of man, something man uses; but the opposite is actually the case in some sense. Language uses man; man lives in language. This is why Martin Heidegger (2001) writes that "man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man". Like in the master-servant relationship, man does only the bidding of language. Being bespoken by language, he knows reality only as language presents it to him. In other words,

man is a product, a creation of language. In connection with this, Wilhelm von Humboldt has said:

> Man lives with his objects chiefly - in fact, since his feeling and acting depends on his perceptions, one may say exclusively - as language presents them to him. By the same process whereby he spins language out of his own being, he ensnares himself in it; and each language draws a magic circle round the people to which it belongs, a circle from which there is no escape save by stepping out of it into another (qtd in Cassirer, 1946: 9)

Okolo and the rest of the people who inhabited the world of *The Voice* constitute viable subjects of this ensnarement. They are, in two respects, creations of language. Language calls them into being for the first time. They rightly fitted into Heidegger' s description that "language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to words and to appearance" (2001:71). Their emergence, their appearing, is contemporary with the writing. Their world, things and the beings are bid into "worlding" by the naming which language orchestrates. There would never have been any Amatu or Sologa or Okolo save in language. In addition, the entire work is a demonstration of the construction of reality, meaning and attribution, of attitude and all social representations (SRs) as well as individual perceptions or situation models by and through language. To understand the root of the social perception of Okolo and Tuere, the attitude towards them and the one they bear towards their world, the stereotypes, and the misunderstanding that lead to their expulsion, one needs to turn to discourse – language in its truest form. In recognition of this double reliance of the literary on language, Akwanya has posited that "to read the literary work is to encounter language in its specificity as mythic thought perceiving, naming, interpreting, and assigning phenomena a destination" (2005: 148).

Whereas the existence of the "paper beings" is exclusively dependent on language, the practical world may claim certain pre-linguistic realities and what John Searle (1995) has called "language independent institutional facts" which according to him are facts or social realities that require no linguistic element or proof of their existence. Although he argues that language is prior to other institutions and that these institutions presuppose language, he submits that such things as emotions,

sensations, desires and some other animalistic instincts can be experienced independent of language. What he is, however, silent on is the possible place of language in determining, interpreting/comprehending, expressing and producing this category of reality. To recognize experiences that elicit or arouse certain emotions like fear requires mental representations or schemata of those experiences, and such mental models are usually interfaced by a symbolic function which is often language-based. This relates to Jacques Lacan' s (1998:20) famous teaching that "the unconscious is structured like language". In other words, mental representations are somewhat influenced by language. More so, desire often presupposes experience and its mental representation which is equally constructed by the aid of discourse.

The above notwithstanding, the idea of living in (bondage of) language or perceiving realities as language presents them refers to the symbolic function of language as John Searle already hinted at. We may see features or physical properties and objects but they are without essence, empty and meaningless. The meaning we attach to things and what they stand for depend on the symbolic function of language. Language names, in the sense of giving meaning. When Okolo refuses to name but represents his search with "*it*", he has taken, albeit sparingly, from the resources of language while trying not to, because it will delimit the signification, the canvas of what his search stands for. Therein lies the movement of necessity, the tragic dimension of man' s relationship with language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study will pay attention to the social space of the novel and the constitution of their life-world to see the presupposition of language function, its role in the conflict, and the fruitless struggle to circumvent it. It should be noted that the novel in focus has some erroneous grammatical constructions that are constitutive of its creative composition, and are therefore retained as in the original in this study. Let us consider briefly, van Dijk' s social cognition theoretical approach to discourse analysis.

2.1.1 The Social-Cognitive theoretical Approach to Discourse Analysis

This approach to discourse analysis, credited to Teun van Dijk, holds that social structures and discourse have no direct relationship, but are interfaced by cognition. The study of discourse within this orientation, therefore, triangulates among society/culture/situation, cognition and discourse/language. According to him, this is because "social members represent both social structures as well as discourse structures in their minds, and thus are able to relate these mentally before expressing them in actual text and talk" (van Dijk, 2018: 28). For van Dijk, cognitive processes such as thinking, interpreting, understanding etc, operate on what he calls cognitive structures or mental representation which are schematic blocks formed through interpretation of experiences (linguistic or action-oriented), on the mind of individuals. Such representations/ structures include ideologies, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, plans etc. These mental representations cause and control all human interaction and action including language use. So, what individuals do or say is determined by what mental representations they bear.

Van dijk holds that "discourse is of course of primary importance in the expression, communication and reproduction of mental representations" because mental representations are produced and constructed through text and talk (van Dijk 1990:165). What is processed cognitively is what is input through language. So, language becomes the means of input as well as output of social representation. These mental representations may be personal or social. The personal, he calls, mental models or personal cognition while the social, he calls social representations or social cognition.

The personal (mental) models are unique subjective interpretations of discourse and events. According to him, "(situation) models or mental models are cognitive representations of personal experiences and interpretations, including personal knowledge and opinions, and are located in the episodic memory" (1990:166). They are considered individual because they do not follow strictly from popular opinion. It is in this light we can understand "traditional notions such as (possibly different) speaker or hearer meaning of the ' same' discourse, are accounted for by the different personal mental models of the participant language users" (van Dijk 2018: 30). The personal models can be either situation models or a context

models. Van Dijk explains that situation models represent the situation a discourse is about or refers to; hence, they account for the personal meaning or interpretation of discourse and define its meaningfulness and coherence, while "context models ongoingly represent the dynamically changing communicative situation or experience in which language users are ongoingly involved (van Dijk 2015: 67).

Social cognition or social representations on the other hand are the generally shared beliefs, attitudes, ideologies and convictions of a specific group of people or community. Despite the effort to create distinct pictures of personal and social cognitions, van Dijk submits that "our personal experiences are interpreted, and hence construed and represented as mental models, on the basis of these various forms of social cognition. Hence, unique, personal mental models may be more or less similar to those of other members of the same community or group. These crucial features of human cognition allow cooperation, interaction and communication, and hence discourse" (van Dijk 2015: 67).

Although van Dijk prefers not to refer to socio-cognitive discourse studies as a method (2018: 28), it turns out that with all it offers in terms of studying discourse especially the cognitive interface framework, it can serve as an approach to discourse analysis. He has himself applied this approach to locate, within discourse, some underlying racist attitudes and prejudices, stereotypes, persuasion, ideologies, power and domination. In this study therefore, it is attempted to follow this approach to understand how language could cause conflict in a society as a result of the cognitive interface.

2.2 Empirical Review

Related research works carried out in this area of study which include Ashaolu (1979), Foucault (2005), Krisagbedo (2010), yeibo (2011, Eze, (2019), and Metu (2024).

Ashaolu, (1979) does a study on the predicament of the social reformer in Okara' s *The voice* as he casts the gaze on the matter of conflict. The objective of the study is to liken Okolo with Christ. The analysis reveals that Okolo strives for a "society free from corrosive materialism and spiritual degeneracy". Okolo' s unfortunate death becomes a tragic event that brings highlights as the messianic figure out to

combat the forces of evil. Associating the text with the author Gabriel Okara, Ashaolu concludes that "in the novel, Okara succeeds in getting his message across to his readers". (1979:118). Ashaolu (1979) and the present study are related in the sense that both of them anchored on tragedy in Okara' s *The voice*. Their differences is that while Ashaolu (1979) study on the predicament of the social reformer the present study is on language cognition and tragic constraint.

Coucault (2005) investigates the subject of conflict, language, oppression and corruption in Gabriel Okara' s *The voice* in a work titled *The order of things:* An archaeology of the human sciences. The objective of the research is to find out the cause of conflict among the leadership of Amatu. The study draws its data from the text. The analysis shows that the matter of conflict is generated by resource extraction. It observes that corruption among the leadership of Amatu is the fuel of environmental degradation. The eventual drowning of Okolo and Tuere in the river is interpreted from the standpoint of waste aesthetics. The argument is built upon the premise that chief Ọzọngo regards humans as waste, and the river as a waste dump. Tracing the friction between the oppressor as an attempt by the oppressed to recover their humanity, the entire conversation kindled by Mijie and Nwokolo, sets the ground for a line of reflection on the text rooted in conflict. Foucault (2005) and the present study are related in the sense that they talked about language and tragedy in Okara' s *The voice*. Their differences is that while Foucault (2005) studies the subject of conflict, language, oppression and corruption in Okara' s *The voice*, and the present study analyses language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice*.

Krisagbedo (2010) carries out a pragmatic analysis of President Obasanjo' s speeches on corruption in line with Austin' s (1962) speech act theory using felicity condition. The objective of the study is to find out the extent to which President Obasanjo' s speeches on corruption fight during his eight-year tenure conformed to or violated the felicity condition. The data for the research are president Obasanjo' s speeches within his eight-year tenure. The analysis shows that the speeches to a great extent violated the felicity conditions and decreed infelicitous. Krisagbedo (2010) and the current study seem alike, they differ in same areas. This is because Krisagbedo (2010) studies President Obasanjo' s speeches on corruption

fight using speech act theory of Austin (1962) while the current study investigates language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice*.

Yeibo (2011) investigates Gabriel Okara' s *The voice* as social discourse: A lexico-semantic perspective. The objective of the study is to examine Okara' s ability to manipulate linguistic element in conveying the meaning of the text. The study adopts a discourse-stylistic theoretical framework. Discourse analysis lays emphasis on what is communicated in the text whereas stylistic figures out how it is communicated. The analysis shows that *The voice* is a social discourse that depends on "lexical reiteration" and "anaphoric reference" to achieve coherence and cohesion to the ultimate aim that the author' s ambition of communicating meaning is achieved. The deliberate choice of specific words and their subsequent repetition in the narrative is an instance of lexical reiteration that impresses upon the reader the image of the oppressor and oppressed. It further reveals that Okara' s lexicons identifies the oppressed as light, while the oppressor is darkness. Yeibo comes close to Ashaolu' s staunch believe that the author is the voice of the oppressed.

Yeibo (2011) and the present study are related in the sense that they anchored on language in Okara' s *The voice*. Their difference is that while Yeibo (2011) examines lexico-semantic perspective of Okara' s *The voice* as a social discourse, the present study analysis language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice*.

Eze (2019) studies corruption as a discourse topic in Nigeria media political discourse. The objectives of the study are to explore the sincerity of President Buhari' s discourses on corruption fight, determine the socio-pragmatic implications of the action on Nigerians and investigate the type of action taken by the actor in his discourses on corruption fight. The study adopts a qualitative research paradigm in its analysis. The study employs Habermas theory of communicative action in its analysis of data. The finding shows that Buhari' s discourses on corruption fight are insincere. It also reveals that although the socio-pragmatic implications of his action on Nigerians at the onset were hope for the common man and fear for the corrupt Nigerian politicians, the effects were overtaken by the feelings of disappointment on the side of common man and relief on the side of corrupt politicians as the corruption fight became lopsided. Eze

(2019) and the present study are related in the sense that both of them are discourse analysis point at oppressors and the oppressed. Their difference is that while Eze (2019) studies corruption as a discourse topic in Nigerian media political discourse, the present study focuses on language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice*.

Metu (2024) does a research on language and meaning in Okara' s *The voice*. The objective of the study is to examine/identify words and other linguistic units in discourse analysis that are suggestive of the conflict between the oppressor and oppressed. The research draws data from the text. The study reveals that this acute awareness of the contextual usage of words in the text shows that there is a battle of meaning. It further shows that the seeming conflict in the narrative is not just something limited to the actions alone, this linguistic analysis opens up the existence of lexicons that are combative. Metu (2024) and the present study are related in the sense that both of them talked about language in Okara' s *The voice*. Their difference is that while Metu (2024) studies language and meaning in Okara' s *The voice*, the present study analysis language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice*.

2.4 Summary of Literature Review

The related literature is reviewed under the following headings-theoretical framework, empirical studies. The empirical review revealed that no work to the best knowledge of the researcher has been carried out on language, cognition and tragic constraint in Okara' s *The voice.* It is that gap that this study tends to fill.

3. Methodology

This research used a qualitative research design. This research design as defined by Myers (2009) is focused on researching social and cultural phenomena, because it is concerned with understanding people and the social cultural contexts within which they live, why people act the way they act, their attitudes, beliefs, fears and knowledge. The design is suitable since the study is based on language, cognition and tragic constraint of a people. Moreso, the study will make use of content analysis of the text under study and draw some ideas out of it. The author wrote many texts, it would be difficult to study all; therefore, there is need for sampling. The researchers used sampling technique to select representative of Okara' s entire

texts from where data are obtained. Data are collected through excerpts from this text in order to get facts and points useful to the study. Researchers used library work to get broad idea of language, cognition and tragic constraint. Internet sources helped a lot in this research.

The Teun van Dijk' s social-cognitive theoretical approach to discourse analysis was adopted as the framework of the study. This is because mental representations are produced and constructed through text and talk. What is processed cognitively is what is input through language. So, language becomes the means of input as well as output of social representation.

4. Analysis

4.1 The Power of the Spoken Word

The Book of John reveals the creative and illuminating power of language even if metaphorically (see John 1: 1-5). (The dynamics of the illuminating potency of words will be attended to in the last section of this paper. The creative power of language will engage us here). In equating "the Word" with God (the Word rendered in a pious capital that makes it symbolic) and attributing the creation and source of life to it recalls the Judaeo-Christian creation account where creation is by performative speech acts: "let there be"; and that of essence or meaning giving by naming the creatures: "And God called [named] the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Genesis 1: 3 and 5).

Such a case as the one made by Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* in a fit of love; "what' s in a name? That which we call a rose/by any other word would smell as sweet" (2.2.85-6), distances name from essence. The signifying power of words has however engaged Ernst Cassirer who studied it from the mythico-religious point of view. For him, words, when they name, embody the individual or the reality it names. It is not just a symbol but a meaning, an essence. To name in this case is to call into existence an essence, not a material property as such. It is through this power that *The Voice* is created as a display of the language power.

The spoken word which is used here to mean language in general (including discourse) is significantly presented in the novel. "Word" is variously qualified in the story thus; "teaching words", "imprisoned words", "crooked word", "straight

word", "questioning words", "answering words", "words growing inside" thereby drawing attention to its being a significance. Okolo the pronounced victim of language power seems to be the one who understands this power and its consequences the most. That is why he tries to avoid naming. One of the messengers equally shows a little understanding in this regard. While discussing the words of Okolo with his colleague, he confesses that "nobody withstands the power of the spoken word" (Okara, 1979: 94). Even Okolo cannot withstand it for it grows inside of him and bursts out. The over determining position of language in the affairs of men is, therefore, already inaugurated.

More significantly, words construct the social representation that renders Okolo an outsider. We have learnt from van Dijk that "social representations are abstracted from purely personal knowledge and experiences, from personal or context-bound opinions, as well as from unique situations, and have undergone a process of generalization, adaptation and normalization" (1990:166). Chief Izongo' s personal perception of Okolo gets generalized and normalized such that everybody considers Okolo a social misfit. The narrator informs us that "Chief Izongo spoke at the gathering of Elders and the Elders, in their insides, turned these spoken words over and over and looked to see the path they would take to avoid this stinking thing. They turned over the spoken words and sent messengers to Okolo to ask him to cease forthwith his search for *it*" (Okara, 1979: 24). The definition given to Okolo and the prejudice it instils in the people henceforth determine their attitude towards him. Harmless as Okolo is, this mental construct shared by the people spurs them into running to safety whenever he is in sight and compels them to seek a way to get rid of him. The narrator further refers to the influence of Chief Izongo' s words on the people' s perception of Okolo: "◎as he passed, women moved away from his front, vesting bad eyes at him and from dark interiors of houses people looked at him with Chief Izongo' s eyes and behind him walked his friends, walking with Chief Izongo' s feet" (Okara, 1979: 41). Their looking with Izongo' s eyes, and walking with his feet is a pointer to how much his opinion or personal model dominates their mental model; in other words, his personal opinion has achieved generalisation.

On board to Sologa, Okolo meets another manifestation of the potency of words to create a reality that never was; the power to give him a new definition of a

pervert, a paedophile; a situation that lingers so long that it affects even the attitude toward the little girl, Ebiere. Ebiere whom Okolo covers with his raincoat on the boat while it rains is dubbed a bad girl and Okolo is accused of molesting her. Neither the girl' s confession that Okolo did not touch her nor Okolo' s plea for innocence could save the situation. By the proclamation of the mother-in-law, Ebiere becomes a spoilt child. Through discourse, the act of molestation is enacted with Okolo and Ebiere as actors even when they are alien to the act itself. It does not surprise us therefore to hear that the words of Chief Izongo made the people "feel power to even empty the continually flowing river with their bare hands" (Okara, 1979: 100). In the above is not just highlighted the position of Chief Izongo, but also the essential defining potency of language.

The mark of a witch Tuere bears is also attributive to the influencing power of discourse. The narrator puts it succinctly; "she was stuck with the name of witch and was ostracised" (Okara, 1979: 32). Seitu, we are told, is the first person to refer to her by that name, and this perception sells among the people. It is adopted as a generally shared view that leads to her immediate expulsion from the community. Who she is therefore depends on how discourse has presented her. And the attitude towards her is also constructed in the cognition of the people by discourse. In other words, both Seitu and the rest of the people are pawns in the hands of language.

More so, discourse projects and guides their knowledge of witchcraft. Their exposure through discourse to the reality of witchcraft makes the perception of Tuere as a witch possible. Seitu probably sees a correspondence between her mental representation of a witch, the witch schema, built up through text and talk and the events happening around Tuere such as the strange death of her parents and suitors. But such may have been mere coincidence. This is one of the problems with schema activation in humans, for they usually are prejudiced in the case of a schema disrupting event. Humans are wont to "assimilate"- in the sense it is used in Piaget' s developmental psychology - new information. An event that requires schema restructuring is often forced to be an instantiation of an existing one because as David E. Rumelhart and Donald A. Norman observe, restructuring is the most difficult form of learning, comprehension and adjudging (see Rumelhart and Norman, 1976). The people of Amatu instantly see in Tuere an activation of

the witch schema which discourse has constructed in their minds. Jonathan Culpeper already warned that schema which he refers to as "prior knowledge" can lead us astray (2014:57), given that what one sees is in part determined by what one expects to see (2014:65).

The creative power of words anticipates its capacity to engender difference. As it creates what was not, it also constructs different mental representations that are in disharmony with one another.

4.2 Making Other: Models as *Differentiae*

Van Dijk proposes that;

> Subjective mental models [which are also products of discourse] account for the fact that people form their own personal representation of an event, with their own perspective, interests, evaluative emotions, and other elements based on unique personal history or their current subjective experience (2009:6).

This means that within social representation, there are models which are individual interpretations of events/ situations which maybe in variance with the SR, and are also potential candidates for another SR through generalisation and normalization. These models mark the interface between the individual and social dimensions of cognition and interaction. Van Dijk notes further that "models are personal, unique and subjective☺ they are constructed differently as a result of personal aims, knowledge or previous experiences or other aspects of contexts" (2005:59-60); that is to say that there is nothing about it that makes it acceptable. What happens in its evolution into social representation depends on what may be called "politics of knowledge". By this is meant the processes and force factors and agencies involved in selling an opinion or idea, and ensuring its adoption either through cohesion or persuasion. This seems to be the struggle in the novel: two different personal models struggling to attain the status of social representation with Okolo and Chief Izongo as agents; rightly put, as servants. Both are in a contest to determine whose model will become generalised.

What makes Okolo different, a stranger, if not his personal perception of the situation in his society? This perception equally presupposes the kind of discourse

he has been exposed to. The people make conjectures as to the cause of his search: "They said it was the result of his knowing too much book, walking too much in the bush, and others said it was due to his staying too long alone by the river" (Okara, 1979: 32). Discourse is still implicated in these hunches namely in his knowing too much book. For them, text and talk in organised education influenced Okolo' s "odd" attitude to life. We cannot conclude yet. We are told that Okolo began to ask for *it* when he returned from abroad:

> Okolo started his search when he came out of school and returned home to his people. When he returned home to his people, words of the coming thing, rumours of the coming thing, were in the air flying like birds, swimming like fishes in the river. But Okolo did not join them in their joy because what was there was no longer there and things had no more roots. So he started his search for *it*. And this stopped the elders from slapping their thighs in joy because of the coming thing. (Okara, 1979: 23)

Do we then say that his different view of life was constructed through what he was exposed to abroad. Most probably! However, we are not in a hurry to conclude still, bearing in mind that he is not the only one who has gone abroad to study. Chief Abadi too has a PhD from a University abroad and has been to many countries (Okara, 1979: 43-4); but his mental representation agrees with what is socially shared. Although this is a possible influence, there seems to be a more fundamental discourse that constructs Okolo' s model. This is why we have to go back to the time before he left; the time of his father.

The narrator reveals that Okolo continually recalls his father' s words, and there we locate the words that make him different. The rest of the people probably were not exposed to these special words of counsel from Okolo' s father and are alien to its guide.

> Then he remembered his father' s spoken words when he was dying: ' I could have been a big rich man be,' his father had whispered with his last voice, holding Okolo' s hand, ' if the straight thing I had not spoken, if the straight thing I had not done. But I have a sweet inside and clean as the eye of the sky. The world is changing and engine canoes and Whiteman' s houses have

> everybody' s inside filled. But open your ears and listen, son. Let the words I am going to speak remain in your inside. I wanted you to know book because of the changing world. But Whiteman' s book is not everything. Now listen, son, believe in what you believe. Argue with no one about Whiteman' s god and Woyengi, our goddess. What your inside tells you to believe, you believe and, always the straight thing do and straight thing talk and your spoken words will have power and you will live in this world even when you are dead. So do not anything fear if it is the straight thing you are doing or talking. (Okara, 1979: 105-6)

Okolo is therefore left a slave of this discourse which is in polar stance with the social representation dominant in his time. There is certainly no genealogical or biological constitution of Okolo that sets him apart from the rest of the people. He is a bona fide member of the community but for his model. How he perceives the ' happening-things' in his world differs with how others do, all owed to his father' s words. He is bent on not only living these words, but protecting them and ensuring they never leave his consciousness. He equally wants to propagate the consciousness - that of always doing the straight thing.

Whereas Okolo thinks the situation demands urgent action, some others who admit that all is not well think that there is need to either wait and speak later when the time is right or stay silent. In fact, there are four major models of the situation namely; those who see nothing wrong with it and promote the policies of Chief Izongo. The second group are those who feel that something is wrong but nothing can ever be done about it. Tebeowesi for instance shares this model. He tells Okolo: "I see in my inside that your spoken words are true and straight. But you see it in your inside that we have no power to do anything" (Okara, 1979: 49). While he thinks that the heap of dirt in the land is more than one man' s strength, Okolo insists that he has to start clearing, at least by basketful (Okara, 1979:50). The third model is possessed by those who think that the time is not ripe to speak up. They agree with Okolo that there is something amiss but they disagree with him on the cause of action and timing. Ukule, the cripple and Tiri, the messenger have this model. Tuere has this understanding until Okolo' s rhetoric persuades her to reconstruct hers to agree with Okolo' s whose model is the fourth. For them,

the time is now. These models of the state of the community lead to disagreement. Those who occupy extreme positions constitute major rivals. This is why Okolo and Tuere' s model cannot exist alongside Chief Izongo' s. The more powerful of the two models become the social model while the other is deemed alien and deserving of expulsion.

The dynamics of model as a basis of difference is further played out in the boat experience. We understand the mother-in-law' s accusation as an event enabled by language. However, the event is perceived differently by the people in the boat. While the Whiteman' s cook prominently sees the situation as one that requires neither denial nor explanation from Okolo, the engine man on the contrary thinks that Okolo has the right to defend himself. The Whiteman' s cook immediately, without questioning, accepts the accusation as true and goes ahead to insinuate that Okolo is notorious, and had done similar things. The engine man on the other hand considers the situation worthy of further investigation before conclusion can be reached. Addressing the cook, he says: "you, that man, why allow him not to speak ◎this woman is putting a happened-or-not thing on his head. Let us hear him. I do not like how you his mouth want to close" (Okara, 1979:67). For him therefore, Okolo is a mere suspect. The ' happened-or -not thing' means that the accusation can be either true or false; hence Okolo ought to be given a fair hearing. As a result of this different models constructed of the situation in the minds of the engine man and the Whiteman' s cook, disagreement is bred between the two participants and consequently conflict spread through the boat, one that was going to cost the lives of the people on-board but for the intervention of Okolo.

The third messenger refuses to have a superstitious interpretation of the incident of hitting a foot on a stone owing to his unique discourse experience. The other two insists that there is significance to such incident but he differs with them. Difference in the discourse they have experienced is accountable for this divergence in views. While the other two rely on the traditional socialization they received, the third messenger speaks from his experience of advanced education. The first messenger accurately observes that "he speaks this way because he passed standard six. Because he passed standard six his ears refuseth nothing, his inside refuseth nothing like a dustbin" (Okara, 1979: 24). The implication is that the education, through the instrumentality of language, the third messenger

received has made him more open to new ideas and he has become more accommodating than them. The unique exposure language offers helps one to create personal models and makes one different. This model forms what the narrator calls "the meaning of life" for an individual. And as the narrator submits; humans "can' t one meaning of life have. Each man to one meaning of life; each woman to one meaning of life◎yes, each one has a meaning of life to himself. And that is perhaps the root of the conflict" (Okara, 1979: 111). Here, our thesis is justified. The meaning of life makes for difference, and for community to be possible, there must be a common meaning of life. Conflict is therefore bred because there can' t be one. Language is implicated here because each person' s meaning of life is (in)formed by discourse.

The implication of this in our analysis is that language in the form of discourse has shaped the understanding of the members of the community in certain lights that at every point in time, events and utterances are understood differently and agreement is sometimes impossible. They not only perceive things differently but reproduce this perception differently in their interactions with others thereby inciting hate. "Although," writes van Dijk, "in most forms of discourse between members of the same community mental models will be sufficiently similar to guarantee successful communication, it should be stressed that mental models necessarily embody personal elements that make all discourse productions and interpretations unique – and hence misunderstanding possible – even when they have many, socially shared, elements" (2005:60). What is more, as language engenders certain social conflicts and disagreement, it has an internal tension within itself that leads to further complications and conflict in human relationship. We may call it the ambiguity in language.

4.3 The Clearing and Concealing Tension

Language, not only in literature, has the double destiny of clearing and concealing. It has the capacity to illuminate, and this light sometimes cast shadows on sense and meaning. In using language, humans hope to express or represent thoughts, emotions, and other cognitive contents. But language has the ability to frustrate this effort by obstructing meaning, and consequently understanding. This has nothing to do with incompetence in language use of participants or use of different language/dialect. Of course, language differences pose a different challenge to

understanding. A recent study by Joshua Conrad Jackson and Johann-Mattis List concludes that emotional terms vary widely in their meaning from language to language. (See Matacic, 2019) By this they mean that the semantic contents of words that may be regarded as substitutes among languages vary widely. As such, what is to be construed, or the conceptual picture when a word like "love" is used in different languages differ. That not being of much interest here, we return to the duplicity within a language which has also been observed by Ernst Cassirer while talking about mental deception. According to him, the deception "is rooted in language, which is forever making game of the human mind, ever ensnaring it in that iridescent play of meanings that is its own heritage" (1946:6). Needless to say therefore, it is in the nature of language to distort the sense encoded while functioning as medium.

When humans acknowledge language as the system designed to assist cognitive processes, in terms of input and output, they inadvertently subject themselves to the snare of language. Handicapped in trying to express or describe something, humans often say, ' wait, there is a word for it' and try to think it up, hoping that a mere word saves the situation. By this very reality, they not only subscribe to but prove the fact that they cannot effectively represent or express their cognitive contents outside language. Hence, humans are perpetually under the manipulation of language. The assurance with which humans resort to language is often disappointed still, for language does not always represent, in the sense of embodying reality in its entirety. When Okolo chooses to represent his search with ' it' he assumes that what he pursues has been adequately captured without alteration or adulteration. But he plunges his search into mystery with that. A more common instance is when humans use a word as innocent as "home." They think little of how much of the reality of home is embodied in that word. The word itself while not adequately encompassing the reality of home, and including an avalanche of miscellaneous ideas of what home may comprehend, also equally tries to cram these realities into that single word. This reductionism which is understood in literature as encapsulation of meaning leaves language dense, with the capacity to generate meaning endlessly.

Akwanya (2005) on the contrary posits that language, as representation, comprehends human experience in its entirety; it underlies and accompanies his

experiences. Even when this is more or less a sweeping generalization, we can understand that his position is founded on the grounds of a distinction between expressionist and representational function of language which is to say that language is both communicative and symbolic. When language is meant to express, that is, communicative, according to him, limitation attends it. When language is symbolic, it takes up that effacing character; meaning becomes disseminated. In Akwanya' s own word, language as representation is "protean and difficult to fix" (2005:75). This goes to say that even this understanding of language leaves it with that duplicity that attends it when it is communicative. In this case, meaning will not reside in the word but is construed. The dialogue between Okolo and Tebeowesi raises a curious issue about language in this regard:

> ' The chair you are sitting on now is made of Abura, a cheap soft wood. Not so?
> ' Yes.'
> ' Well, what will you call a person who says it is made of Iroko?'
> ' Perhaps he does not know'
> ' I mean a person who knows Abura and Iroko. What will you call him?
> ' A person who speaks not the straight thing.' (Okara, 1979: 49)

The need to repeat the question and make effort to render the question clearer implicates the question of meaning construction. As held in cognitive semantics, the meaning of what Okolo asked is in his head and not really in the words. This necessitates further effort to clarify with the appendage, "I mean". Knowledge of reality is also hinted at in "perhaps he does not know" as constitutive of meaning-making thereby consolidating the inefficiency of language to represent cognitive content.

In literature, in particular, language is most dubious, for while it first brings beings into openness, it conceals them by presenting them in ways we can hardly relate to them. This is what Formalist critics refer to as "defamiliarization". Realities are presented by language in literature as they are not, in our world; hence the word ' fiction' , a making, a lie. Language poses before us an impossible state as that of Okolo: "he was now between sleeping and waking, thinking and not-thinking, floating between sky and earth" (Okara, 1979:39). This description of Okolo' s state is momentous. It is difficult to relate with a state where one is thinking and not

thinking at the same time, to be at the point, if there is any, between waking and sleeping. It is more outrageous to think of human floating between sky and earth while lying down in bounds. Apart from making comprehension difficult, the lines "break the logical laws of non-contradiction and of the excluded middle" (Semino, 2014: 60). Such is the characterising feature of an impossible world within the possible world theory, although these theorists are aware that literature makes possible such impossibilities. What language does in literature is to play with the human mind. When words in literature take up this kind of unaccustomed function, such as the "twin flames◎ danced" (Okara, 1979: 33), one would want to understand that irregularity by bringing up metaphoricity which is a figural use of language. Language as we learn from Paul Ricouer is primitively metaphorical; hence it has always left man in a haze of meanings. The problem posed here therefore is how to know when to understand an utterance literally and when it is metaphorical in which case meaning becomes endless.

This is what Okolo does not consider when he chooses to render his search as the search for "it". "It" here is, as a consequence, laden with multiple meanings and can be said to be metaphorical. Okolo in doing that tries to avoid the duplicity and division language brings to reality. The narrator wonders; "what is he himself trying to reach? For him it has no name. Names bring divisions and divisions, strife. So let it be without a name; let it be nameless◎." (Okara, 1979: 112). His entrapment in language lies in his resorting to language to borrow ' it' to represent the nameless. Although a name for his search, "it" leaves the object of his search distanced from the people. He could neither live in language nor escape it. But because he does not live in language according to the established way, he becomes an outsider, and then an enemy of the community, deserving of expulsion.

5. Conclusion

The tragedy of Okolo and – considering that his death is a loss to the community – the community points back to the fundamental factor in human relation namely, language. Language created the world of the text and it constructed the cognitive structures of the people. These structures, owing to that basic factor of its building, make for different views and understanding. Consequently, misunderstanding and conflict is bred. Language, or properly discourse, is therefore a major factor influencing conflict. van Dijik social cognitive theoretical approach to discourse

analysis is suitable for this study. According to him, mental representation cause and control all human interaction and action including language use. So, what individuals do or say is determined by what mental representation they bear. The approach helped us to know how language has caused conflict in a society as a result of the cognitive interface. In the case of the novel studied here, the constraint instituted by language accounts for its tragic vision. Discourse, social (and personal) cognition and conflict definitely have an intricate relationship that must be unravelled to successfully deal with the latter.

Works Cited

Akwanya, Amechi Nicholas (2011) *Verbal Structures: Studies in the Nature and Organisational Patterns of Literary Language.* Enugu: New Generation Books.

Akwanya, Amechi Nicholas. (2005) *Language and Habits of Thought*. Enugu: New Generation Books.

Ashaolu, Albert (1979).A Voice in the Wilderness: The Predicament of the Social Reformer in Okara' s The Voice. *The International Fiction Review,* 6(2). 111-117.

Baridisi Isaac et al (2021) Language and Morality: An Analysis of Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice*. *Journal of English Language Teaching,* 8(2). 428-433

Cassirer, Ernst (1946) *Language and Myth*. New York: Dover Publications.

Culpeper, Jonathan (2014) *Language and Characterisation*. New York: Routledge.

Eze, J.U. (2019). Corruption as a discourse topic in Nigerian media political discourse: A communicative action perspective. M.A. Thesis, department of linguistics, university of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Foucault, Michel. (2005) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge Classics

Good News Bible

Heidegger, Martin (2001) *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Happer Collins.

Krisagbedo, C.E. (2010). Speech act analysis of former president Obasanjo' s speeches on corruption. M.A. Thesis, department of English and literary studies, university of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Krishanthi Anandawansa and Ranjan Hettiarachchi (2015) Language and ideology in the fiction of Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice* and V.S. Naipaul' s *A House For Mr. Biswas*.

Lacan, Jacques (1998) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Matacic, Catherine (2019) "What is Love? It Depends on what Language you Speak", *Science* https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/12/what-love-it-depends-which-language-you-speak

Metu, Ignatius. (2024) Language and Meaning in Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice*. *Nigerian Journal of African Studies*, 6(1), 47-52.

Myers, M.D. (2009). *Qualitative research in business and management.* London: Sage Publications.

Ntanga, Gustin (2021) Character archetypes in Literature, a picture of what exists elsewhere: A Study of Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice*. *International Journal of Innovation and Applied Studies*, 34(3), 643-656

Okara, Gabriel (1979) *The Voice*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Omijie Othniel and Cynthia Nwokolo (2023) Corruption and Environmental Pollution: A Critique of Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 48-53. Doi:10.22161/ijels

Rumelhart, E David and Donald A Norman (1976.) *Accretion, Tuning and Restructuring: Three Modes of Learning.* Report, Center for Human Information Processing University of California, San Diego.

Searle, R John (1995) *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: Free Press.

Semino, Elena (2014) *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*. New York: Routledge,

Shakespeare, William (1965) *Romeo and Juliet*. Harlow: Longman.

Van Dijk A Teun (2008) *Discourse and Context: A Sociocognitive Approach*. New York: Cambridge UP.

Van Dijk, A Teun (2015) "CDS: A Sociocognitive Approach" in Ruth Wodak and Micheal Meyer (eds) *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies.* Sage Publications, pp. 63-85

Van Dijk, A Teun (2018) "Socio-Cognitive Discourse Studies" in John Flowerdew and John E. Richardson (eds). *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*. Routledge, pp. 26-43

Van Dijk, A Teun (1990) "Social Cognition and Discourse". In: Giles H and Robinson WP (eds) *Handbook of Language and Social Psychology.* John Willey & Sons Ltd, pp. 163-183

Van Dijk, A Teun (2009) *Society and Discourse*, New York: Cambridge UP.

Yeibo, Ebi. (2011) Gabriel Okara' s *The Voice* as Social Discourse: A Lexico-Semantic Perspective. *International Journal of English Linguistics,* 1(2). 213-221.