

Activity Type and Pragmemic Conflict in Three Selected African Plays

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Abstract

This study examines how conflict in African dramatic discourse is structured through context-bound pragmatic configurations. While African drama has been extensively analysed from thematic and sociopolitical perspectives, relatively limited attention has been paid to how conflict is organised as situated pragmatic action within recognisable activity types. Drawing on Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory, particularly the concepts of *pragmeme* and *activity type*, the study analyses selected dialogues from Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit*, and Akeem Ajibade's *The Thinking Head*. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study identifies recurrent *pragmemes* that emerge within activity types such as political mobilisation, militant resistance, communal negotiation and generational contestation. The findings demonstrate that conflict is not merely a thematic construct but a contextually regulated interactional process shaped by sociocultural norms, participant roles and ideological positioning. The paper argues that activity type functions as a structuring mechanism that constrains and enables specific *pragmemic* realisations, thereby organising dramatic conflict as socially meaningful action. The study contributes to pragmatics and African literary studies by foregrounding activity type as a crucial analytical bridge between linguistic configuration and thematic construction in dramatic discourse.

Key words: Pragmatic Acts Theory, activity type, *pragmeme*, conflict, African drama, discourse

Introduction

Conflict is central to African drama, serving as both a narrative engine and a lens for

examining social, political, and cultural tensions. From precolonial ritual performances to postcolonial political

theatre, African playwrights have consistently employed confrontation to interrogate identity, power, ideology, and community norms. Critical scholarship on African drama has largely emphasised thematic, historical, and ideological perspectives, exploring nationalism, postcolonial identity, gender dynamics, and socio-economic inequality (Gikandi, 2000). While these studies have provided valuable insights, they often treat conflict primarily as a thematic construct rather than a pragmatically organised interactional process.

This study shifts the focus from thematic interpretation to pragmatic structuring, investigating how conflict in African plays emerges as context-bound pragmatic action within recognisable activity types. Conflict is conceptualised not as mere disagreement or narrative tension but as sequences of pragmatic moves: accusation, resistance, negotiation, and self-assertion, activated within socially and institutionally defined interactional frames.

Drawing on Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory (2001), particularly the notions of pragmemes and activity types, this study analyses selected dialogues from Akeem Ajibade's *The Thinking Head* (2010), Ahmed

Yerima's *Hard Ground* (2006), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *The Black Hermit* (1968). These plays were selected for their rich deployment of conflict across varied sociocultural, political, and domestic contexts. The study argues that activity type functions as a regulatory mechanism, constraining and enabling the pragmatic realisation of conflict, and thus organising it as socially meaningful interaction.

Theoretical Framework

Pragmatic Acts Theory

Mey's (2001) Pragmatic Acts Theory offers a context-sensitive alternative to classical speech act theory. Unlike traditional approaches that focus on speaker intention or illocutionary force, Pragmatic Acts Theory emphasises socially situated action. Meaning is not contained in linguistic form alone but emerges through interaction within structured activity types.

The pragmeme is the central unit of analysis, a generalised, socially recognised pragmatic act that is instantiated in context-specific practs and diversified as allopracts. While the pragmeme is abstract, the pract is the actual utterance realised in a situation, and allopracts are the variations conditioned by

participant roles, power relations, emotional intensity, and institutional norms.

Activity Type

An activity type is a socially recognised communicative frame within which pragmatic actions are organised and interpreted (Mey, 2001; Verschueren, 1999). Examples include political negotiation, ritual confrontation, familial instruction, or marital mediation. Each activity type comes with expectations about participant roles, permissible utterances, goals, and interpretive frameworks. Within an activity type, certain pragmemes are available while others are constrained.

Conflict, therefore, is structured interaction rather than arbitrary thematic opposition. Pragmemes such as accusation, resistance, negotiation, and commanding acquire intelligibility only within the activity type that frames them. By foregrounding activity type, this study situates conflict in African drama as contextually regulated social action.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual analysis, focusing on pragmatic patterns

within identifiable activity types. The selected plays were analysed using a researcher-designed checklist of pragmatic acts, which categorised utterances as: informing, commanding, warning/advising, accusing, promising/committing, consoling/reassuring, appealing, threatening/resisting, negotiating/appeasing, and self-asserting. These categories functioned as analytical entry points rather than rigid speech act labels, allowing the identification of broader pragmatic configurations and involved the following procedure: identifying dominant activity types in each play, extracting recurrent pragmemes within those activity types, examining how pragmemes were realised as practs and allopracts, and linking pragmatic realisations to thematic construction, focusing on conflict dynamics. Only dialogues central to conflict were foregrounded, with page-referenced textual evidence provided for transparency and replicability.

Findings and Discussion

Political Negotiation in The Thinking Head

In The Thinking Head, conflict occurs predominantly within the institutionalised activity type of electoral and political procedure. Pragmemes such as accusation, commanding, warning, and self-assertion structure the negotiation of power, civic accountability, and collective mobilisation.

Accusation and Civic Accountability:

Koroo and Mr. Kolapo accuse voter complicity and systemic corruption:

“Some of these electoral boys are corrupt... that is how an ordinary handshake gets to the elbow” (TH26).

“When shall we have good government? When will our people stop selling their votes?” (TH35)

These utterances exemplify the accusing pragmeme within the political negotiation activity type. The institutional frame legitimises accusation as a tool for collective mobilisation rather than personal attack.

Commanding and Political Mobilisation:

Commands function as coercive instruments within procedural and patronage structures:

“Swear, swear, swear that you will not take dirty money to vote for Jejelola” (TH27b).

“...all contracts at the council in this village should be given to me” (TH64b)

These commands demonstrate how authority is exercised through discursive force, structuring conflict within procedural norms.

Warning and Generational Caution:

Warning pragmemes signal strategic vigilance:

“Sit down there...” (TH26)

Although superficially imperative, this utterance functions as political caution, illustrating that pragmatic meaning is contextually activated, not determined by syntax alone (Mey, 2001).

Self-Assertion and Identity:

Self-assertion links conflict with ideological and cultural positioning:

“A custom that is not transmitted from one generation to another dies a natural death” (TH32).

Here, self-assertion operates pragmatically to reinforce moral and cultural authority within the civic activity type.

Findings:

In The Thinking Head, conflict is structured and regulated, constrained by institutional norms, participant roles, and civic accountability. Pragmemic moves such as accusation, command, and warning coalesce to produce discursively authorised confrontation.

Ritualised Generational Confrontation in Hard Ground

Hard Ground foregrounds overlapping activity types: domestic crisis, militant struggle, spiritual mediation, and political resistance. Unlike the institutional focus of The Thinking Head, conflict in Hard Ground is emotionally charged and violence-laden, with pragmemes such as accusation, threatening/resisting, negotiating, and commitment orchestrating confrontation.

Accusation and Moral Reconstruction:

“With what do you swear, son? The hate in your eyes...?” (HG15b)

“You are becoming like your father” (HG28c)

Accusation here functions to reconstruct identity and instil moral responsibility,

situating conflict within generational and domestic activity types.

Threatening/Resisting as Militant Pragmemes:

“Oh Tamuno! I shall kill somebody as atonement for their lives” (HG23).

“I have killed the Devil... I slit his throat with one stroke” (HG59a).

Resistance evolves from projected to enacted violence, illustrating pragmemic escalation conditioned by overlapping activity types.

Negotiation and Spiritual Mediation:

“...May his senses scatter like the dust from your shrine. May darkness envelop his world... this Don... be with me...” (HG57)

Negotiation here is ritualised and symbolic, blending domestic hospitality with spiritual strategy to manage conflict.

Commitment and Identity Assertion:

“Nothing can happen to me. I swear!” (HG15a)

“I swear by the Saints, I know nothing” (HG25a)

Commitment pragmemes construct self-confidence, survival, and strategic alignment,

demonstrating allopractic variation across speakers and contexts.

Findings:

In *Hard Ground*, conflict is multi-layered. Activity types overlap, intensifying the pragmatic structuring of confrontation. Accusation, threat, and negotiation are contextually constrained, illustrating that conflict is socially regulated rather than random.

Communal Mediation and Identity Negotiation in *The Black Hermit*

In *The Black Hermit*, conflict occurs primarily within communal and marital activity types, framed by post-independence anxiety, tribal nationalism, and ideological mediation.

Negotiation and Communal Mediation:

“Remi was not the husband of Thoni alone... Remi was also the new husband to the tribe” (BH8).

Marriage becomes communal instrument, exemplifying negotiation as conflict regulation. Similarly, Remi recounts:

“... the elders of the tribe came and prayed with me to do a father’s wish and obey a sacred custom” (BH 34b).

Negotiation is ritualised and symbolically reinforced, showing that conflict is discursively constrained by social obligation.

Accusation as Ideological Regulation:

“Flung insults at your own tribe... What have you done to the lives of many?” (BH71)

Accusation functions to regulate ideological boundaries, targeting both individual deviation and structural tribalism.

Self-assertion and Identity:

“I have been too long a hermit in the city ... I must now rise and go to the country” (BH44-45).

Self-assertion performs identity reconstruction, linking individual autonomy with collective nationalist responsibility.

Findings:

Unlike *Hard Ground*, where resistance is militant, and *The Thinking Head*, where conflict is institutionalised, *The Black Hermit* shows mediation-focused conflict. Activity type regulates confrontation, allowing negotiation, accusation and self-assertion to maintain communal cohesion while resolving identity tensions.

Comparative Discussion

The three plays illustrate that activity type determines the pragmatic structuring of conflict:

In *The Thinking Head*, conflict is regulated and procedural as there is institutionalised political negotiation, which constrains accusation and command within procedural and civic frameworks. Threat and negotiation operate simultaneously in *Hard Ground*, demonstrating activity type collision and escalation as ritualised generational and militant confrontation produced overlapping and intensifying conflict pragmeme. In *The Black Hermit*, accusation and self-assertion are relational and normative, rather than violent as communal and marital mediation structures conflict through negotiation and ideological regulation.

Across all plays:

- Accusation is central but manifests differently depending on activity type.
- Threat /resistance emerges in violent or militant contexts but is moderated in institutional or communal activity types.
- Negotiation functions both as conflict containment and ideological alignment.
- Self-assertion links individual identity with social norms or political/cultural ideology.

These findings confirm Mey's (2001) assertion that pragmatic acts are contextually bound. Activity type acts as a regulatory frame, enabling and constraining the realisation of pragmeme, and shaping conflict as a socially meaningful process rather than a purely thematic device.

Conclusion

This study has examined conflict in three African plays through the lens of Pragmatic Acts Theory. By foregrounding the activity type, it has demonstrated that conflict is not merely thematic but structured and regulated through pragmatic configurations. In *The Thinking Head*, conflict is institutionalised and procedural. In *Hard Ground*, conflict is emotionally and militantly charged, intensified by overlapping activity types. In *The Black Hermit*, conflict is mediated through communal and marital negotiation, producing relationally constrained confrontation.

Pragmemes such as accusation, threats/resistance, negotiation and self-assertion are realised differently depending on contextual constraints, illustrating that activity trpy functions as a central organising mechanism.

The study contributes to both pragmatics and African literary studies by linking linguistic configuration to thematic construction. It demonstrates that African drama stages conflict not only narratively but as socially situated pragmatic action, opening avenues for further research into pragmeme-based analysis of postcolonial dramaturgy.

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