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# **LASU Journal of Humanities (LASUJOH)**

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# Contents

1	“Heaven Helps Only Those Who Help Themselves”: Ladipo Solanke and the WASU Hostels in London—Ochiai, Takehiko, . . . . .	1
2	Polygamy and the Rights of Women: Reflections on Religious Feminism —Fayemi, Ademola Kazeem . . . . .	18
3	Beyond Racism: Language Use, Raciolinguistics and the Cognition of Africa —Adegbindin, Omotade, PhD. . . . .	31
4	Referencing and Academic Integrity and Excellence: An Evaluation —Onyemelukwe, Ifeoma Mabel . . . . .	42
5	A Constructivist Critique of Gene Editing—Macaulay-Adeyelu, Olawunmi . . . . .	53
6	Referring Expressions in Nigerian Stand-Up Contexts—Filani, Ibukun & Bamgbose, Ganiu Abisoye . . . . .	63
7	José Luandino Vieira: Marcas de Africanidade, Inovação E Autenticidade No Texto Literário—Bamisile, Sunday Adetunji, PhD . . . . .	83
8	Analysis of <i>Gangbe</i> Music of Badagry Ogu Community, Lagos, Nigeria —Loko, Olugbenga Olanrewaju, PhD . . . . .	95
9	The Fanti Carnival in Lagos and its Message of Morality—Ōnádípè-Shalom, Títílàyò. . . . .	106
10	The Life and Times of Musa Ajagbemokeferi: 1933-2000—Bello, Mufutau Olusola, PhD & Balogun, Badrudeen Adesina. . . . .	113
11	Ìmò Ìjìnlẹ̀ Èrò Yorùbá Nínú Orin Fuji Saheed Òṣùpá—Taiwo, Adekemi Agnes . . . . .	125
12	A Study of Lexical Priming in Newton Jibunoh's <i>Hunger for Power</i> —Hunjo, Henry J., PhD & Ajakah, John Chukwuma . . . . .	137
13	Fífi àṣà Ìṣẹ̀lù tìpá Tíkúùkù yìirì Ìpolongo Ìbo ni Ipilẹ̀ Èkó—Olómì, Oyèwolé Òlamide . . . . .	156
14	L'Implication de la Theorie du Skopos dans la Traduction des Anthroponymes —Oye, Adetola Olujare, PhD. . . . .	168
15	Traduire le hanló ou la chanson satirique fon en français: Dilemme identitaire, défis et fonctionnalité—Houenon, Casimir & Umah, Paulinus . . . . .	177
16	Conversational implicature and Politics in Achebe's <i>A Man of the People</i> —Ndeche, Chinyere, PhD. . . . .	191
17	Nehemiah's Strategy of Fighting Corruption and Injustice in Neh. 5: 1-19: Implication for Incorruptible and Just Leadership in Nigeria's Democracy—Apuuivom, Daniel B., PhD, Inyaregh, Abel A., PhD & Aande, Simeon I., PhD . . . . .	202
18	Salman, Hakeem, PhD— الثورة فنّية اجتماعية علي الشعر العربي الكلاسيكي . . . . .	214





# 16

## Conversational implicature and Politics in Achebe's *A Man of the People*

*Ndeche, Chinyere C., PhD*

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### Abstract

*Conversational implicature is concerned with what a speaker says and what he implicates or means. Implicature can therefore mean a new way of describing meaning. The idea of what is said cannot be restricted to merely linguistic notion of logical form. It is a way in which relevance and successful communication can be achieved. In some speech acts, conversational implicature makes use of the conversational meaning of the words in a speech to determine what is implicated in helping to determine what is said. Contributors in a conversation are rational agents; they obey a general principle of rationality known as the cooperative principle. The speaker must follow the maxims of conversation. A speaker can flout, opt out or observe any of the maxims. These maxims are flouted mostly in figures of speech such as metaphor which is an instance of ambiguity. This means that a speaker has kept back part of what he intends to say. The maxims are quantity, quality, manner and relation. The main thrust of the novel is the corrupt nature of the politicians. It is not all about political corruption but the corrupting power of privilege, position, power and money. Grice's conversational implicature, by applying the maxims, was used in analyzing the novel. Some of the speeches that convey implicatures with political statements were highlighted, which indirectly indicated the author's message of problem of corruption in politics.*

### Introduction

**L**ANGUAGES ARE NOT JUST STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS BUT ARRANGED WORDS USED in thoughts and communications. The use of human language is interestingly related to human cognition. Alkmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish, (2001), list eight metaphors built on the ideas of language as a "conduit for ideas" (366). They further state that the major idea that structure these metaphors is that language functions like a conduit, it transfers thoughts bodily from one person to another in a linguistic communication between a speaker and

a hearer, the speaker acts as a “transmitter” and the hearer acts as a “receiver.” A speaker has some message in mind which he wants to communicate to the hearer.

In writing and speaking, people insert their thoughts or feelings in their words. Human beings use language in much of their thoughts. With language at man's disposal, he thinks, especially, his abstract thoughts and expresses them through words of a language. In other words, language is an outlet of intense feelings. In listening or reading, people extract thoughts and feelings from words. Language is presented as a bridge between a speaker and a hearer, or a writer and a reader; for the “private” ideas of the speaker/writer are communicated through sounds or words which function as the vehicle for transmitting the relevant message. The listener or reader decodes the words/sentences which are crucial parts of linguistic communication. A speaker communicates a wide variety of general beliefs about the word, the past, present and future cause of talk-exchange. He also brings about the hearer's beliefs about these issues as well. What comes after these beliefs are the speaker's desires, hopes, intentions and many others. In the cause of talk-exchange, many of these beliefs, desires and intentions affect what is said and at the same time change themselves as a result of what is said, (Akmajian et al, 378)

Linguistics of the functional and pragmatic aspects of language presents the function it performs in a social action and social practice. It is a text or a discourse. The communication carried out through talk-exchange is not done using sentences randomly but by means of connected discourse which takes meaning from the potential of meanings in a culture, real instances of meaning which serve their particular purpose. According to Halliday (1978), “language is as it is because of the function it has evolved to serve in people's lives” (30). It is the instrument of communication in everyday life and activity.

Komlosi (2012) sees linguistic environment, which is linguistic context, as a basis for any language based and text based interpretation. He further states that language provides us with conceptual structures residing in the mind. Linguistic structures and the architecture of the mental lexicon jointly have to be aligned with the conceptual structure underlying any linguistic interpretation. He believes that extending meanings in the mental lexicon by different types of mental operations is a fascinating human faculty that efficiently unites creation by language and creation by thoughts. Despite the fact that abstractions such as metaphorical or metonymical mappings open up new levels of meaning; making sense of anything requires being reflected in thought, language and culture.

Language remains a predominant mode of communication whether in spoken or written form. It is not merely used for passing messages but it is itself an integral part of social situations. According Ike-Nwafor (2016), language can be used to control and deprive as well as to also serve to define the role of participants. In a totalitarian political state, language degenerates into power instrument. It becomes a means of sharing knowledge in order to manipulate people in war and peace. Human language grows as dynamic instrument of change and creativity.

Sometimes, a speaker means something other than what the words he uttered mean. Meaning in language is usually the product of the meaning of the words used in phrases and sentences. When one hears or reads a piece of language, one tries to understand not only what the words mean, but also what the writer or speaker of those words intends to convey. Normal conversations have a recognizable structure. They tend to begin and end in certain linguistic ways. Conversations reflect both social and linguistic principles. Speakers can mean to communicate more than they say. It is this type of communication that Grice explores and labels conversational implicature. This conversational implicature is to be applied in the novel: *A Man of the People*. The aim is to bring to the political statements and the hidden meanings they contain.

### Grice's Conversational Implicature

The history of implicature shows that the concept was first formulated by Grice in 1975. (Allot, 2010). He emphasizes the capacity of language to project messages which may have no direct relationship with the formal linguistic value of the words and sentences used to portray the message. Grice (1975) maintains that in all communications, there is a general agreement of cooperation between the speaker and the hearer, or the writer and the reader. Lee and Thomas (1990) state that when people converse, they acknowledge a kind of agreement to cooperate conversationally towards mutual ends. This agreement he calls cooperative principle. When one abides by the cooperative principle one conforms to various rules of maxims. These maxims are quality (truthfulness), quantity (informativeness), relation (relevance), and manner (perspicuity). They are important conditions for a meaningful communication. The nature of these conventions is broken in such a way that the speaker intends that the hearer knows and recognizes that it is intentionally done in order to convey extra information. Cooperative principle states that one should make conversational condition such as required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which one is engaged.

What Grice calls conversational implicature (as cited in Malkmajaer, 1991) possesses five features:

- ◆ It must be cancelled since it depends on cooperative principle being observed and is possible to opt out of observing it.
- ◆ It is non-detachable from what is being said. If the same thing is being said in a different way, the same implicature will be attached to both manners of expression. For example, "I tried to do it" will have the same meaning attached to it as in "I attempted to do it."
- ◆ It is not part of the meaning of the expression, but it is rather dependent on the previous knowledge of that meaning.
- ◆ Implicature is not carried by what is said by the speech act. What this refers to is that it is not carried by the propositional content.
- ◆ It is indeterminate; that is, it is not possible to state what is exactly said.

One rule that both speakers and listeners share is what might be called “one-meaning convention.” Understanding speech requires the decoding of ambiguous stimuli. Any narrative either written or told has main points because the participants share some mental organization. For a speaker to mean something by an utterance at least in the sense of meaning to communicate something, the speaker must intend by that utterance to produce some effect on the audience.

According to Alkmajian et al. (2001), Grice is of the opinion that the final quality in the meaning conveyed by the speaker is that intention should play such a role as being “open” or “overt” and not “hidden” or “deceptive.” It is intended to be recognized and when the audience recognizes them, communication is successful. Another quality is that the notion of what is said should involve the operative meaning of the expression uttered, the time of the utterance and the reference[s] made in the utterance. For instance, in the expression: “He is in the grip of vice,” an audience is expected to know what was said if the audience could determine the operative meaning of vice, the time of its utterance and who “he” is being referred to (Alkmajian et al., 2001:399).

Brown and Yule (1983) state that Grice uses implicature to account for what can imply, suggest or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says. For instance, a speaker does not directly assert that one item of expression follows another, but the form of expression used conversationally implicates that such a relation holds. Simons (2000) explains conversational implicature as the phenomenon whereby a speaker says one thing and conveys typically in addition something else. He goes further to present Gricean conception of conversational implicature as part of what is meant. He states that for Grice, what a speaker means by an utterance is the complete context which the speaker intends to communicate. One component of what is meant is what is said, which can be taken approximately to be linguistically encoded in the utterance. He further states that Grice’s view is that implicatures other than manner implicature are calculated on the basis of what is said, that is, based on the truth conditional content. Therefore, other ways of expressing the same truth conditional content in the given context should give rise to the same implicature. Conversational implicatures are pragmatic inferences, unlike entailments and presupposition. They are not tied to the particular words and phrases in an utterance but arise instead from contextual factors and the understanding that conventions are observed in conversation (Zabbal, 2008). The inference can be obtained through a special reasoning process that relies on the understanding of the convention of communicative exchange which is conversation.

### **Grice’s Conversational Implicature in *A Man of the People***

Conversational implicature can be used to examine both literally and non-literary texts. This is because of the interpretive power of implicature in literary and non-literary texts. In a visual world constituted by images, implicature does not just

support opinions of critics but gives a fresh and first-hand interpretation of texts based on unusual realities of sociocultural values of the author's world.

*A Man of the People* has politics as one of its themes which is an indictment on the post independent political leaders. The Europeans have been replaced by a ruling class of politicians most of whom are corrupt and in control of everything. The prime members: Minister of Culture and other cabinet ministers are portrayed as hounds of dogs and hyenas that yep and smirk themselves at the people they ought to be accountable to. The outcome of this type of leadership is that the people and the nation are at the mercy of the leaders. Odili (the narrator) refers to Chief Nanga as a “man of the people,” an approachable politician in the country. His speeches to the public represent everything a politician should be and do, but he does not practice what he preaches. At the brink of destruction, political leaders practice politics of bitterness. The ruling party has zero tolerance for opposition. The politicians are anti-intellectuals in government. They rubbish members of the parliament who are educated, honest and upstanding. Therefore, to explicate the political undertone of the novel, the maxims of conversational implicature—quality, quantity, relation and manner—are applied. These are used in the analysis of some speeches/ conversations of the characters in the novel.

Odili (the narrator) quotes the editor of the *Daily Chronicle* who describes the Minister of Finance and his supporters as being intoxicated with their university education, aping the white man's mannerism and being stooges.

Let us now and for all times extract from our body politic as dentist extracts a stinking tooth those decadent stooges versed in textbook economics and aping the white man's mannerism. We are proud to be Africans. Our true leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford Cambridge and their Harvard degrees but those who speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above people. (4)

In the above excerpt, the educated/elites who try to help boost the economy of the country are thrown out, and seen as intoxicated with their “textbook” education. The editor only projects the interest of his masters, those in governance. These educated men are not drunk, neither are they “aping” the white man's mannerism but are trying to convey to their nation, the administrative ideas they have learnt. Using words out of the ordinary speech such as “intoxicated,” “extract,” the Minister of Finance and his supporters are presented in the bad light. They are compared to a bad tooth which a dentist extracts; the accusation leveled against them is false. The government in power sees these intellectuals as obstacles and wants them thrown out. They are condemned based on their education. The use of “intoxicated,” “with the Oxford and Harvard education,” “to extract them as dentist extracts a stinking tooth” violates the maxim of quality. The editor knows that these people are not drunk nor are they “stinking tooth” but by cooperative

principle, it is understood, that these honest people are not needed in the government.

This editorial comment is further confirmed in the Prime Minister's speech, in which he portrays the efforts of semiliterate leaders to frustrate the elites out of politics.

From today we must watch, and guide our hard-won freedom jealously. Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of Africa to the hybrid classes of western educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage (6).

The Prime Minister presents these people as betrayers of their motherland. The intellectuals are presented as people who do not have any regard for their country. They are compared to Esau in the Bible who sold his birthright for a plate of pottage. They are accused of being snobbish for imbibing western education. The accusation made by the Prime Minister is false and lacks evidence to prove that the Minister of Finance and his colleagues are prepared to "sell" their country. Also, there is no evidence that they are snobbish, otherwise they would not have offered to serve their country. This statement by the Prime Minister again violates the maxim of quality.

Achebe, through Odili, portrays the cynical attitude of voters and their interest in the peanuts they collect from politicians especially during electioneering campaign. "And so as long as men are swayed by their hearts and stomachs and not their heads the Chief Nangas of the world will continue to go away with anything" (75). This statement metaphorically conveys the effect of love for money by the politicians and the hungry masses. Odili states that people are more interested in money they collect from the politicians and that the act of reasoning is no longer done as a brain exercise. It is money and attachment to those who have the money that rule. When one receives or gets money one gives up what is right. In other words, people do not think properly; they do not consider what is important to them. But because they are concerned with what they get, politicians like Chief Nanga will only give people what they want for the moment in order to enrich themselves. The metaphor violates the maxim of quality. Naturally, people are not swayed by hearts and stomachs; they are guided by their heads, that is, their brain. This statement makes a relevant statement, which means it observes the maxim of relation; that is, it states the nature of politics in the society. It is their need for money and not their right that guides what the masses do. It also observes the maxim of quantity as it is informative. The narrator in this speech implicates that corrupt men (the Nangas) will remain in power and will continue to satisfy their personal interests.

When Chief Nanga sees Odili as an obstacle to his political ambition, he tries to bribe him by offering him scholarship to study abroad. He also tells him to "leave the dirty game of politics to us who know how to play it" (33). Chief Nanga, in his speech, observes the maxim of quality when he refers to politics as a dirty

game, which is true, considering the nature of politics they play. The same maxim is violated when he says that politics should be left for him and his likes who are not the right people to govern. By implicature we know that his aim is to bribe Odili out of his way.

In another development, Max (Odili's friend and political colleague) blames him (Odili) for not accepting the money offered to him by Chief Nanga. He tells him (Odili). " . . . Tell me how you propose to fight such a dirty war without soiling your hands a little" (141). He confirms Chief Nanga's statement that politics is a "dirty game." By cooperative principle, Odili is able to understand that the war of politics can never be fought without bribery and the likes.

Andrew, while discussing with Odili during Chief Nanga's visit to Anata, is very clear and straight forward in pointing out the flaws of the Minister for Culture: "...just think of such cultureless man going abroad and calling himself Minister of Culture." In the statement, he observes the maxim of quality but violates the maxim of manner, for; he does not clearly state the character of the Minister – Chief Nanga – that makes him lack culture. Though he is semi-literate and his social life does not present him in good light; the expression also observes the maxim of relation. The statement is relevant to the issue he is discussing with his friend. Through cooperative principle Odili is able to get what his friend Andrew said; his reply that the Minister is not interested in the outside world but "inside world," which stands for his country and constituency where he gets what he wants irrespective of how he gets it portrays this. It is his interest that matters.

The politicians in the novel are reluctant to relinquish positions once occupied. This is metaphorically presented in this excerpt:

A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say "to hell with it." We had all been together in the rain yesterday. Then a handful of us the smart and lucky and hardly ever the best had scrambled for one shelter our former ruler left, and had taken it out and barricaded themselves in, and from within they sought to persuade the rest, through numerous loud speakers, that the first phase of the struggle had been won and that, the next phase the extension of our house was even more important and called for new and original tactics; it required that all argument should cease and the whole people speak with one voice and that any more dissent and argument outside the door of the shelter would subvert and bring down the whole house (42).

This comment by the narrator portrays the idea that the person who goes from having nothing to having everything will be reluctant to go back to having nothing, when compared to someone who has everything all the time. The people (nation) have been in the rain, that is, under colonial rule, and when they left, the unqualified politicians, who in one way or the other had been close to the colonial masters in government, have succeeded in occupying the posts and



are telling others to remain calm and go along with them. There should be no “arguments and people speak with one voice.” That is to say nobody should protest no matter what happens. They are not willing to leave the post as they are calling for “extension of the house . . . new and original/ tactics.” They intend to remain in power to formulate new and original policies for governance. The excerpt violates the maxims of manner and quantity. There are ambiguity and prolixity as the narrator uses the metaphor of rain to express the greed in the politicians as they protect themselves and refuse to relinquish power. The information given about the politician is detailed; and so, violates the maxim of quantity.

Chief Nanga wants a road to be constructed in his constituency not for the good of his people but for his personal interest. This is because election is fast approaching and he is interested in having his buses ply the road. He claims the buses come from Chief Nanga’s use of “never-never arrangement” reveals nothing to his listener, who states that he is not sure if he means “free - gift.” Chief Nanga is obscure and ambiguous in his speech and therefore violates the maxim of manner which demands that one should be straightforward. But again, the expression portrays the “kick back” that politicians receive from the contracts they give. The efforts of these politicians to satisfy their personal interest is further portrayed in Chief Nanga’s desperate attempt to make sure that the road to his community is tarred. He has disagreed with T.C. Kobino, the Honourable Commissioner for Public Construction. Chief Nanga is not happy with the Honourable Commissioner because the commissioner told him he is expecting the expert’s advice on the texture of the soil. He (Chief Nanga) knows that the man is not an expert, “Who is the expert . . . because he wants to carry out tests in the soil. He has become an earthworm” ( 48) Chief Nanga wants to prove that the expert is not truly an expert since the so-called expert he did not get the post he occupies not because of his qualification but because those at the top want to “use” him. He is not “familiar with the texture of the soil unlike earthworm.” Nanga violates the maxim of manner for he does not clearly state that the “expert” lacks knowledge of his assignment. His comparing him to earthworm violates the maxim of relevance. Earthworm lives in the soil and does not carry out tests. There is no relevance to testing the soil. But by implicature and cooperative principle the message that the supposed expert is not an expert is conveyed.

The attitude of the politicians is again expressed in the interest of the junior minister, who in secret, supports CPC the new party that is formed by elites to challenge the old existing parties: P.O.P and P.A.P. Odili wants to find out why the junior minister cannot resign if he is not happy with the government he is serving. Max fails to give him a direct answer but asks him; “Resign . . . where do you think you are, Britain or something”? By this statement Max violates the maxim of quality but by implicature Odili gets the answer through cooperative principle; for a politician to resign from his post in Africa, he must have his eyes on the main chance,” that is a better position. He resigns when he has the opportunity to get a better post.



During campaign elders and voters think of what they can get from the politicians before voting for them. An elderly man tells Odili during his campaign that " . . . anyone who wants to look at our new tooth should know that his bag should be heavy" (141). The elderly man accepts that Odili who is a native of Urua should represent them to bring their share of the "national cake." But he states metaphorically that for them to vote for Odili (to see their new tooth) his bag must be heavy; that is, he must have money to give them. What this implies is that Odili has to give them money despite the fact that he is their "son" and is going to bring their own share of the "cake." The elderly man in his statement fails to state directly the condition which Odili will fulfill before they can vote for him; instead he talks about "new tooth" and "a bag that is heavy." By virtue of the maxims, the elderly man violates the maxim of manner. He is ambiguous. This proves that the game of politics does not exhibit sincerity.

The society is not bothered by what their leaders do. This is portrayed in the apathetic and cynical attitude of the people Odili presented in the novel. They are not disturbed that their economy is destroyed and the money in government custody is looted. They are of the opinion that the white men have looted and gone and nothing was done. Anybody in the government should "eat" and one day it will be their turn or that of their sons; so: "let them eat" (167). The use of "eat" violates the maxim of manner. We eat food and not money. But it is used to express the alarming rate of embezzlement of public fund. This also illustrates the selfish nature of those in government.

When one is not in power, it is possible to criticize and call those in government names, but as soon as one assumes power, he presents a different image of himself. Odili illustrates this using personality of the former Students' Union President who turned out as a secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Productivity. As a student union leader, he was: "the fire-eating president of . . . students' union" but as a secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Productivity he has changed to: "ice-creaming eating prominent secretary . . . (122). The narrator does not say much about the leader. He violates the maxims of manner and quality. He is obscure in discussing the leader as he does not clearly state what the man did as students' union leader and what he does as the secretary in the Ministry of Labour and Productivity. The maxim of quality is violated when he refers to him as "fire - eating" and ironically presents him as "ice-cream eating." Though ice - cream is eaten, fire is not eaten. The idea presented is that of one who should continue his fight against bad governance that he started as a student union leader has turned cold and cannot do anything now that he is in government. As a government official and one of the corrupt people in government, he finds it difficult to criticise. Criticism is done outside the government which should better be done while in government, so as to correct mistakes and govern people well.

Election rigging is also portrayed in the statement that: "Chief Koko's resourceful wife is leading the women's wing of P.O.P in "breastfeeding" ballot" (160). This conveys the desperate efforts made by politicians to get re-elected. The

breast-feeding metaphorically illustrates where the ballot papers are stuffed to be delivered at the appropriate place and time. The expression violates the maxim of relation because it is babies that are breastfed and not ballot papers. But by implicature the statement is understood.

Finally, the title of the novel *A Man of the People* helps to convey the message contained in the novel. The indefinite article used in introducing the title of the novel violates the maxim of manner. It is not definite in specifying the personality of the “chief” in the novel or state clearly that the man is not truly a man of the people. The article which refers to the man, points out that the man discussed in the novel has a questionable and disagreeable character. The indefinite article presents the man as some unknown or unfamiliar man. “A” instead of “The” man of the people presents a gap between the man who is of the people and not for the people who are identified with him. Again, a man as used in the novel refers not only to Chief Nanga but is inclusive of people of his type in the novel. The people linked with the man are portrayed as rather unfortunate people; a people at the mercy of unknown, unfriendly man. The author presents the “man of the people as unapproachable, yet he is a man of the people.” The title also flouts the maxim of relation. For, “a man of the people” has no true relation with the people but by cooperative principle, the message in the title is conveyed.

## **Observation**

The “man of the people” in the novel has no true relation with what a man of the people should be. The masses are used to serve the personal interest of the politicians, the masses on their part, are cynical and do not question the activities of these politicians. The semi-literates fight and occupy the political posts, refuse to relinquish power, and destroy anyone who opposes them, especially the educated/literate people. These politicians believe that government money and property belong to anyone who is in power and so efforts are made to get a share of the national cake; even if it entails taking turns “collecting it.” Anybody in power turns things to suit him. In other words, power benefits whoever occupies a political post. Offices are shared out to people with little or no knowledge to run them. Chief Nanga is the uncultured Minister of Culture. Professionals like Dr. Makinde a Ph.D in Public Finance is attacked in the official quarters and even the media, and few among his league are frustrated and flushed out unceremoniously.

## **Conclusion**

The text is analyzed using Gricean conversational implicature to buttress Achebe’s implied messages in the novel. The nature of politics practiced by the politicians in the novel represented prominently by Chief Nanga, is revealed. The analysis reveals that the actual utterances of the politicians differ from the potential utterances: for the actual utterances do not represent what is intended. They are therefore portrayed as people of double standard. Conversational implicature contained in formal linguistic features such as metaphors and idioms

convey the actual meaning of the utterances. Achebe arranges his work with prophetic clairvoyance to reveal to his people the political problem facing them. He expresses his commitment to his society in his role as a novelist and a teacher. As a writer he thinks it is his concern to teach the people the reality of their society. Similarly, he sees the role of the artist as a teacher in the sense that he must deliberately stir the consciousness of the people to rediscover themselves. He regards art as a weapon or an instrument for social change not art created for pleasure or for its own sake.

The novel is an example of the work of a modern novelist whose focus is to conscientize the mind of the people by liberating his readers from the shackles of ignorance which no doubt is seen as a hindrance to national development. He investigates “chaos of rites” of passage especially in the political and economic development of a nation. Conversational implicature applied in the analysis of the novel helps to realize that what Achebe suggests is that community built on selfish interest and which lacks public moral sanctions that regulate the lives of the people is bound to fail.

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