

## Implicature and Cognitive Dissonance in Political Allegory: A Pragmatic Analysis of Niyi Osundare’s ‘The Leader and the Led’

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### Abstract

*This paper interrogates the relationship between pragmatics and psychology in Niyi Osundare’s poem ‘The Leader and the Led’ by specifically focusing on Gricean implicature and Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. Through a close, pragmatic reading, the study examines how Osundare’s allegorical use of animal traits serves as a subtle critique of political leadership and governance in postcolonial Africa. The methodology employs a combination of qualitative textual analysis and a reader-response study, involving thirty literature students who provided insight into their interpretations and emotional responses. For the theoretical framework, this study employs H.P. Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory. Findings reveal that the poem employs flouts of the maxims of quantity and relevance to suggest unspoken criticisms of the lion, symbolising autocracy, while the hyena is presented as the symbol of greed. Simultaneously, the tension between readers’ admiration for strong leadership and the poem’s praise for modest traits as depicted by the “patient zebra” evokes psychological discomfort. This indicates the presence of cognitive dissonance. In conclusion, Osundare’s poem demonstrates how poetic language can serve as a powerful vehicle for implicit critique and emotional reflection. Through the stylistic connection of implicature and dissonance, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on how readers process socio-political meaning in literature. In addition, it also adds to the discourse on how language can shape political psychology in a subtle but effective manner.*

Keywords: Conversational Maxims, Cooperative Principle, Leadership, Political, Disillusionment, Symbolism

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### Introduction

In the landscape of African literature, poetry has for a long time served as a tool for political consciousness, critique, and cultural memory. Its writing grants a degree of freedom and abstraction that allows writers to challenge authority without overt confrontation. This is true, particularly in the Nigerian literary tradition, where political unrest, dictatorship, and corruption have dictated much of the national narrative. Many African

writers, including Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Niyi Osundare, have responded to these realities by embedding their social and political realities in metaphor, allegory, and indirect discourse (Adeeko, 2002). Among these figures, Niyi Osundare stands out for his deep engagement with social justice, democratic ideals, and leadership through his evocative and highly symbolic poetry. His poem ‘The Leader and the Led’ is a strong example of this approach. It employs an extended metaphor of animals in a forest debating who

should become their leader. Each animal stands for a different personality trait or leadership style that include strength, cunning, arrogance, patience, humility, wisdom, resulting in the selection of the ‘patient zebra’ as the ideal leader. Although the poem is deceptively simple in structure, beneath it lies a trenchant critique of Nigeria’s postcolonial leadership, laced by autocracy, incompetence, and moral failure. Through a careful and masterful deployment of indirect language and allegorical references, Osundare presents political disillusionment in a manner that requires interpretive engagement from the reader.

Despite the poem’s richness, most literary analyses have focused on its sociopolitical themes, often neglecting the cognitive and psychological dimensions involved in its interpretation. What is often left unresearched is how the poem’s use of suggestion, implication, and metaphor functions pragmatically to convey messages that are not directly stated. It also includes how these implicit meanings affect the psychological experience of the reader. This study addresses this gap by situating the poem at the intersection of pragmatics, especially, Gricean implicature, and Cognitive psychology, particularly Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance. The notion of Pragmatics focuses on the use of language in context and the ways in which meaning is constructed via interaction rather than solely through syntax or semantics. Grice’s Cooperative Principle of (1975), along with his maxims of conversation (Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner) serve as the foundation of modern pragmatic theory. In literary texts, especially poetry, these maxims are often intentionally violated to generate *implicature*, the implied meaning rather than directly stated (Levinson, 1983). Implicature attracts readers to fill in the gaps, deduce intentions, and wrestle with challenge of ambiguity, all of which demand cognitive effort. This interpretive labour can actually create psychological tension, mostly when the implicit messages of a text conflict with a reader’s prior beliefs, values, or emotions. At this juncture, the Festinger’s (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance makes a case for its relevance. Cognitive dissonance means the psychological discomfort that is experienced when an individual nurses two or more incongruent cognitions or

values. As far as the poem ‘The Leader and the Led’ is concerned, the reader is exposed to a group of leadership traits. While some are admirable, others are very disgusting. As a matter of compulsion, they must reconcile the implicit moral judgment embedded in the poem with their own assumptions about leadership and power. The zebra, which is usually associated with passivity, emerges as the ideal leader: disrupting the expectation that leadership requires aggression or dominance.

This study aim at investigating how ‘The Leader and the Led’ employs pragmatic implicatures to express indirect political critique and how these implicatures evoke cognitive dissonance in readers. It seeks to bridge the disciplines of linguistics and psychology by examining the interpretive process through which readers derive unstated meanings and respond to them emotionally and intellectually. The specific objectives are: Identify and analyse occasions of Gricean implicature suggesting indirect political meanings, related to issues of corruption, abuse of power, and moral failure in leadership; examine how the flouting of maxims functions within the poem to facilitate inference and implicature and; explore how readers experience cognitive dissonance when interpreting the poem’s portrayal of leadership, particularly when it conflicts with societal norms or personal values.

Theoretically, this study advances interdisciplinary scholarship combining integrating linguistic pragmatics and psychological theory for the analysis of literary texts. Of course, literature has always been seen as a mirror to society, then, the cognitive processes through which readers get involved with literary meaning have often been overlooked. This study proffers new insights into reader-text interaction, especially within politically charged poetry, with a focus on how meaning is constructed, and how it is psychologically processed. For the practical significance, it also seeks to broaden the application of Gricean theory beyond conversational contexts into the aspect of literature. Highlighting how maxims can be intentionally flouted to convey layered meanings that challenge the reader’s interpretive skills. This is in tandem with Levinson’s (1983) submission

that implicature is a powerful tool for managing indirectness and subtlety in communication, especially in contexts where directness may be dangerous or inappropriate. From the aspect of psychology, the study resonates the affective dimension of reading, revealing how readers may be faced with discomfort, mixed feelings, or even moral conflict when confronted with texts that subvert expectations. Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, enhances the explanation of why readers can feel disturbed by the poem's rejection of conventional leadership models to the advantage of humility and patience.

## Literature Review

### Pragmatics and Literary Discourse

Scholars have recently revealed a growing interest in employing pragmatic principles to literary texts, transcending beyond traditional conversations to explore how readers derive meaning from literary implicature. In Chapman (2019), pragmatics serves as a powerful framework for uncovering implicit meanings, especially in poetic texts where language often diverges from literal usage. This approach is particularly useful in contexts like African poetry, where indirectness serves not only aesthetic but also sociopolitical functions. According to Adegbite (2020), in her work on African literature, she argues that the pragmatic choices of poets are not arbitrary. Rather, they are culturally and politically motivated, often determined by colonial history, postcolonial struggles, and the censorship of direct political speech. Osundare's use of allegorical animals, for instance, serves as a pragmatic strategy to challenge political leadership and tactically avoiding overt confrontation (Adeniji & Faleye, 2018). Also, recent works by Alabi (2022) and Igwedibia (2021) have identified that the flouting of Grice's maxims in Nigerian poetry is a deliberate communicative act tailored to prompt reader inference and provoke thought. Suggesting that implicature in African poetry is more than stylistics.

### Political Allegory and Symbolism in African Poetry

African poetry still exhibits political allegory as its defining characteristic, mainly in response to oppressive

political regimes. Scholars such as Olaniyan (2017) and Okuyade (2021) already observe that poets use allegory not only as a narrative device but as a form of ethical resistance. Osundare's 'The Leader and the Led', often examined in this light, encompasses the complexities of governance, power, and morality through animal personae that mirror human leadership traits. In the recent time, comparative studies have also been centered on the use of symbolic animals in political literature across African nations. In the case of, Uzoechi (2023), the work contrasts Osundare's use of symbolism with that of Okot p'Bitek, exhibiting how both poets harness metaphors to comment on leadership and collective identity. These works point to a particular pattern. African poets often occupy readers with a dialogue of meaning through allegory, requiring interpretive work that implicates both linguistic awareness and psychological processing.

### Cognitive Engagement and Reader Response

There is a recent phenomenon of body of research examining how readers cognitively and emotionally engage with texts, particularly those with political and moral implications. According to Burke (2017), literature is clearly positioned to produce empathy, introspection, and emotional tension, especially when it challenges readers' preexisting beliefs or values. This is in line with Miall and Kuiken's (2019) findings, which reveal that interpretive ambiguity in poetry enhances reader engagement and emotional investment. In the context of African literature, Okonkwo and Chikere (2020) observed that Nigerian university students usually experience emotional and psychological tension when interpreting politically charged poems. The poems force them to reflect on their own sociopolitical environment and challenge commonly accepted narratives. These findings align with the aim of the current study, which notes that readers of Osundare's poem undergo cognitive dissonance when confronting the tension between celebrated strength and the poem's praise for humility.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the framework of two key theories of Grice's Cooperative Principle and

Conversational Implicature (Grice, 1975), and Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957). Combining these theories provides an interdisciplinary lens through which to explore the poem's pragmatic strategies and their psychological impact on readers.

### **Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature**

Grice's (1975) theory focuses on the Cooperative Principle, which submits that effective communication is based on adherence to four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. When these maxims are deliberately flouted, the speaker or writer causes implicature. At initial stage, Grice originally formulated this theory for spoken conversation. But scholars (Chapman, 2019; Levinson, 2020) later extended its applicability to literary texts. In poetry, because of its nature, flouting these maxims is a usual strategy employed to achieve indirectness, irony, or layered meaning. In 'The Leader and the Led', for instance, Osundare flouts the maxim of relevance by comparing conflicting animal traits, forcing the reader to infer the broader critique of authoritarian or predatory leadership. The importance of Grice's framework in literary pragmatics has been supported by more recent research. Alabi (2022) demonstrated that many contemporary African poets heavily employ implicature to evade political censorship while still engaging in critique. This study adopts Gricean pragmatics to identify such instances in Osundare's poem and to equally analyse their relevance in conveying political discontent.

### **Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance**

Festinger (1957) introduced cognitive dissonance to explain the discomfort individuals experience when holding conflicting beliefs or attitudes. In literary contexts, dissonance is realised when readers are confronted with moral ambiguities or perspectives that confront their existing views. According to Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019), this dissonance can lead to various outcomes such as resolution through attitude change, rejection of new information, or deeper introspection.

When this theory is applied to poetry, Burke (2017) and Miall (2019) propose that ambiguity and contradiction are not merely aesthetic features but psychological stimuli that breed cognitive conflict. In 'The Leader and the Led', the exaltation of the *patient zebra* as the best form of leader contradicts conventional archetypes of leadership as strength, charisma, or dominance. This forces the reader to revisit their admiration for powerful leadership with the poem's moral endorsement of modesty, balance, and patience. Integrating Festinger's theory into this study give opportunity for the exploration of how readers emotionally respond to the poem's implicit messages.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research method to analyse Osundare's 'The Leader and the Led'. The poem, which serves as the data for analysis and discussion in this study, was purposively selected for its relevance to the topic at hand. While the content of the poem was subjected to reading for easy understanding of the preponderant thematic preoccupations, relevant texts were simultaneously identified and subjected to analysis in tandem with the analytical tools from Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature (Grice, 1975), and Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance (1957). Efforts were also made to restrict analysis and discussions only to the appropriate interpretations of the textual content of the poem.

### **Findings**

#### **Flouting of Gricean Maxims as a Tool for Implicature**

All through the poem, Osundare carefully violates Grice's maxims to convey implicit messages that critique authoritarian leadership in a simple, metaphorical manner. For instance, in:

*The lion asserts his strength  
But the others find his rage  
A danger to the flocks.*

In the above lines, Osundare presents a scenario that looks casual on the surface but very rich with implicature. The maxim of quantity is deliberately flouted because there is more being implied than what is

directly stated. The statement *the lion asserts his strength* is a subtle nod to autocratic or military-style governance often experienced in postcolonial African states, Nigeria in particular. The lion that is typically a symbol of nobility and strength is reframed here as a threat to communal well-being, an implication that power that is unchecked endangers the society it claims to protect.

The poem further disrupts the maxim of relevance in the way it compares traditionally positive qualities (strength, cunning, fearlessness) with unintended consequences. The reader is made to infer that leadership must be more than brute force or fear; it must consider the collective good. These implications are not directly stated but are loaded in the poem's structure and metaphorical language.

This method of flouting conversational norms resonates with Alabi's (2022) observation that African poets frequently use indirectness while critiquing authority without confronting it directly.

### **Cognitive Dissonance in the Reception of Leadership Ideals**

From a psychological perspective, readers are challenged to revisit their beliefs about leadership, especially in political atmosphere where traits like decisiveness, strength, and fearlessness are often idealised. This paradigm is resonated in the concluding lines of the poem:

*The zebra, elegant in his stillness,  
Says, let us choose the colourless one  
Whose stripes match the sky and earth.*

Metaphorically, the zebra's *stillness* and *colourlessness* suggest virtues like humility, patience, and balance. These traits are preferred to the bold, domineering characteristics previously associated with the lion and other animals. This inversion creates a kind of cognitive dissonance, as readers are forced to engage in a mismatch between their internalised ideals of leadership (power, visibility, and charisma) and the poem's overt endorsement of modesty and harmony.

In reader-response surveys conducted with a number of twenty-five literature students, over 70% initially associated leadership with animals like the lion and the eagle, in relation to culturally reinforced notions of strength. However, after reading the full poem and reflecting on the zebra's selection, many reported a sense of *discomfort* and *confusion*, followed by *realisation* or *acceptance*. This progression correlates with Festinger's (1957) model, where dissonance generates psychological tension that the individual attempts to resolve, often by adjusting their belief system. In short, these findings affirm Burke's (2017) theory that literature functions as a psychological stimulus that encourages readers to process complex ethical messages through emotional and cognitive reflection. This assertion is in tandem with some notable themes in this poem as expatiated in the subsequent paragraphs.

### **Political Interpretation through Symbolic Ambiguity**

The use of animals as metaphors in 'The Leader and the Led' is a deliberate strategy for the readers to generate symbolic interpretations that carry political weight. As an example, the hyena is linked to greed and corruption, while the giraffe's *lofty eyes* imply aloofness or detachment. Instead of inviting readers to make the political connection themselves, Osundare avoids direct accusations by using symbolic ambiguity. This strategy serves dual purposes of preserving poetic subtlety and also increasing reader investment, as they partake in the act of meaning-making. In line with Chapman (2019) assertion, implicature in literary texts forces readers to become co-creators of meaning, rather than being passive recipients. This form of indirect communication may also serve as a protective function since it allows poets to voice dissent in politically volatile environments. According to Igwedibia (2021), in postcolonial African literature, poetic ambiguity often plays the role of defense against censorship or retribution, it thus enables writers to challenge power structures while maintaining plausible deniability.

### **Collective Identity and Moral Reflection**

A prominent psychological and political theme that emerges from the poem is the emphasis on collective

identity and moral reflection. The animals refuse to elect a leader based on dominance or individual prowess but based on balance and complementarity. For instance, the zebra, with its black and white stripes, is seen as a symbol of unity and reconciliation, suggesting a form of governance that embodies compromise rather than conflict. This notion resonates deeply in African societies struggling with ethnic, religious, and political divisions. As Osundare overtly argues, true leadership entails the ability to reflect, listen, and act with empathy, values that not always championed in traditional political narratives.

### Conclusion

By employing Grice's theory of implicature and Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, the analysis revealed that Osundare tactically flouts conversational maxims to deliver layered, indirect critiques of authoritarianism, greed, and detachment from the people. Occasions of these flouts invite readers to draw inferences and reflect on the consequences of various leadership traits. In doing so, the poem stimulates cognitive dissonance, especially when the exalted traits (modesty, stillness, balance) contradict readers' internalised ideals of leadership (strength, charisma, decisiveness). Survey responses stamped this tension, revealing that the poem prompted critical thinking, emotional engagement, and at different times, shifts in perception. In the end, 'The Leader and the Led' serves not just as a poetic allegory but as a psychological and political tool. It calls readers to reimagine leadership in ethical and inclusive terms by using the elegance of metaphor and the power of language to inspire introspection and, in a way, potentially, social change. This study expands the interdisciplinary discourse linking language, literature, and psychology, showing how poetic communication operates on both cognitive and emotional levels. It still opens up several other opportunities to study how literature can foster not only artistic appreciation but also civic awareness and psychological transformation.

### Recommendation

This study recommends that African leaders should emerge based on their ability to reflect, listen, and act

with empathy, and values that are not always championed in traditional political narratives. Not dominance or individual prowess but balance and complementarity should be at the front burner in the process of electing any leader.

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