

Research Article

Contextual Dynamics and Language Choice in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

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Abstract

This study undertakes a sociolinguistic exploration of the intricate relationship between context and language choice within two seminal works of Nigerian drama: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The mastery of a language is not merely a function of grammatical competence but is profoundly demonstrated by the ability to select linguistic forms appropriate to a given context. This research investigates the contextual factors that govern language choice in these plays, which serve as rich repositories of sociolinguistic phenomena. Employing a qualitative methodology grounded in discourse analysis, specifically the SPEAKING model associated with the ethnography of communication, the study analyzes 115 exchanges from 16 purposively sampled excerpts. The findings reveal that the contexts influencing language choice are multifaceted, primarily delineated along the formal and informal axes. These contexts are shaped by a confluence of factors including the physical setting, the social and hierarchical status of the participants, the cultural worldview embedded in the speech community, and the overall atmosphere of the communicative event. The study concludes that context exerts a determinative influence on the linguistic choices made by the characters. The participants in the plays adeptly navigate their linguistic repertoires, deploying language in a manner that is congruent with the situational and cultural exigencies they face. This research contributes to the understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in literary texts, highlighting the interplay between language, culture, and society as portrayed in Nigerian dramatic literature.

Keywords

Sociolinguistics, Language Choice, Context, Hymes' SPEAKING Model, Nigerian Drama, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi

1. Introduction

Language, in its spoken and written forms, stands as the quintessential medium for the articulation of a people's culture, creative spirit, and collective wisdom. As Ito [2] posits, the very fabric of linguistic creation is woven from the threads of a community's language. The manner in which language is utilized within a society is a subject of profound importance,

offering insights into social structures, cultural norms, and individual identities. Scholars have offered various definitions of language; Barber [3] describes it as a system of vocal signals, while Quirk [4] views it as a medium of expression. A more comprehensive definition is provided by Dada [5], who

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characterizes language as an “arbitrary vocal system of communication used among members of a speech community.”

The use of language is not monolithic; it is subject to variation based on the speaker’s identity, the nature of the activity, and the attitudes held towards the language itself. Every speaker, barring those with severe learning impairments, possesses a vast linguistic repertoire, enabling them to adapt their language use to a multitude of situations. This variation is also contingent upon the speaker’s social background and identity. A crucial factor, as unanimously agreed upon by sociolinguists, is the social context, which plays a pivotal role in determining the appropriate language variety for a given interaction. Trudgill [6] succinctly captures this by stating that “language varies not only according to the social characteristics of the speaker but also according to the social context in which a user finds himself.”

A multiplicity of factors can influence the selection of a particular language variety. Catford [7] emphasizes that “language use is determined by situation and context,” viewing language varieties as collections of formal features that correlate with specific socio-situational characteristics. Consequently, any set of linguistic features must align with a corresponding situation. Similarly, Lyons [8] outlines several key elements for understanding the language-context relationship: participants’ awareness of their roles and statuses, knowledge of the temporal and spatial aspects of the conversation, the ability to gauge the degree of formality, and the selection of an appropriate medium and subject matter. These elements underscore the dialectical relationship between language and society, where each perpetually shapes the other. Language is not merely a passive reflector of social reality; it is a potent force that influences thought and behavior.

This study, therefore, focuses on a sociolinguistic analysis of the influence of context on language choice, using Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame* as case studies. These plays, authored by first-generation Nigerian playwrights, are canonical texts that offer a rich tapestry of linguistic interaction, reflecting the complex sociolinguistic landscape of Nigeria.

1.1. Statement of the Research Problem

The mastery of a language is partially measured by the speaker’s ability to select language appropriate to a given context. Linguists are largely in agreement about the central role that context plays in determining the choice and use of a particular language variety. Prasad [9] argues that a speaker’s vocabulary should be adapted to the audience being addressed. It logically follows that the choice of language should be dictated by the context to ensure that the selected variety is appropriate. However, a prevalent trend in Nigerian drama is the use of multilingualism, bilingualism, code-mixing, and code-switching in formal contexts that would typically require Standard British English. The desire to understand the contexts that influence these language choices in Nigerian plays forms the basis of this research. This study distinguishes itself

from previous sociolinguistic research by focusing on language choice within literary drama. The findings are expected to be unique and to contribute significantly to sociolinguistic studies, particularly because drama is the literary genre that most closely approximates the reality of human interaction.

1.2. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to conduct a sociolinguistic study of the influence of context on language choice in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. to identify the contexts that determine language choice in the two selected plays.
2. to investigate the effects of these contexts on language choice in the selected plays.
3. to examine, from a sociolinguistic perspective, how the playwrights portray the influence of context on language choice in society.
4. to discover the interplay between language users and the language they use in the two plays.
5. to explore the intricate relationship between language, society, and culture.

1.3. The Scope of the Study

This research is confined to two plays by first-generation Nigerian playwrights: Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* and Ola Rotimi’s *The Gods Are Not to Blame*. The study will not only examine the influence of context on language choice but will also explore how indigenous languages are interwoven with English in these texts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Choices in Multilingual Contexts

Language choice is a fundamental concept in sociolinguistics, referring to the speaker’s selection of a particular language, language variety, register, style, or discourse strategy in a given situation, especially within bilingual or multilingual communities [10, 11]. In this study, the term is used operationally to include shifts between formal and informal registers, Standard English and Nigerian English, code-switching and code-mixing, Pidgin-influenced forms, Yoruba lexical insertions such as culturally marked names and ritual terms, and proverb-driven or poetic forms of expression. These choices are treated as socially meaningful because they index participants’ status, communicative goals, cultural affiliation, emotional stance, and the norms of the speech event. In such communities, a multilingual speaker must make appropriate language choices, which are primarily influenced by the domain of use and the linguistic repertoires of the participants in the speech event. The decision is not arbitrary but is governed by a complex set of factors, including the interlocutors, the topic

of conversation, the social distance between speakers, and the physical location of the interaction. David [12] provides a comprehensive list of factors that can trigger a specific language choice, such as social status, gender, educational attainment, ethnicity, age, occupation, rural versus urban origin, the medium of communication, and the formality of the situation. Coulmas [13] further explains that individuals and groups make linguistic choices for various purposes, including the effective communication of ideas and the strategic association with or dissociation from others. This adaptability allows people to adjust their linguistic repertoires to new circumstances and even construct new linguistic forms to suit their needs. Fasold [14] adds another layer to this, noting that the language preference of a speaker is often influenced by the dominant languages in their environment, and vice versa.

2.2. Code-switching, Code-mixing, and Language Alternation

In multilingual societies, the phenomenon of alternating between languages or language varieties is a common communicative strategy. This practice is generally categorized into two types: code-switching and code-mixing. Code-switching refers to the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in the context of a single conversation [23]. This can occur between sentences (inter-sentential) or within a single sentence (intra-sentential). Code-switching is not a random act but a strategic one, used by speakers to achieve various communicative goals. It can be used to signal a change in topic, to emphasize a point, to express solidarity with a particular group, or to negotiate a particular social identity [23, 26]. For example, a speaker might switch from a formal language to a more informal one to create a sense of camaraderie with their interlocutor.

Code-mixing, on the other hand, involves the embedding of linguistic units such as words, phrases, or morphemes from one language into an utterance of another language. While some linguists use the terms code-switching and code-mixing interchangeably, others maintain a distinction, with code-mixing being seen as a more integrated form of language alternation. The prevalence of code-switching and code-mixing in post-colonial contexts, such as Nigeria, is a direct reflection of the complex linguistic histories of these nations. The legacy of colonialism has resulted in a situation where a European language (in this case, English) coexists with a multitude of indigenous languages. This linguistic reality is often mirrored in the literature produced in these nations, where writers use code-switching and code-mixing to create a more authentic and nuanced representation of their societies.

2.3. The Concept of Context and Its Influence on Language Choice

The interpretation of language meaning is deeply intertwined with the concepts of context of culture and context of

situation [15]. The foundational work of anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski has been highly influential in this area. Malinowski's theories, which emphasized that language is only meaningful when considered within the language events in which it is used, profoundly influenced linguists like J. R. Firth [16] and M. A. K. Halliday [15]. This perspective shifted the focus of linguistic analysis from individual words to the meaningful relationships they form with other words in their immediate environment. Language is constrained not only by the broader context of culture but also by the specific topic and participants of a given language event, which Halliday [15] terms the context of situation.

Malinowski [17] first developed his theory of context during his ethnographic fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands [15]. The inhabitants, who spoke the Kiriwinian language, had a culture vastly different from that of the West. Malinowski found that a literal translation of their texts was insufficient to convey their meaning to a Western audience. In his seminal work, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," Malinowski [17] argued that language can only be understood by considering the broader context of situation. He posited that language is "essentially rooted in the reality of the culture, the tribal life and customs of the people, and it cannot be explained without constant reference to these broader contexts of verbal utterance." An utterance, therefore, only becomes intelligible when it is placed within its context of situation [15].

Context is a widely used notion in linguistics, generally referring to the relevant features of the dynamic setting in which a linguistic unit is systematically used [18]. Huang [18] identifies three types of context: the physical context, which is the physical setting of the utterance; the linguistic context, which refers to the surrounding utterances in the same discourse; and the general knowledge context, which encompasses the shared background assumptions between the speaker and the addressee. This dynamic conception of context views it as a product of the interactive use of language, being constantly construed, co-constructed, and negotiated by the participants. It establishes a dialectical relationship between language users and the language they employ [18].

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, specifically utilizing the Ethnography of Communication model developed by Dell Hymes [1], commonly known as the SPEAKING model. The ethnography of communication emerged as a critical approach in sociolinguistics when the necessity of analyzing language in its social context became a central concern for linguists. This framework posits that language is a reflection of the reality and unique characteristics of its cultural milieu. It illuminates the profound connection between language and culture, and how language encodes the socio-cultural and physical environment of its speakers [19].

Hymes' SPEAKING model provides a robust analytical

tool for dissecting communicative events into their constituent components. The acronym SPEAKING represents eight distinct, yet interrelated, elements that guide the ethnographic analysis of speech. As reviewed and presented by Adebite [20], these components are as follows:

- 1) S - Situation: This component is twofold, encompassing both the setting and the scene. The setting refers to the concrete physical circumstances of the communicative event, including the time, place, and environmental conditions. The scene, in contrast, refers to the cultural definition or the psychological setting of the event. For instance, a formal dinner has a different scene from a casual family meal, even if the setting (a dining room) is the same.
- 2) P - Participants: This refers to the individuals involved in the speech event, including their roles, statuses, and relationships. It includes the speaker/sender/addresser and the hearer/receiver/addressee. The model distinguishes between the speaker-hearer in a direct speech event, the sender-receiver in written communication, and the addresser-addressee in the context of fictional texts, such as the implied author and reader.
- 3) E - Ends: This component addresses the purposes, goals, and outcomes of the speech event. Hymes distinguishes between the conventional outcomes of a communicative event (e.g., a verdict in a trial) and the personal goals of the individual participants (e.g., a lawyer's goal to win the case).
- 4) A - Act Sequence: This refers to both the message form and the message content. It involves analyzing what is said (the content) and how it is said (the form), including the precise words used and the structure of the conversation. It examines the sequence of speech acts that constitute the communicative event.
- 5) K - Key: This component pertains to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a message is conveyed. It is the element that signals the mood of the speech event. For example, a lecture can be delivered in a serious, formal key or a light-hearted, jocular one. The key often provides a crucial lens for interpreting the intended meaning of an utterance.
- 6) I - Instrumentalities: This refers to the channels of communication and the forms of speech being used. The channel is the medium of transmission (e.g., oral, written, telegraphic), while the forms of speech refer to the language, dialect, or register being employed (e.g., Standard English, Pidgin, a specific dialect).
- 7) N - Norms: This component encompasses the social rules that govern the communicative event. There are norms of interaction (e.g., rules of turn-taking, what topics are appropriate) and norms of interpretation (the cultural rules for understanding the meaning of what is said). These conventions can be universal or specific to the culture of the participants.
- 8) G - Genres: This refers to the identifiable categories of

communication, such as poems, proverbs, riddles, sermons, prayers, or lectures. Genres are often characterized by their typical linguistic forms and structures.

This comprehensive model integrates components of both the context of culture and the context of situation, providing a holistic framework for analysis. Adebite [20] notes that this approach to contextual meaning gives rise to 'stylistic' meaning, which describes the relationship between linguistic forms and features of the situational context, and 'co-textual' meaning, which relates linguistic features to one another within the linguistic environment. This study aims to systematically deconstruct the communicative events in Soyinka's and Rotimi's plays to reveal the underlying sociolinguistic principles that govern language choice.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, which is the most appropriate approach for an in-depth exploration of the sociolinguistic phenomena under investigation. Qualitative research is characterized by its focus on understanding phenomena in their natural settings, interpreting them in terms of the meanings people bring to them. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen [21], qualitative researchers aim to understand a phenomenon by examining the total picture, rather than deconstructing it into discrete variables. The objective is to achieve a holistic and deep understanding, rather than a numerical analysis of data. Furthermore, as Creswell (2009) notes, qualitative research is descriptive, with the researcher being interested in the process, meaning, and understanding that can be gained through words or pictures.

Specifically, this research utilizes a descriptive qualitative design to analyze the discourse elements of the ethnography of communication, as conceptualized by Hymes, within the two selected plays. A qualitative descriptive study is particularly suitable when the goal is to provide detailed descriptions of phenomena and to focus on the presentation of participants' dialogue and interaction [22]. This design allows for a rich, thick description of the language use in the plays, enabling a nuanced analysis of how context influences language choice.

4.2. Method of Data Collection

The data for this research were generated from two canonical plays by first-generation Nigerian playwrights: Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* [25] and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* [24]. These texts were selected as the primary sources for examining the influence of context on language choice. The plays are rich in dialogue that reflects the complex linguistic realities of a post-colonial society, where English, indigenous languages, and various registers coexist and interact. The complete texts of both plays were procured and served as the corpus for this study.

4.3. Sampling Procedures

A purposive sampling method was used to select conversations and exchanges from the literary texts. Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was chosen because it allows the researcher to select cases that are most informative for the study's objectives. The selection of excerpts was guided by their relevance to the research questions, specifically their potential to illustrate the influence of context on language choice. From the numerous conversations in the two plays, a total of 115 exchanges, contained within 16 distinct excerpts, were selected for detailed analysis. The sample was considered representative because it covered the two primary texts, different dramatic settings such as the market, palace, colonial bungalow, ritual procession, public address, and private confrontation, and different participant relationships including ruler-subject, elder-community, colonial officer-native subordinate, kinship, and priestly or prophetic authority. Six of the most illustrative excerpts are foregrounded in this article to demonstrate the recurring patterns identified across the larger sample. The analysis was guided by the components of Hymes' SPEAKING model: Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre.

4.4. Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were systematically identified, analyzed, and described using Hymes' SPEAKING model as the analytical framework. The process of data analysis involved several stages. First, the researcher conducted a thorough reading of

the entirety of both plays to gain a holistic understanding of the plots, characters, and linguistic styles. During this process, all communicative events that demonstrated interesting socio-linguistic features were identified. Next, the 16 excerpts were formally extracted from the texts. Each excerpt was then subjected to a rigorous analysis, where the dialogue was broken down and examined through the lens of each component of the SPEAKING model. This systematic approach ensured that all relevant aspects of the communicative events were considered, from the physical setting to the underlying cultural norms. The analysis was qualitative and interpretive, focusing on describing and explaining the relationship between the contextual factors and the linguistic choices made by the characters. The findings were then synthesized to draw broader conclusions about the portrayal of language use in the selected plays.

5. Results and Discussion

As outlined in the methodology, this section presents a detailed analysis of the data extracted from the selected plays. The analysis is conducted through the lens of Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING model to deconstruct the communicative events and explore the profound influence of context on language choice. The discussion will integrate the findings from the textual analysis with the theoretical concepts discussed in the literature review, providing a comprehensive sociolinguistic interpretation of the dramatic texts. Each play is analyzed sequentially, beginning with Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*.

Table 1. Summarizes the principal contextual dimensions that recur in the representative excerpts and the linguistic choices they most consistently predict. The pattern indicates that participant status and setting/scene recur most frequently, while key, norms, and genre shape the tone, register, and culturally marked forms of expression used by the characters.

Contextual dimension	Representative recurrence in displayed excerpts	Associated linguistic choices
Setting and scene	6/6 excerpts	Formal public settings elicit elevated or declarative registers; ritual settings elicit poetic, proverbial, and culturally saturated language.
Participant status and role	6/6 excerpts	Kings, chiefs, elders, colonial officers, and subordinates select language that indexes hierarchy, authority, deference, or resistance.
Key or tone	6/6 excerpts	Celebratory, solemn, confrontational, diplomatic, and fearful moods predict shifts in register, directness, and metaphorical density.
Instrumentalities	6/6 excerpts	Standard British English, Nigerian English, Pidgin-influenced forms, Yoruba-inflected English, proverbs, praise poetry, and ritual vocabulary appear as context-bound resources.
Norms and genre	6/6 excerpts	Praise-singing, royal proclamation, proverbial argument, and cross-cultural miscommunication determine acceptable forms of address and interpretation.

5.1. Analysis of Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman

Soyinka's play is a rich tapestry of language, weaving together elevated, poetic English with the deep structures and rhythms of Yoruba oratory. The language choices are heavily stratified, reflecting the social hierarchy, the cultural context, and the unfolding tragedy. The analysis of the following excerpts will demonstrate how context governs the characters' linguistic behavior.

Excerpt 1: The Elesin's Rite of Passage

Background: This scene opens the play, with Elesin Oba passing through the bustling market, accompanied by his drummers and a praise-singer (Olohun-iyo). This is not a casual stroll; it is the beginning of his rite of passage, a public procession towards his impending ritual suicide, a duty he must perform to accompany the deceased Alafin (King) to the ancestral realm. The excerpt is drawn from the opening market procession in Soyinka's play [25].

Praise-Singer: Elesin o! Elesin Oba! Howu! What tryst is this the cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind.

Elesin: (Slows down a bit, laughing). A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment.

Praise-Singer: Ooh, you knew that my companions? That's the way the world goes. Because the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children.

Elesin: When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at it? The market, long-suffering home of my spirit, and the women are packing up to go. That Esu-harassed day slipped into the stew-pot while we feasted. We ate it up with the rest of the meal. I have neglected my women.

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting is the vibrant, chaotic Yoruba market at dusk, a space that is both a center of commerce and a site of profound spiritual significance. The scene is one of public ritual and celebration, yet it is underscored by the gravity of impending death. The market, a symbol of life and earthly connection, is the space Elesin must traverse and transcend to fulfill his otherworldly duty. The atmosphere is a complex mixture of festivity and solemnity.
- 2) Participants: The primary interlocutors are Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman, a man of high social status and spiritual importance, and the Praise-Singer, his Olohun-iyo. Their relationship is hierarchical (Elesin is a chief), yet deeply intimate and symbiotic. The Praise-Singer is not merely a sycophant but a historian, a spiritual guide, and the voice of the community, whose role is to fortify Elesin for his journey.
- 3) Ends: The overarching goal of this interaction is to spiritually prepare and celebrate Elesin for his final transition. The Praise-Singer's words are not just flattery; they are incantations meant to bolster Elesin's resolve. The playful, metaphorical language about the "cockerel" and

the "brand-new bride" serves as a subtle test of Elesin's focus. The intended outcome is a public affirmation of Elesin's honor and the community's adherence to its sacred traditions.

- 4) Act Sequence: The dialogue unfolds as a poetic, call-and-response exchange. The Praise-Singer initiates with a metaphorical challenge, and Elesin responds with a witty, proverbial retort. The illocutionary acts include praising, challenging, reminding, and affirming. The sequence is fluid and lyrical, mimicking the rhythms of Yoruba oral poetry.
- 5) Key: The key is predominantly jocular and celebratory, yet it is a performance of merriment that masks the profound seriousness of the occasion. This juxtaposition of the comic and the tragic is a hallmark of Soyinka's dramaturgy. The language register is informal in its intimacy but highly formal and elevated in its poetic density and reliance on cultural symbolism.
- 6) Instrumentalities: The channel is face-to-face verbal interaction, enhanced by the non-verbal channel of drumming. The form of speech is a masterful example of linguistic syncretism. While the words are English, the syntax, imagery, and proverbial logic are distinctly Yoruba. Soyinka crafts an English that can "carry the weight" of his indigenous cultural context, a form of linguistic re-appropriation.
- 7) Norms: The interaction is governed by the cultural norms of the Yoruba people as depicted in the play. The central norm is the ritual suicide of the King's Horseman, a sacred duty to ensure cosmic balance. The norms of interaction involve the use of praise-singing, proverbs, and indirect, metaphorical language to address matters of great spiritual weight. It is a norm to celebrate the Elesin's journey, not to mourn it as a loss.
- 8) Genre: The genre is a form of dramatic dialogue that is deeply infused with panegyric poetry and oral performance traditions. It is a ritualistic exchange, not a simple conversation.

Excerpt 2: The Nature of Honor

Background: As the procession continues, the praise-singing intensifies. The women of the market join in, and the focus shifts to the philosophical underpinnings of Elesin's impending sacrifice: the concept of honor. The excerpt is drawn from the same opening ritual sequence in Soyinka's play [25].

Praise-Singer: Elesin Oba! Are you not that man who looked out of doors that stormy day the gods of suck limped by, drenched to the very lice that held his rags together? You took pity upon his sores and wished him fortune. Fortune was foot-loose this dawn, he replied, till you trapped him in a heartfelt wish that now returns to you. Elesin Oba, I say you are that man who chanced upon the calabash of honour, you thought it was palm wine and drained its contents to the final drop.

Elesin: Life has an end. A life that will outlive fame and friendship begs another name. What elder takes his tongue to

his plate, licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter silence when he calls on children to fulfill the smallest errand. Life is honour. It ends when honour ends.

Women: We know you for a man of honour.

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting remains the market, but the scene has shifted from a playful, introductory mood to a more direct and profound exploration of Elesin's character and his destiny. The atmosphere is charged with communal admiration and spiritual gravity.
- 2) Participants: The participants now include the Women of the market, who represent the collective voice and conscience of the community. Their presence broadens the interaction from a dialogue between Elesin and his Praise-Singer to a communal affirmation of their cultural values. Their relationship with Elesin is one of respect and reverence for his office and his fated role.
- 3) Ends: The goal here is to cement the definition of honor that underpins the entire cultural practice. The Praise-Singer is not just recalling a past deed but is mythologizing Elesin, framing his impending death not as a choice but as the culmination of a life lived with honor. Elesin's response serves to articulate the philosophical justification for his sacrifice. The outcome is a shared understanding and reinforcement of the cultural imperative that honor is more valuable than life itself.
- 4) Act Sequence: The Praise-Singer uses a narrative and a metaphor (the "calabash of honour") to praise Elesin. This is a speech act of commendation and myth-making. Elesin's response is a philosophical declaration, using a proverb about the elder to illustrate the importance of leaving a legacy. The Women's utterance is a choral affirmation, a speech act of collective agreement. The sequence moves from specific praise to general principle to communal consensus.
- 5) Key: The key is serious, elevated, and deeply philosophical. The tone is one of profound respect and admiration. The language register is highly formal and poetic, befitting the discussion of life, death, and honor. The mood is one of collective pride and solemn purpose.
- 6) Instrumentalities: The channel is still primarily oral, but the form of speech is now explicitly panegyric and gnomic. The Praise-Singer employs storytelling, while Elesin uses proverbial wisdom. The language is rich in imagery and metaphor, demonstrating the aesthetic and philosophical depth of Yoruba oral tradition.
- 7) Norms: This excerpt powerfully illustrates the cultural norm that places communal honor above individual existence. The norm of interpretation requires the audience (both in the play and of the play) to understand that Elesin's death is not a tragedy in the Western sense but a necessary, honorable, and life-affirming act within his cultural framework. The interaction reinforces the social contract that binds the individual to the collective.

- 8) Genre: The genre is a blend of praise-poetry, philosophical discourse, and dramatic dialogue. It functions as a public declaration of faith in the community's cosmology.

Excerpt 3: A Sudden Shift in Tone

Background: The celebratory atmosphere is abruptly shattered. As the women continue their praise, Elesin becomes inexplicably angry, silencing them. This sudden shift in mood creates confusion and anxiety, leading to a tense interaction with Iyaloja, the "mother" of the market. The excerpt is drawn from the market sequence in which Elesin's desire interrupts the communal ritual mood [25].

Women: (Puzzled, they whisper among themselves, turning mostly to Iyaloja): What is it? Did we say something to give offence? Have we slighted him in some way?

Elesin: Enough of that sound, I say. Let me hear no more in that vein. I've heard enough.

Iyaloja: We must have said something wrong. (Comes forward a little). Elesin Oba, we ask forgiveness before you speak.

Elesin: I am bitterly offended.

Iyaloja: Our unworthiness has betrayed us. All we can do is ask for your forgiveness. Correct us like a kind father.

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting is unchanged, but the scene undergoes a dramatic transformation. The mood shifts from communal celebration to tense confusion. The psychological atmosphere becomes one of apprehension as the women try to understand the source of Elesin's anger. This moment introduces the first sign of a potential disruption in the ritual, a foreshadowing of the tragedy to come.
- 2) Participants: The key participants are Elesin, the Women (as a collective), and Iyaloja, who steps forward as their representative. Iyaloja's role is crucial; she is both a powerful Figure in her own right and a guardian of the market's traditions. Her interaction with Elesin is one of deference mixed with authority. She addresses him respectfully but also seeks to manage the situation and restore harmony.
- 3) Ends: Elesin's immediate goal is to stop the praise, which he now finds hollow. His deeper, unstated goal, which becomes clear later, is to claim a new bride, a desire that represents his attachment to the physical world. Iyaloja's goal is to placate Elesin, understand the cause of his offense, and ensure the ritual proceeds without disruption. The outcome of this immediate exchange is a heightening of the dramatic tension and a demonstration of Iyaloja's diplomatic skill.
- 4) Act Sequence: The sequence begins with the Women's confused whispering (a collective speech act of questioning). Elesin follows with a forceful command (a directive speech act). Iyaloja then performs a series of acts: she speculates on their error, offers a pre-emptive apology (a commissive act), and requests clarification. Ele-

sin's declaration, "I am bitterly offended," is an expressive act. Iyaloja's final plea is a supplication, reinforcing the hierarchical relationship while gently guiding Elesin back to his expected role as a "kind father."

- 5) Key: The key shifts dramatically from celebratory to confrontational and then to placatory. Elesin's tone is angry and imperious. The Women's tone is one of confusion and fear. Iyaloja's tone is respectful, conciliatory, and diplomatic. This rapid modulation of key demonstrates the characters' sensitivity to the unfolding social and ritual context.
- 6) Instrumentalities: The channel remains oral. The form of speech shifts from the high poetic register of the previous excerpts to a more direct, though still formal, mode of address. Iyaloja's language is carefully chosen to show respect ("Elesin Oba," "Our unworthiness") while also controlling the situation. Elesin's language is blunt and commanding ("Enough of that sound, I say").
- 7) Norms: This scene highlights the norms of interaction when a social or ritual equilibrium is disturbed. The community's immediate response to the anger of a high-status individual is to assume fault and seek reconciliation. Iyaloja's actions are a masterclass in following the cultural script for resolving conflict and showing deference to authority. The underlying norm is the imperative to maintain harmony, especially during a critical ritual.
- 8) Genre: The genre shifts from praise-poetry to a tense dramatic confrontation. It is a moment of negotiation and conflict resolution, enacted through dialogue.

Excerpt 4: The Colonial Encounter

Background: This scene marks the collision of the two worlds in the play. Simon Pilkings, the colonial District Officer, is at his bungalow with his wife, Jane. He is trying to prevent Elesin's ritual suicide, an act he views as barbaric. Amusa, a native policeman who has converted to Christianity, arrives to report on the situation, but is horrified to find the Pilkingses wearing costumes seized from a local egungun cult, which they intend to wear to a masquerade ball. The excerpt is drawn from the colonial bungalow scene involving Pilkings, Jane, and Amusa [25].

Pilkings: Well, what is it Amusa? Did you find him?

Amusa: I have report to make sah.

Pilkings: I'm listening. What's the matter, you're shivering like a leaf.

Amusa: It is the egungun, sah.

Pilkings: What about the egungun?

Amusa: I cannot against it sah. It is not my place.

Jane: (advancing). What is he saying, Simon?

Pilkings: Don't worry, Jane. Just our good Amusa being his usual superstitious self.

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting is the colonial bungalow, a space that represents British power and cultural detachment from the local environment. The scene is one of pro-

found cultural misunderstanding and sacrilege. The Pilkingses' casual appropriation of the sacred egungun costumes creates an atmosphere of tension and foreshadows the disastrous consequences of their ignorance.

- 2) Participants: The participants are Simon Pilkings, the District Officer, who embodies the colonial mindset of rationalism and cultural superiority; Jane Pilkings, his wife, who is more curious but equally ignorant; and Amusa, the native policeman, who is caught between two worlds. Amusa's position is one of inherent conflict: he is an agent of the colonial authority, yet he retains a deep-seated reverence for his indigenous culture.
- 3) Ends: Pilkings' goal is to get a straightforward report from Amusa and to enforce the colonial law by stopping the ritual. Amusa's goal is to do his duty but also to express his horror and refuse to participate in what he perceives as a sacrilegious act. Jane's goal is simply to understand the confusing situation. The outcome is a complete breakdown in communication, highlighting the unbridgeable gap between the two cultural perspectives.
- 4) Act Sequence: Pilkings opens with a direct question. Amusa responds with a formal, deferential statement ("I have report to make sah"), but his shivering and subsequent utterances reveal his distress. His refusal to speak in the presence of the desecrated egungun costume is a powerful non-verbal speech act of protest. Pilkings' dismissal of Amusa's fear as "superstitious" is a speech act of condescension and cultural invalidation.
- 5) Key: The key is starkly divided. Pilkings' tone is impatient, pragmatic, and dismissive. Amusa's tone is one of fear, reverence, and formal deference. The clash of these keys underscores the lack of shared understanding. The language register used by Pilkings is informal and colloquial British English. Amusa's language is a form of Nigerian Pidgin or heavily indigenized English ("I cannot against it sah"), which Pilkings interprets as a sign of his lack of education and sophistication.
- 6) Instrumentalities: The channel is oral. The form of speech is a critical element. Pilkings uses Standard British English. Amusa's language, a non-standard variety, immediately marks him as a subordinate. This linguistic stratification is a direct reflection of the colonial power structure. The visual instrumentality of the egungun costumes is central to the scene's conflict.
- 7) Norms: The scene is a direct clash of cultural norms. For the Pilkingses, the costumes are mere fancy dress. For Amusa, they are sacred objects, and wearing them is a violation of a powerful taboo. The norms of interaction are dictated by the colonial hierarchy: Pilkings speaks with authority, and Amusa responds with deference, even as he attempts to uphold his own cultural norms. Pilkings' failure to recognize or respect Amusa's norms leads to the communication breakdown.
- 8) Genre: The genre is one of cross-cultural miscommunication and colonial comedy of errors, which quickly

darkens into tragedy. It is a scene of dramatic irony, as the audience understands the gravity of the Pilkingses' actions, even if they themselves do not.

5.2. Analysis of Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame*

Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* is a Nigerian adaptation of the Greek classic *Oedipus Rex*. Rotimi masterfully transposes the story into a Yoruba cultural setting, and his use of language is a key element of this cultural translation. The play is renowned for its rich use of proverbs, pidgin, and a form of English that is deeply infused with the cadence and worldview of the Yoruba language. The language choices made by the characters are powerful indicators of their social status, their emotional state, and the specific context of their interactions.

Excerpt 5: The King's Address

Background: The play opens with King Odewale of Kutuje addressing his people, who are suffering from a terrible plague. He is a beloved and respected king, and his people have come to him for salvation. He addresses them from the steps of his palace. The excerpt is drawn from the opening palace scene in Rotimi's play [24].

Odewale: My people... your suffering is my suffering. The gods are my witness. I will not sleep, I will not rest, until I have found the cause of this... this pestilence that has befallen our land. The oracle of Ifa has spoken. The killer of the old king, King Adetusa, my predecessor, lives among us. Find me the man! I say... find me the man!

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting is the front of King Odewale's palace in Kutuje, a formal and public space. The scene is one of crisis and supplication. The people are desperate, and the atmosphere is thick with fear and hope. This is a formal address to the entire community.
- 2) Participants: The primary speaker is King Odewale. The audience is the people of Kutuje. The relationship is that of a monarch and his subjects. Odewale is in a position of supreme authority, but he is also seen as the father and protector of his people.
- 3) Ends: Odewale's goal is twofold: to reassure his people that he shares their pain and is taking action, and to initiate the investigation that will (unbeknownst to him) lead to his own downfall. The outcome is a public declaration of his commitment and the official start of the hunt for the regicide.
- 4) Act Sequence: Odewale begins with an expressive act, showing empathy ("your suffering is my suffering"). He then makes a commissive statement, a vow to his people ("I will not sleep, I will not rest..."). He follows this with a reportive act, conveying the message from the oracle. He concludes with a powerful directive, a command to his people ("Find me the man!"). The sequence moves from empathy to action.

5) Key: The key is serious, formal, and impassioned. Odewale's tone is one of regal authority mixed with genuine concern. The language register is a form of elevated, formal English, but it is a Nigerian English, characterized by its directness and emotional force. It is not the poetic, metaphorical English of Soyinka's *Elesin*, but a more direct and declamatory style.

6) Instrumentalities: The channel is a public oration. The form of speech is a carefully crafted Nigerian English that conveys authority and resonates with the cultural context. Rotimi uses repetition ("I will not sleep, I will not rest," "Find me the man! I say... find me the man!") for emphasis, a common feature of African oral performance.

7) Norms: The scene adheres to the cultural norm of a king being the ultimate protector of his people. The people turn to their king in times of crisis, and the king is expected to consult the gods (through the oracle) and take decisive action. The norms of interaction for this formal address require the king to speak with authority and the people to listen with deference.

8) Genre: The genre is a royal proclamation or a formal public address. It serves to set the plot in motion and establish the central conflict of the play.

Excerpt 6: The Power of Proverbs

Background: A heated argument has erupted between King Odewale and the blind seer, Baba Fakunle. Odewale, angered by the seer's cryptic and accusatory pronouncements, insults him. Aderopo, Odewale's brother-in-law, tries to intervene and calm the king, employing traditional wisdom to do so. The excerpt is drawn from the palace confrontation involving Odewale, Baba Fakunle, and Aderopo [24].

Aderopo: A king does not get angry. Or if he does, he should be like the tortoise: slow to anger. When the tortoise is angry, he withdraws into his shell. But you, my king, you are roaring like a lion!

Odewale: And you! You stand there, talking to me of tortoise and lion. Get out of my sight! The hyena, when it wants to eat its children, first accuses them of smelling like goats.

Analysis:

- 1) Situation: The setting is still the palace, a formal space, but the scene has devolved from a public assembly into a tense, personal confrontation. The atmosphere is charged with anger, suspicion, and the shock of a king losing his composure.
- 2) Participants: The interlocutors are King Odewale and Aderopo, his brother-in-law and a respected chief. Their relationship is one of both family and state. Aderopo's position allows him to advise the king, but Odewale's rising paranoia and anger are beginning to strain these bonds.
- 3) Ends: Aderopo's goal is to de-escalate the conflict and remind Odewale of the expected royal decorum. He is trying to save the king from his own rashness. Odewale's goal, fueled by his growing fear and anger, is to deflect

the seer's accusation and assert his authority. He interprets Aderopo's counsel as a challenge and a sign of conspiracy.

- 4) Act Sequence: Aderopo begins with a corrective statement, immediately softened by a proverb (a speech act of advising through traditional wisdom). Odewale's response is a furious directive ("Get out of my sight!"), followed by a counter-proverb. This is a complex speech act: it is an accusation, a dismissal, and a justification of his own anger, all wrapped in the guise of folk wisdom.
- 5) Key: The key is confrontational and aggressive. Aderopo attempts to introduce a calmer, more conciliatory key, but Odewale's furious tone dominates the exchange. The rapid, proverbial back-and-forth is a form of verbal duel, a contest of wisdom and authority.
- 6) Instrumentalities: The primary instrumentality here is the proverb. In Yoruba culture, and in Rotimi's play, proverbs are not mere decoration; they are a vital form of speech for conveying complex truths, offering advice, and making arguments. The ability to use proverbs effectively is a sign of wisdom and cultural competence. The channel is direct, face-to-face speech.
- 7) Norms: The scene illustrates the cultural norm of using proverbs in serious discourse. Aderopo's proverb appeals to the norm of kingly behavior: a king should be patient and composed. Odewale's counter-proverb, however, twists this norm. He uses a proverb not to calm the situation, but to accuse Aderopo of treachery, demonstrating how even these traditional forms can be weaponized in a conflict.
- 8) Genre: The genre is a dramatic argument conducted through proverbs. It is a verbal sparring match that reveals character and advances the plot by showing the depth of Odewale's paranoia and his increasing isolation.

5.3. Comparative Discussion: Context, Register, and Worldview

The comparative analysis of these two seminal plays reveals the sophisticated ways in which Soyinka and Rotimi manipulate linguistic resources to serve their distinct artistic visions. Their approaches to language are not merely stylistic choices but are deeply ideological, reflecting their engagement with the complexities of post-colonial identity, cultural authenticity, and the role of the artist in society. The differences in their use of register, their treatment of the colonial language, and their integration of indigenous oral forms highlight the diverse possibilities for creating a Nigerian national literature in English.

Soyinka's linguistic strategy in *Death and the King's Horseman* can be described as one of linguistic appropriation and elevation. He takes the English language, the language of the colonizer, and imbues it with the full weight and texture of Yoruba cosmology. This is not simply a matter of translating Yoruba proverbs or idioms into English. Rather, Soyinka

forges a new kind of English, one that can accommodate the philosophical and spiritual nuances of his culture. The elevated, poetic register serves to create a sense of distance from the mundane, everyday world, lifting the drama into the realm of myth and ritual. This linguistic choice is a political act. By demonstrating that English can be made to "speak Yoruba," Soyinka asserts the validity and sophistication of his indigenous culture, challenging the colonial assumption that African cultures are primitive or lacking in philosophical depth. The play becomes a powerful argument for cultural relativism, suggesting that the tragedy of the colonial encounter lies in the West's inability to comprehend a worldview that does not conform to its own rationalistic and individualistic values.

The analyses of the excerpts from *Death and the King's Horseman* and *The Gods Are Not to Blame* reveal that while both playwrights masterfully employ language to reflect their specific cultural and dramatic contexts, they do so through distinct sociolinguistic strategies. The language choices in each play are not merely decorative but are fundamental to the construction of their respective dramatic worlds, characterizations, and thematic concerns.

A primary point of comparison lies in the dominant linguistic registers employed by each playwright. Soyinka, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, crafts a highly poetic and elevated English register that is saturated with the syntax, imagery, and metaphysical concepts of the Yoruba worldview. The language of *Elesin and the Praise-Singer* is dense with metaphors and allusions that require a deep understanding of the cultural context for full comprehension. This choice of a high, formal, and poetic register is appropriate to the play's context, which is fundamentally a ritualistic and metaphysical tragedy. The central conflict is not about discovering a hidden truth but about fulfilling a sacred, public duty. The language, therefore, serves to elevate the action, imbuing it with cosmic significance. The context is one of spiritual transition, and the language reflects this by being otherworldly and incantatory.

In contrast, Ola Rotimi, in *The Gods Are Not to Blame*, utilizes a register that is more grounded in the everyday speech of the Yoruba people, characterized by its directness, emotionality, and, most notably, its pervasive use of proverbs. While the language is still a form of English, it is what might be termed a "proverbial register." Proverbs serve as the primary vehicle for expressing wisdom, making arguments, and navigating social interactions. This linguistic strategy is perfectly suited to the play's context, which is a domestic and political tragedy centered on investigation and discovery. The plot unfolds like a detective story, and the proverbs are the clues and the tools of reasoning used by the characters. The context is a search for truth in the human world, and the language reflects this by being gnomic and didactic, focused on practical wisdom and social commentary.

This difference in register is directly linked to the social and hierarchical contexts of the two plays. In Soyinka's play, the linguistic stratification is stark. The colonial characters (the Pilkingses) speak a colloquial, and often dismissive, British

English. The Yoruba characters, particularly those of high status like Elesin, speak a sophisticated, poetic English, while a character like Amusa, who is caught between worlds, speaks a form of Nigerian Pidgin. This creates a clear linguistic hierarchy that mirrors the colonial power structure. In Rotimi's play, the linguistic variation is less about the colonial encounter and more about internal social dynamics. While King Odewale speaks with royal authority, his language is accessible to his people because it is rooted in a shared proverbial tradition. The ability to use proverbs effectively, rather than the ability to speak Standard English, is the marker of wisdom and status in this context.

Finally, the language choices reflect the different worldviews being presented. Soyinka's play is a defense of a holistic, integrated Yoruba cosmology against the rationalistic and fragmenting worldview of the West. The language is a testament to the philosophical depth and beauty of this cosmology. Rotimi's play, while set in a Yoruba cultural milieu, is an adaptation of a Greek story. His use of language serves to naturalize the foreign plot, making the story of Oedipus resonate within a Yoruba context. The proverbs and the Nigerian English help to bridge the cultural gap, demonstrating the universality of the tragic theme while grounding it in a specific, local reality. The worldview is syncretic, blending the fatalism of the Greek tragedy with the communal wisdom of Yoruba culture.

In summary, both playwrights demonstrate a profound understanding of the principle that language choice is determined by context. Soyinka uses a poetic, elevated register to explore a context of ritual and metaphysics, while Rotimi employs a proverbial, grounded register to navigate a context of investigation and social drama. In both cases, the language is not merely a medium for the plot but is the very fabric of the plays' cultural and dramatic worlds.

This sociolinguistic exploration of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and Ola Rotimi's *The Gods Are Not to Blame* affirmed the foundational principle that context is a determinative factor in language choice. Guided by Hymes' SPEAKING model [1], the study showed how setting, participant roles, communicative ends, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre govern the linguistic strategies employed by characters in the selected Nigerian dramatic texts. The findings indicate that language in the plays is dynamic and socially purposeful: characters use it to negotiate hierarchy, perform ritual obligations, express communal values, resist domination, and manage conflict.

The research identified that the contexts influencing language choice are primarily organized along a formal-informal continuum, which is itself shaped by a confluence of factors. In both plays, the status and relationships of the participants profoundly impact the register and tone of the dialogue. The formal, poetic language of Elesin in his interactions with the Praise-Singer, the deferential yet authoritative speech of Iyalaja, the proverbial sparring between Odewale and his

chiefs, and the stark linguistic divide between the colonial officers and the native characters all serve as potent examples of how social structure is encoded in language. The physical setting and the psychological scene—be it the spiritually charged marketplace, the sterile colonial bungalow, or the tense royal court—further constrain and shape the communicative events.

In conclusion, the analysis provides compelling evidence for the inextricable link between language, context, and culture. The characters' linguistic choices are strategic acts that reflect their social positions, cultural environment, and communicative goals. The plays therefore serve as valuable literary case studies for sociolinguistics, demonstrating that fictional dialogue can preserve culturally grounded patterns of speech and interpretation. In the hands of Soyinka and Rotimi, language becomes more than dialogue; it becomes social action and a mirror of cultural consciousness.

Abbreviations

SPEAKING Setting and Scene, Participants, Ends, Act Sequence, Key, Instrumentalities, Norms, and Genre

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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