

Naming and Identity Construction in Selected African Queer Films

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Abstract

Several studies have examined queerism from different perspectives using queer theory, film theory, feminism theory and new media theory, amongst others. However, there is a dearth of literature on African queer movies which focus on naming patterns and ideological underpinnings in the way queerism has been linguistically codified. Hence, this paper from a critical pragmatic perspective interrogates the way language is used as a signifying practice and the ideologies projected in their discourses in selected African queer films. Dialogues were purposively selected thematically from two queer movies: *Rafiki* (Kenya, 2018) and *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (Nigeria, 2018). These movies were classified and analysed using principles of critical pragmatics. Findings revealed the use of rhetorical questions to satirise the reactions of homosexuals and people who support them. The choice of words such as abominable, misbehaving and deterrent in *We don't live here anymore* gives an indication of the speakers' perspective on the subject of discourse. The implicature derived is that the speakers' orientation does not align with that of the queers and thus they are deviants. Also, queers are labelled as perpetrators of reprehensible acts in the two films. In *Rafiki*, the parents of Kena talked about her being cleaned because she has been possessed by demons while in *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, Chidi's mother asked God to deliver his boy from evil spirits. In fact, a deliverance prayer was organized for Kena. The choice of the derogatory nouns -fag and faggot in the two films as a naming strategy point to the perception of queers by the speakers. Other reference choices that show homosexuals as demystifying creatures include labelling them as 'lost souls' and 'evil spirits'. Queers are also seen as juvenile delinquents. For instance, in *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, queerism is labelled 'teenage rebellion', while in *Rafiki*, it is attributed to naivety and in turn a temporary feeling that would be outgrown. This implies that queers are perceived as juvenile delinquents who are still negotiating their identities. Although queer related discourse as seen in these two movies is still guided by the African societies' non-conformist stance on the subject, the main characters in these two movies are not straight jacketed into maintaining this heteronormative stance.

Keywords: *Queer, homosexuality, African queer movies, critical pragmatics*

Introduction

Language is an integral aspect of culture; it can be used to x-ray diverse ideals or inclinations of a society. There are appropriate and inappropriate ways of

discussing specific phenomenon according to the dictates of the society. For instance, in sexual discourse there are restraints on what is allowable in public discourse. When it comes to individual's sexual orientation,

there are even stricter rules. Pioneer leading theorists on discourse of queer theory were Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and others (Green, 2010; Giesking, 2008; Haggerty, 1986). Discussions edging on sexual discourse is 'tabooed in public discourse in both Western and African cultures' Dare (2005) This accounts for the 'repressive hypothesis' critiqued by Michel Foucault in 'The History of Sexualities', where he opines that from the 17th to the mid-20th century, sex was a secret affair restricted to the confines of matrimony, and discussions bordering on sex have been banned and repressed.

Foucault (1978) asserts that the 'repressive hypothesis' is a limiting effort to connect overt discourses of sex to personal emancipation. However, Foucault states that from the 17th to the mid-20th century the 'repressive hypothesis' was an illusion, rather than a suppression of Western society's sexuality. In fact, discourse about sexuality flourished during this time period and it 'was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation and modification of desire itself' (p. 21-22). In contrast to African societies, Green-Simms (2016) avers that writers who addressed previously tabooed themes in Africa only emerged in the late 20th century and they were often referred to as the third-generation writers. These writers in depicting queerism often 'show how homosexuality is integral to larger debates and discussions about women's struggles, sexism, imposed gender normativity, violence, corruption, religion, and immigration' (Green-Simms, 2016, p. 143).

In both societies, heteronormativity was the main focus of discourse, where heterosexuality was viewed as the norm and any deviations, such as homosexuality, was regarded abnormal or "queer". Thus, Norton (2000) recognises the impact of 'the structures and labels imposed upon it (queer culture) by an external mainstream culture' in evolving the language of queerism. This however is depicted in films which serves as data for this paper. Existing studies have examined queerism in specific contexts using Queer theory, Film theory, Feminism, New Media amongst others. So far, there is no accessed literature that has examined how African queer movies have been linguistically conceptualised. Therefore, this paper, from a Pragmatic perspective interrogates the way queerism has been codified and the identity constructions projected in selected 'African queer films.

Synopsis of the selected African movies

Rafiki is a lesbian romance set in a place where such love stories, in real life and onscreen, are forbidden by law. It is the first Kenyan film to be screened at Cannes and, more importantly, the first film with a positive message about homosexuality to play in Kenyan theatres. Kena and Ziki live very different lives in Nairobi. Kena works in her father's shop and awaits the start of nursing school, while Ziki passes the days hanging out with her friends and making up dance routines. Their paths cross when their fathers run against each other for seats in the County Assembly, and they find themselves drawn to each other. Soon their interest grows to affection and the girls find ways to

love each other despite the ever-watching gaze of the neighbourhood.

We Don't Live Here Anymore is a Nollywood movie that tells the story of two teenage boys in Prominence high school – Tolu Bajulaiye and Chidi Ekwunwue, who fall in love with each other and have to deal with the society after being caught by a teacher during a steamy session. With an impending expulsion at bay, Tolu's mother, Nike, who is a powerful matriarch, pulls all the strings within her palm and resets the tone into what would become a battle of class, blackballing and a triggering society ready to punish anything besides the status-quo. On the other hand, Chidi's mother who is a single parent becomes an outcast. At the end, Chidi commits suicide which makes Tolu a living corpse. Eventually, he leaves his parent's care and all attempts to find him prove abortive. His parents in turn become miserable because of their futile attempts at locating him.

Review of literature

Critical pragmatics

Mey (2001) presents his idea of Critical Pragmatics (henceforth CP) as that which showcases criticality and pragmatics in language production and interpretation. He draws his insights from Fairclough's Lancaster School of critical language awareness (p. 316). The term 'critical' is related to appointing power to groups in the public domain whether on the level of production or interpretation (Fairclough, 1989). Al-Hindawi & Mohammed (2018) surmise that we may produce or construe a

piece of discourse in a powerless or a powerful way.

Mey (1989) claims that "there is a pragmatic aspect to all linguistic phenomena" (p. 829); pragmatics "should get itself involved in improving the human environment" (p. 830). Mey (2001) argues that pragmatists "need to integrate their practical endeavours toward a better use of language with a theory of language use" (p. 289). Therefore, in criticality studies, the critical issue being discussed accounts for the stance to be embraced in contrast to the opposing view. In this respect, queer language draws on opposing inferences from heterosexual norms since they are perceived sexually compliant. Adopting such stance implies revealing how the critical issue is laid bare in front of language users, informing them of the undesired connotation in language. In sum, two key concepts in critical studies are ideology and power; and explicating these issues in pragmatic work is the goal of CPs.

Archer et al. (2012) surmise that the fundamental constituents of CPs are pragmatic examinations of power. How do the pragmatic theoretic elements index identity and power relations. Hence, this paper examines queer language in the selected African movies as another perspective in unravelling how ideology and power are revealed in Critical Pragmatics. In this paper, we use pragmatic principles of reference strategies and implicature to interrogate our data set.

Reference strategies

Reference deals with the way listeners assign names to objects being discussed. In line with Yule (1996:22) “reference is not simply a relationship between a word or phrase and an object or person in the world. It is a social act, in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identify an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended”. Hence, reference assignment may include (but not limited to) the use of personal names, address terms, use of deictic expressions and particularly indexicals. Hence, in this paper, we identify the reference strategies deployed in naming and labelling queers.

Implicature

Implicature is the backdrop to most human communication. It provides insights into how much gets communicated even when the propositions expressed do not explicitly reveal ‘surface’ meanings. By ‘surface meaning’ we mean utterance interpretations that rely only on the semantics of the language as used by the speaker. Mey (2001: 45) asserts that “implicature is a regularity that cannot be captured in a simple syntactic or semantic ‘rule’.” According to this position, implicature goes beyond what is on the surface or deep level syntactic analysis of language study to look at what is not explicitly expressed but implied via the choice of lexical choices and/ or other contextual variables that participants employ in their propositions. For implicatures to be derived, listeners need to share background knowledge of certain norms as we shall see in our data set.

2.1 Queer theory

West (2018) opines that in many histories of queer studies, Teresa de Lauretis (1991) is credited with coining the term “queer theory” during a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in 1990. Queer is a sexual orientation that defies the social cultural norm of sexual orientation, preference and choice. Queer was a symbol of perversion, disdain, sickness and absurdity (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). Queer is the umbrella under which bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects are subsumed, but its analytical framework also includes topics like cross-dressing, intersex bodies and identities, gender ambiguity and gender-confirmation surgery. The deployment of queer is an attempt to move beyond the hegemonic and historic practice of institutionalised systems using identity – categories (e.g., a “homosexual” identity) to shame, regulate, and eradicate same-sex sexual behaviour (Foucault, 1985).

Queer theory grew out of gay/lesbian studies, which in turn grew out of feminist studies and feminist theory. Gay/lesbian studies, as a political form of academics, also challenge the notion of normative sexualities. In turn, queer theory emerges from gay/lesbian studies’ attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behaviour. For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is “natural”,

“essential”, “biological” or “God-given” (Harris, 2005).

Calafell and Nakayama (2016) argue that gendered constructions are historically and culturally constituted; not particularly the same in all historical eras or in all cultures around the world. In other words, these gendered ideas are not “natural”, or grounded in biology. Queer theory insists on the constructed aspects of identities, and by so doing it opens the possibility of constructing identities in other ways and for other goals. Queer challenges the binary way of thinking about sexualities. Queer embraces whatever is non-normative. Hence, it is anti-essentialist, as it does not claim any essential, underlying character to the various categories of sexual identity.

Queer theory is a segment of academic thoughts that focuses on the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities and categorizations. To the queer theorist, heterosexuality and homosexuality are binary social constructs that hold saliency only in certain historical moments, rather than descriptors of innate sexual types. Thus, rather than studying the homosexuals or heterosexual individual, the queer theorists study the webs of power and discourse that create and uphold the idea that such individuals exist, and that defining individuals by sexual object choice is somehow natural.

Queer theory attempts to break down the continual use of categories and labels that stereotype and harm those who are in marginalised positions, such as LGBT people (de Lauretis, 1991). Queer theory

“re-presents” a more fluid concept of gender and sexuality to enhance understanding of human diversity (de Lauretis, 1991).

The accounts of queer approaches to television, film, and digital media converge and diverge in focus as well as style, but they all invitations to reflect on the important developments that took place in queer studies, LGBT activism, and the media industries in the 1990s (Ahn, Himbery & Young, 2014). The launch of LGBT-dedicated cable channels in the United States and Canada simultaneously exploited the segmenting potential of narrowcasting, thus reinforcing hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nation, and marked a new era of visibility and political recognition. These same deregulatory shifts also forced queer studies to reckon with the globalization and digitization of many national and regional economies outside the United States.

With the rapid globalization of regional media industries in the 1990s, scholars institutionally based in the United States and beyond tracked a growing body of queer transnational media that challenged normative ideas about kinship, family, intimacy, and empire in ways that did not legibly cohere with the global market or with a US-based politics of “coming out” and visibility. A queer approach to media theory and practice has suggested possibilities for challenging—through critical analysis—overlapping structures of patriarchy, nationhood, citizenship, heteronormativity, and the machinations of neoliberal capitalism.

Fouz-Hernandez (2010) in 'Assimilation and Its Discontents: Representations of Gay Men in Spanish Cinema of the 2000s' concludes that Spanish gay men as represented in some selected movies have formed a strong sense of community, enjoy great visibility and, as couples, have loving relationships that are not so different from those of their heterosexual counterparts of their own and previous generations. This sense of identity is visually reaffirmed in territories, which are not as ghettoized as a first reading may suggest. The support networks that populate such territories now include members of gay men's biological families as well as alternative, larger families (not exclusively gay, or male) formed within these communities.

In Africa however, Green-Simms (2016) argues that gay characters are portrayed as murderous and lecherous, often involved in other vices such as prostitution and witchcraft, and they are almost always a direct and clear threat to heterosexual marriages. She asserts that Nollywood is the first form of African popular culture to provide an archive of gay-themed narratives. Nollywood has only three possible endings for these characters: they are killed, imprisoned or become Christians who return to heterosexuality and denounce their sins. They cast homosexuality in a negative light and have arguably helped to legitimate laws that criminalize homosexuality.

The increased criminalisation of homosexuality has compelled both young writers and more established third generation writers to insist on telling their

own stories of love and suffering and to do so in public and visible way that provides levels of detail and intimacy previously unseen. These stories are beginning to provide readers with portraits of everyday life and love, with struggles that are just as much about being gay and African as they are about being a woman and African, an immigrant and African, effeminate and African, or poor and African (Green-Simms, 2016).

In 'Unlocking the Arab Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in Egyptian Film', Menunicucci (1998) reveals that homosexual characters are portrayed in many Arab films in an implicit, rather than explicit manner. There are no kissing or sex scenes to be found. Directors have faced problems in realistically depicting homosexuals, even when they are required by adaptations from literature. Neither the word nor outright acts can appear on the screen because they violate censorship codes that ban the word "homosexual" or obvious depictions of homosexual sexual behaviour.

Methodology and theoretical framework

In this paper, we purposively selected dialogues based on thematic consideration as regards the subject of discourse. The linguistic choices of the characters were carefully noted and categorized on queerism and labelled to reflect the identities they construct for queers in the films. Such texts are identified in a table and then discussed using the principles from reference strategies and implicature.

Data presentation and analysis

In this section, linguistic items for codifying queers in *We Don't Live Here Anymore* and *Rafiki* and the identities constructed are highlighted and discussed:

Queers as Deviants

In most African societies, queer defies the social cultural norm of sexual orientation, preference and choice. It is considered non-normative and deviant. Heterosexuality is the standard and heteronormative. Every

other sexual identity that does not fit into the binary power relation of male vs female is considered deviant and punishable. In fact, offenders are liable to at least 14 years imprisonment in some Africa countries including Nigeria and Kenya. Although homosexuality is outlawed in many African countries, same-sex relationships have been legalised in Angola, Botswana, Seychelles, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and Lesotho (2019). Below is a table showing extracts from the two movies relating to queers being perceived as deviants.

<i>Rafiki</i>	<i>We Don't Live Here Anymore</i>
Utterance 1a Pastor: What surprises me is that there are Kenyans who are challenging the government because of their stand on same-sex marriage . They say it's a human right. What is a human right?	Utterance 1b Principal: The school board is bent on making scapegoats out of your kids... Just to prove to everyone their strong stance against homosexuality...It will serve as a deterrent .
Utterance 2a Kena's Dad: Save that anger for those guys who almost beat her to death?They should be at the police station, not our daughter.	Utterance 2b Chidi's mother: They were caught misbehaving. They said they had sex. I don't understand it.
Utterance 3a Kena's Dad: It could've been worse. You could have gone to jail.	Utterance 3b Chidi's mother: Society punishes anyone who violates its order, and what you did was abominable .

Table 1: Interaction examples showing linguistic index of queers as deviants

There are sanctions both at the micro and macro level. At the micro level, jungle justice usually takes precedence. Non-authorised bearers of the law subject queer to physical abuse, battering and sometimes death due to queers presumed deviant

nature. At the macro level, social institutions are at the forefront of sanctioning. While in *Rafiki*, Ziki, and Kena were dishd jungle justice and even ended up at the police station, Chidi in *We Don't Live Here Anymore* was expelled from school. His partner Tolu got a waiver due to the

influential position his parents hold in the society.

The linguistic choices that reflect the labelling of queers as deviants are portrayed through rhetorical questions to satirise their reactions to order, strong verbs and adjectives to condemn queers acts and negative labelling/naming. The choice of the words abominable, misbehaving and deterrent gives an indication of the speakers' perspective in the subject of discourse. The implicature derived is that the speakers' orientation do not align with that of the queers and thus they are deviants.

Queers as perpetrators of reprehensible acts

Besides queers being identified as non-conformist as per certain societal standards on sexuality, they are also perceived as perpetrators of reprehensible acts. Here, the

context determines to what extent this labelling would be distasteful. Based on shared social cultural knowledge of anti-queer enthusiasts, queers are tagged enablers of repulsive acts. This kind of perception and disgust for the 'act' usually results in jungle justice as seen in *Rafiki*. In religious contexts, the enormity of this act eludes the physical. It has a spiritual connotation of being possessed by 'demonic spirits' which requires spiritual cleansing. In fact, religious moral whips aver that God hates the act. The biblical allusion of Sodom and Gomorrah is usually referenced and it is important that the queer is set straight to avoid fatal consequences. Below is a table showing extracts from the two movies relating to queers being perceived as perpetrators of reprehensible acts.

<i>Rafiki</i>	<i>We Don't Live Here Anymore</i>
Utterance 4a Kena's Father: Let her clean up. We can talk after that. Kena's Mother: She will never be clean... Kena's Mother: Don't you dare speak to me! It is your fault, John. Are you forgetting that demons have possessed this child? You want me to accept these demons in this house? Dad: Are you suggesting... Mercy: I am concentrating on cleansing her. She is full of demons, and it is because of you, you and those women out there. It is all your fault.	Utterance 4b Tolu's father: Is it true? How could you bring shame into this family? After everything we did for you...shameful stupid animal...My own son pants down with another dude...Your son is sick...I don't have any traces of gay in my family, I wonder where he got that from.

Utterance 5a Waireri: What are you looking at, faggot? Kena: How is he hurting you? Waireri: Do you think God is just watching men fuck each other?	Utterance 5b Chidi's mother: Father Lord, right the wrong in your son, deliver him, deliver us from evil spirits. Chidi: You think I chose this? I prayed to God to be like other boys. I accepted it. This is who I am.
Utterance 6a Pastor: Are we going to ignore God? Don't chose to be lost!...God left them to follow their shameful desires. Even women changed their natural ways to unnatural ways...and men did the same thing. They left women for their unnatural ways and desired other men. They did shameful things with other men. And as a result of their sin, they suffered.	Utterance 6b Student: Chidi was a faggot. Student 1: God hates fags. Student 2: Faggot, we should cut your dick right here, right now.
Utterance 11 Deliverance Prayer Pastor: We're humbled, and our hearts are broken. We pray to you, merciful God to save this soul...Show mercy on Kena...We say every strong hold is broken.	

Table 2: Interaction examples showing linguistic index of queers as Perpetrators of Reprehensible Acts

The choice of 'fags' and 'faggot' in both movies show the distasteful notion of homosexuality in the African society as exemplified in the chosen West and East African movies. Queer theorists opine that homosexuality is considered to defy the heteronormativity norms in most societies. This accounts for why these two societies are in sync regarding the use of these derogatory words.

Meanwhile, the reference choice of referring to homosexuals as 'lost' and 'evil spirits' in both movies further affirm the position of Critical Pragmatists regarding language use being depictive of ideology and power. Marxism followers agree that religion is an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) used for conditioning the minds of people. In both dialogues, there is a religious undertone in the use 'lost' and 'evil spirits'. In fact, 'lost' was extracted from the speech of a pastor during a sermon in *Rafiki*. He attributes homosexuals to condemned souls, whose resting place is in 'hell'. On the other hand,

Chidi's mother's reference to 'evil spirits' is synonymous to the biblical allusion. In the biblical mythology, evil spirits are considered demonic and are usually cast away. Hence, the comparison of homosexuals to these assumed demystifying creatures further attest to the marginalised positions of queer in essentialist societies, where sexual identities are straightjacketed and premised on the 'God-given'/biological appropriation of sexual identity.

These linguistic choices are replicated to explain how heinous the sexual acts of gays and lesbians are in the sight of 'God' and the resultant effect of the act.

Queers as juvenile delinquents

In *We Don't Live Here Anymore*, queerism is labelled 'teenage rebellion', while in *Rafiki*, it is attributed to naivety and in turn a temporary feeling that would be outgrown. This implies that queers are perceived as juvenile delinquents who are still negotiating their identities. Since the youthful stage is considered the exploratory stage, queerism is considered one of those defining moments of the youthful stage which requires proper attention.

<i>Rafiki</i>	<i>We Don't Live Here Anymore</i>
Utterance 7a Ziki: Stop being naïve ...	Utterance 7b Chidi's mother: Could it be teenage rebellion ?
Utterance 8a Ziki: I wish this was real Kena: It is Ziki: When we go out there...(it isn't)	Utterance 8b Tolu's mother: Tolu, you are not gay. I know it in my heart. I know that you are not that way. Sometimes, things happen but they don't need to stay that way.

Table 3: Interaction examples showing linguistic index of queers as **juvenile delinquents**

As active producers of their identities, this notion supports the social constructionism theory of construction. In *Rafiki*, Ziki's utterance points out that some queers are fully aware their sexual affinity is temporary and surreal as societal standards is supreme. While some like Ziki subscribe to the notion of temporariness, Kena thinks otherwise. With reference to Utterances 7a-8b, there is

a belief that queerism is a passing emotion that will soon fade away.

Conclusion

Dialogues from the two queer films reveal ideologies of shared sociocultural practices that suggest the parents are not happy with their children's involvement in queerism. The words and expressions are used by others on the universal assumption that queers are deviants, perpetrators of reprehensible acts and juvenile delinquents. While expressing their displeasures in their choice of reference, naming and labelling, the two films allude to their beliefs in

religion and heteronormativity. Although queer related discourse is still guided by the African societies' non-conformist stance on the subject, the main characters in these two movies are not straightjacketed into maintaining this heteronormative stance.

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