Reference Assignment and Character Indexing in Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Scholarly attention has been paid to Adichie's works both from the literary and linguistic perspectives, with greater attention from the former. Within linguistics, her works have been studied from the stylistic and pragmatic angles, among others. This paper complements the pragmatic attempts in its adoption of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (RT) to explore the role of reference assignment in character indexing in conversations in PH, exemplifying with twenty-five percent of the transactions in the novel. The findings reveal definite and indefinite reference markers and phoric references, which pragmatically serve to aid character presentation/indexing toward achieving cohesive effects in the advancement of the plot of the novel. The paper concludes that a study of reference assignment in the novel of Adichie facilitates access to referential-cum cohesive bond vis-à-vis meaning recovery in the text (and, by extension, of the genre of contemporary African prose in general).

Key words: Adichie, character indexing, purple hibiscus, reference assignment, relevance theory

1. Introduction

Referring expressions are those "which on some occasions of utterance may be used to refer" (Blakemore 1992:85), and they play a significant role in discourse interpretation. Studying how the intended referent of any given referring expression can be established in *PH* is therefore necessary in linguistic scholarship, as it has got little attention in it (cf. Jucker and Smith 2004, Wright and Givón 1987, Osunbade 2009). The present study therefore fills this gap by drawing on the relevance theory vis-a-vis contextual consideration to examine pragmatically indexed referents of referring expressions in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (henceforth *PH*), given that reference assignment is often based on pragmatic principles (Jucker and Smith 2004:151).

Our data consisted of transactions from the sampled text (i.e. *PH*). Out of a total number of 164 transactions in the novel, 41 instances (representing 25%) were used for the analysis. The choice of *PH* has been informed by the little attention paid to the text in linguistic scholarship and the consideration for the novel's role in the reflections of the reality of the Nigerian socio-cultural, economic, and political experiences. This study of the role of reference assignment in character indexing in the novel of Adichie will not only shift literature on pragmatics forward but will also provide a new theoretical insight into the interpretation and understanding of contemporary African fiction.

2. Adichie's Works and Synopsis of PH

Studies on Adichie's literary works have dealt with the use of language as a tool for characterisation and thematisation in her texts. Of course, literature finds its expression in language; in fact, the study of language is a complement and aid to the study of literature. Notably, Adichie's literary writings span the three broad genres of literature: drama, prose and poetry. She has written a play, *For Love of Biafra* (1998), a collection of poems "Decisions" (1998), two novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and several short stories. However, she is better known as a novelist. Like most African writers, Adichie has demonstrated concerns for the happenings in her society. She is therefore preoccupied with the reflection of the historical and socio-political condition of her society. She is particularly concerned with the exposition of the ills (social, political, economic, and religious) in her society and the attack of their imperfections. The attack is however governed by love for the society rather than by disenchantment with it. Adichie's works refract fictional reality through her apt use of language.

As Osofisan says "she beautifully manipulates syntax and trope, as well as controls irony and suspense" to achieve great aesthetics and heighten effects (see back cover of *Purple Hibiscus*, 2006), especially to capture the Nigerian experiences she narrates in her novels. Scholars have therefore explored the different experiences of the characters fictionalised in Adichie's novels towards contributing to the growing body of knowledge on Adichie in contemporary Nigerian literature. For instance, scholars such as Heather 2005, Highfield 2006, Oha 2007 have examined how Adichie has addressed the problems of politics, violence against feminine gender, oppression, etc, especially in *Purple Hibiscus* from the literary perspective, while Tunca (2008) and Osunbade (2009) have attempted linguistic investigation of the stylistic resources harnessed to realise the text and the pragmatic features it manifests at the explicit level respectively.

PH, which is being studied here, presents the oddities in Nigeria as well as Africa in general. Particularly, it x-rays the tyrannical trauma of anarchical-cum draconian leaderships (both within the family and society at large) being experienced by the Africans. This is portrayed through the family of Eugene Achike blessed with material wealth, but mined tragically by the cruel abuses of Eugene himself on his family. Eugene adopts a conservative form of Catholicism which infuses him with his callous nature. He however appears to uphold moral standards, as he uses his newspaper, *the standard*, to challenge the socio-political malaise-cum abuse of power that characterizes the governance in the post-independent Nigeria, but his private life is as dictatorial and abusive as the leaders whom he attacks. He constantly batters his wife and uses other violent means to correct his family. This weird behaviour has therefore caused Kambili, her brother Jaja, and their mother, Beatrice both physical and psychological destructions.

The children's lives assume a positive dimension however when they go to spend their holidays with their Aunt, Ifeoma, and her children in Nsukka. Like Eugene, her brother, Ifeoma is also a catholic, but she does not embrace a "fanatic brand of Catholicism" (alá Femi Osofisan).She allows her children to leave in an atmosphere of freedom and corrects them subtly when they go wrong. She also demonstrates love to their father, Papa-Nnukwu, who still holds to the traditional Igbo religion of Odinani, and whom Eugene has rejected as a heathen. Ultimately, Kambili and Jaja's stay in Nsukka plays a significant role in their self discovery and journey to freedom. While Kambili slowly begins to rediscover her voice as well as desire freedom from her father's control, Jaja starts to display defiance which seems to infect their mother, who also starts to disobey her husband. The love that binds these victims of Eugene's brutalities together rescues them in the end. Out of love for her children and herself, Beatrice poisons Eugene so as to ensure their freedom from his inhumane acts to them. Jaja reciprocates the love shown by mama when he confesses to the murder and goes to prison instead of their mother. When mama and Kambili visit Jaja in the prison and everyone keeps mute, Kambili expresses her awareness that a new and different silence now prevails among them; suggesting freedom from their father's subjugation and brutalities, being the metaphoric connotation of 'Purple Hibiscus'.

3. Theoretical Orientation

Relevance Theory (RT), a cognitive approach to human communication propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1986), is the theory favoured in this study. Principally, it is based upon the claim that human cognition is geared to the hearers' search for (and maximisation of) relevance in the information they process in the course of a conversational discourse (see Blakemore 1992, Yus 1999, etc.). This process (which is the first (cognitive) principle of relevance) involves the achievement of as many contextual effects as possible for a little processing effort, especially to ensure successful communication. Of course, for a communicative act to be successful, the speaker needs the addressee's attention. The speaker's utterances then need be made relevant enough to be worth the addressee's attention, given that, in relevance-theoretic account, everyone is geared towards the maximisation of relevance. This thus leads us to the second (communicative) principle of relevance which states that "every act of ostensive communication (e.g. an utterance) communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber and Wilson 1986). By 'ostensive', relevance theorists refer to the overt nature of the speaker's communicative intentions in acts of communication. Central, therefore, to the understanding of an utterance or a lexical unit is intention-recognition. As Perry (2006:25) says "communication will be successful when the addressee recognises those intentions." The fact is that, within RT, the hearer starts off the interpretation of an utterance with the identification of its logical form. This logical form is then enriched with contextual information to generate an explicature. However, what is referred to as explicature is, simply put, "an explicitly communicated assumption" (Sperber and Wilson 1986:182), or "an explicit assumption communicated by an utterance, which is a development of the logical form encoded by the utterance" (Haugh 2002:19-20).

Put differently, it is "the result of fleshing out the semantic representation of an utterance" (Blakemore 1992:59). According to Blakemore (ibid), explicatures have to be determined in all communicative interactions, and they can be derived through enrichment, necessary for reference assignment, gap filling, disambiguation, and bridging. On a cognitive approach, reference assignment, which is the focus of this paper, involves accessing a mental representation which uniquely identifies the intended referent, and incorporating it into the proposition expressed by the utterance. It is necessary because it either makes a certain representation accessible or assumes the accessibility of a given representation (Blakemore 1992:63-69), especially in a given context. An important point to note is that the hearer has to apply relevant contextual information while assigning reference to referring expressions towards assessing the relevance of a referent in focus for the addressee(s). Following Cruse (2000:314), the hearer therefore has to make a search through possible domains in the following order:

    (i)   the immediate preceding discourse (strictly within short term memory)
    (ii)   the immediate situation (currently available to the sense)
    (iii)   the broader situation
    (iv)   memory/ general (or mutual) knowledge

4. Analysis and Findings

Our findings reveal that reference assignment vis-à-vis character indexing in conversations in *PH* is achieved through definite and indefinite reference markers as well as phoric references. These are discussed in turn.

4.1. Definite and Indefinite Reference Markers

A definite marker of reference operationally refers, in this study, to a word/lexical unit that serves to indicate the speaker's intention to refer to an entity that can be specifically identified by the speaker and that he/she expects the hearer to be able to identify from contextual clues. Indefinite marker of reference, on the other hand, denotes lexical unit that functions to indicate that a referent is being introduced into the discourse for the first time, especially without any speaker's presumption of the hearer's familiarity. Definite markers of reference appear as proper nouns, pronouns and noun phrases with the definite article "the", or those without the article but make definite references to known entities in the communicative context. Indefinite ones, on the other hand, feature as unmodified common nouns and they play complementary role to the definite ones in indexing the character in focus for the addressee in a transaction. Notably, there is usually an occurrence of lexical/ grammatical unity between reference markers (definite and indefinite) within a conversational discourse, especially to form a cohesive bond. Examples manifesting definite reference markers can first be considered:

Example 1:   (Background: Beatrice happily shared the news of her pregnancy with her daughter after several miscarriages, indicating how her husband's love had saved her from his family's pressures)

Beatrice (T_1):   *Nne*, you're going to have a brother or sister.
Kambili (T_1):   You're going to have a baby?
Beatrice (T_2):   Yes! (smiling)
Kambili (T_2):   When?
Beatrice (T_3):   In October. I went to Park lane yesterday to see my doctor.
Kambili (T_3):   Thanks be to God.
Beatrice (T_4):   Yes. God is faithful. You know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our Umuna even sent people to *your father* to urge *him* to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters and many of them were University graduates, too. They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr. Ezendu's second wife did. But for love, *he* stayed with me, with us.
Kambili (T_4):   Yes, *Papa* loves us.   (*PH*, p. 20-21)

This interaction reveals Beatrice and Kambili in a tete-à-tete that gives a rather positive portrayal of Eugene in *PH*. Significantly, in the transaction, Beatrice engages, in her T_4, the referring expressions "your father" (a contextually definite token), "him" (anaphor - objective form of 3rd person singular pronoun), and "he" (anaphor - objective form of 3rd person singular pronoun) in her attempt to anchor their reference-marking relevance to her communicative intention. So, what seems in focus for the addressee (Kambili) in the transaction is "who", especially with respect to the demonstration of love being pictured. In relevance theoretic term, it is therefore "who", established by the reference markers engaged, that satisfies the addressee's presumption of relevance in the conversational interaction.

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Kambili's interpretive process cognitively starts by first establishing a lexical cohesive bond between the reference markers drawn by Beatrice, namely "your father", "him" and "he". These markers then contextually assist her in the location of the character referred to, and with the knowledge of the referent, Kambili recognises Beatrice's intention and assigns reference to the tokens appropriately. The enrichment evidently favours "Papa" (meaning father), supplied in Kambili's T_4, as the referent of Beatrice's referring expressions. Thus, the idea explicitly communicated is that Eugene (i.e. Papa) is the character whose action towards his family symbolizes love. Such an assumption is, of course, reached inferentially on the basis of the background information (previously established in Beatrice's utterance in her T_4). As established by Kambili's last utterance in the transaction (i.e. her T_4), "Yes, Papa loves us", this context then provides strong evidence for the assessment of the extent to which the given referent is in focus for the addressee, especially to achieve character presentation/exposition.

Example 2 further illustrates the contextual engagement of definite reference markers to index an intended character:

> (Background: Eugene asked his children to visit their grandfather and instructed them to observe the usual timing)

Eugene (T_1):   Kambili and Jaja, you will go this afternoon to greet your grandfather. Kelvin will take you.

Kambili and Jaja (T_1):   Yes, papa.

Eugene (T_2)   : I don't like to send you to *the house of a heathen*, but God will protect you.

Jaja and Kambili (T_2):   Yes, Papa.

Eugene (T_3):   As usual, you will stay not longer than fifteen minutes there.

Kambili and Jaja (T_3):   Yes, papa.   (*PH*, p.60-61)

This conversation between Eugene and his children obviously exposes Eugene's prejudice towards his father, given the religious differences between them. To underscore his point, he subjects the reference marker "the house of a heathen" in his T_2 to pragmatic engagement. Kambili and Jaja recognise that their grandfather's house where they will go to greet him is salient here as the referent for the referring expression "the house of a heathen" in Eugene's T_2 by inference, especially on the basis of context involving preceding utterance of Eugene, and this is aptly selected as the appropriate referent. Once the hearers (Kambili and Jaja, in the present context) have identified the specific referent of the referring expression, (and equally located its spatial orientation) it becomes easy for them to reach the proposition expressed by the utterance thus:

As usual, you will not stay longer than fifteen minutes in your grandfather's house

The fact is that the referring expression engaged essentially illuminates the sense of the index it refers to, especially through the qualifier. Adichie's portrayal of Eugene, Kambili's father, as a character who fanatically adheres to the Catholic doctrines thus manifests in the discourse.

Also, definite reference markers such as proper names assist in the location of persons underlying them in *PH*. Reference assignment as a pragmatic tool of explicature recovery in this respect demonstrates a necessary recourse to contextual pressure in a significant way in the novel. Example 3 and 4 can be considered:

Example 3:   (Feeling the pains of his son's non-chalance towards his well-being, Papa -Nnukwu poured out his mind to Ifeoma, his daughter).

Papa-Nnukwu(T_1) :   Nekenem, look at me. My son owns that house that fills in everyman in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries.

Ifeoma (T_1)   :   Nna anyi. It was not the missionaries. Did I not go to the missionary school too?…

Papa-Nnukwu (T_2)   … still, I say it was *the missionaries* that misled my son. I remembered the first one that came to Abba, the one they called *Fada John.* His face was red like palm oil… He had a helper, a man from Nino called *Jude*. In the afternoon they gathered the children under the Ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion.   (*PH* p.83)

By pragmatically engaging the definite proper nouns ''Fada John'' and ''Jude'' in Papa-Nnukwu's (T_2) above, reference assignment becomes a significant tool for the recovery of the explicit content of the conversations between Papa-Nnukwu and Ifeoma in the above transaction. The two definite reference markers refer to another definite "the missionaries'' earlier mentioned in the utterance, and strike lexical cohesive alliance with it. In this given context, therefore, the most likely interpretation (s) would be:

(i)   Fada John is a missionary.
(ii)   Jude is a missionary.
(iii)   Fada John and Jude are missionaries.

Such enrichments are reached inferentially on the basis of the background information (previously established in the speaker's utterance). This context then provides a strong evidence for assessing the extent to which the given referent is in focus for the addressee. "The missionaries" therefore becomes established here as the subject which Papa-Nnukwu makes a cognitive appeal to and reference assignment functions to achieve cohesive effect as well as character exposition.

> Example 4:   (Background: Eugene was standing in the front of his house
>   in Abba, screaming at a wrinkled old man who entered his
>   house)
> Eugene: What is *Anikwenwa* doing in my house? What is a worshipper of idols doing in my
>   house. Leave my house!   (*PH*. p. 69)

In example 4 above, the definite nominal ''Anikwenwa'' in the first statement strikes a cohesive relationship with the phrase "a worshipper of idols" in the second statement, thereby giving an exposition of the character in question. A blend of the two structures would eventually end in this enrichment:

Anikwenwa is a worshipper of idols.

Such enrichment would, of course, be recovered by inference on the basis of contextual information, rather than on mere linguistic context. The explicature recovered therefore has implication for indexing "Anikwenwa" as the object in focus in the given conversational context.

Indefinite reference markers, on the other hand, also demonstrate contextual sensitivity so that what they assign reference to would be made pragmatically clear to generate an explicature. The following instance would suffice here:

Example 5:   (Eugene just got Ade Coker, his editor, out of jail and he discussed Ade's ordeal and his plan for subsequent publications of *the standard* with his wife).
Mama (T_1):   Thank God *Ade* is safe.
Eugene (T_2):   They put out cigarettes on his back. They put out so many cigarettes on his back.
Mama (T_2):   They will receive their due, but not on this earth, mba.
Eugene (T_2):   We are going to publish underground now. It is no longer safe for *staff*.
<div align="center">(PH. p. 42-43)</div>

The indefinite nominal entity "staff" in Eugene's T_2 enters into a lexical rapport with the noun "Ade" in mama's T_1. "Ade", serving as the appropriate referent for the reference marker "staff" in Eugene T_2, is of course salient based on cognitive effort and cost, and is evoked on the basis of the context involving shared background assumptions. The intended discourse referent is therefore obvious and precise individuation becomes unnecessary, as the context-driven information available to the interlocutors overrides all other information, thereby making reference assignment in that context unproblematic. This is justified in the following enrichment which the reader would be expected to recover:

Ade is a staff of Eugene's *standard* newspaper.

Significantly, assignment of reference to the referring term "staff" in this instance aids character presentation - as a richer information about the character being referred to is provided, and also creates lexical union between the entities ''Ade'' and ''staff'', thereby forming a cohesive chain. However, "staff" does not bring to mind "Ade" alone, but aids cognitive reference to "all the employees of the newspaper in general", who remain unspecified.

4.2 Phoric References

Phoric reference in our context presupposes a word, commonly pronoun, used to maintain reference to someone or something already mentioned, or that is more fully identified later. Phoric references in *PH* feature as anaphoric and cataphoric references, but the former is preponderant. Driven by context, phoric references generally serve to create cohesive effects and sometimes economically aid indexing of characters in the novel. First, some examples of anaphoric relationship existing between lexical units in characters' conversations would be considered:

Example 6:   (Background: Jaja just returned from school, entered Kambili's room,
                  and the following conversation ensued between them)
Kambili (T_1):   Ke Kwanu!
Jaja (T_1):   Fine. What did you eat?
Kambili (T_2):   Garri
Jaja (T_2):   I wish we still had lunch together
Kambili (T_3):   Me, too
Jaja (T_3):   (turning to leave) I have three assignments to do.
Kambili (T_4):   Mama is *pregnant*
Jaja (T_4):   She told you?
Kambili (T_5):   Yes. She's due in October.
Jaja (T_5):   We will take care of *the baby*; we will protect *him.*
<p align="center">(*PH*. p. 22-23)</p>

The above demonstrates that sometimes anaphoric relation is struck with the use of personal pronoun "him" and certain pragmatically definite descriptions. Here, the pronoun "him" in the second statement of Jaja's T_5 makes an anaphoric reference to the rhematic "the baby" which is the object of the first statement of the utterance. Then, there is a kind of co-phoric relationship between "him" in Jaja's T_5 and "pregnant" (which assumes the salience of pregnancy in Kambili's T_4). The correct identity of the referent of the pronoun "him" is thus made clear pragmatically on the basis of preceding utterances. The referring lexical item "him" is therefore contextually established to refer to "the baby/pregnancy" because this is the only interpretation that makes intuitive sense; in RT terms, it is the only interpretation that satisfies the hearer's presumption of optimal relevance. Significantly, therefore, the referring term "him" serves to economise the speaker's words and to keep the earlier mentioned indexes "pregnant" in Kambili's T_4 and "the baby" in Jaja's T_5 on track, thereby making their referent salient to presuppose the following enrichments:

1.   We will protect the baby.
2.   We will protect the pregnancy.

Cataphoric relationship, on the other hand, is sometimes struck in few instances in *PH* to make the character in focus in the discourse salient in advance of clarification and to serve as a cohesive device. Examples 7 and 8 can be considered:

Example: 7   (Background: Aunty Ifeoma went to St. Agnes hospital in the company of father Amadi
                  to visit Kambili who was hospitalised after being brutalized by her father)
Aunty Ifeoma (T_1):   what's wrong with *her*?
Mama (T_1):   *She*'s in comma. At first, they could not find a vein, and I was so scared.
Aunty Ifeoma (T_2):   This cannot go on, nwunyem...
Mama (T_2):   It has never happened like this before. Eugene has never punished *her* like this before.
Aunty Ifeoma (T_3):   *Kambili* will come to Nsukka when she leaves the hospital.
<p align="center">(*PH*, p. 208-209)</p>

The physical context of the conversation above reveals Beatrice (Eugene's wife) and Ifeoma (her sister-in-law) in a discussion that reveals the pains Eugene subjects his family to. Ifeoma's first turn (T_1) initiates a response that exposes the gravity of the effect of Eugene's cruel abuse on Kambili. Beatrice's answering move in her own first turn (T_1) generates a dissatisfactory reaction in Ifeoma as evident in her T_2.

To make the victim of Eugene's brutality salient, the pronouns "her" in Ifeoma's T_1 as well as Mama's T_2 and "she" in Mama's T_1 are contextually engaged.

The fact is that no much processing effort is required for the referent of these tokens to be tracked as the cataphor "Kambili" in Ifeoma's T_3 provides the needed clue. The assignment of the reference that the terms "her" and "she" signal in alliance with the noun "Kambli" in the process of development of the logical form of Mama and Ifeoma's utterances to yield the proposition expressed is therefore significant for creating lexical cohesion and identifying the character in question.

Another manifestation of cataphoric reference is found in the example that follows.

Example 8:	(Background: Beatrice was brutalised by her husband, Eugene, and she left Enugu to seek refuge in Aunty Ifeoma's house at Nsukka, looking rather unkempt and gloomy).
Kambili (T_1):	Mama, *o gini*? Did anything happen?
Beatrice (T_1):	I do not know if my head is correct. I got back from the hospital today. The doctor told me to rest, but I took Eugene's money and asked Kevin to take me to the park. I hired a taxi and came here.
Aunty Ifeoma (T_1):	You were in hospital? What happened?
Beatrice (T_2):	(Turned to Kambili) you know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke *it* on my belly. My blood finished on that floor even before *he* took me to St. Agnes.
Kambili (T_2):	Thank God you're alive, mama.
Aunty Ifeoma (T_2):	When will *Eugene* stop this?

(*PH*, p. 242-243)

In the above conversation involving Kambili, Beatrice (her mother), and Aunty Ifeoma (her aunt), Kambili perceives that her mother is troubled and initiates a turn (i.e. T_1), which creates the background for the characterisation of Eugene as typically violent in *PH*. Responding to Kambili's elicitation act, Beatrice eventually points out her husband, "Eugene" as the character responsible for her predicament by engaging the pronoun "he" to index the nominal entity "your father" in her T_2. The referential value of this token is thus established in Aunty Ifeoma's T_2, as the pronoun "he" pragmatically makes a cataphoric reference to the character "Eugene" and strikes a lexical cohesive chain with it. The use of this pronominal thus assumes the accessibility of Eugene as the subject in focus in the conversation.

5. Conclusion

Assigning reference to intended referent by engaging the cognitive event of processing inferentially plays a significant role in character identification or indexing in different contexts of use in *PH*. Notably, reference assignment is enhanced in *PH* through definite and indefinite reference markers and phoric references, which pragmatically serve to aid character indexing toward achieving cohesive effects in the advancement of the plot of the novel. Definite reference markers mostly appear as proper nouns, pronouns and noun phrases with the definite article "the". Indefinite ones, on the other hand, feature as unmodified common nouns and they play complementary role to the definite ones in indexing the character in focus for the addressee in a transaction. Phoric references, however, feature as anaphoric and cataphoric references which generally serve to create cohesive effects and ultimately aid indexing of characters in the novel. The paper concludes that an adequate understanding of reference assignment facilitates access to the understanding of characterisation in the novel and has an input in the overall interpretation of the text.

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