



Yorùbá and their Symbolic Means of Communication: A Pragma-Semiotic Analysis of Ààlè

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Abstract: Lots of research had been conducted on àrokò, a symbolic and nonverbal/verbal means of communication among the Yorùbá. While àrokò as a hyponym and ààlè as the super-ordinate have not been studied much. It is in this gap in the literature that this paper attempts a pragma-semiotic analysis of Yorùbá concept of ààlè. Data for the analysis were gathered through participant observation and informal questions technique where these ààlè were used. Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts and Peirce's (1931) symbolic sign in semiotic theory are employed for the analysis. The study revealed that ààlè is used in traditionally motivated contexts characterized by a pract of warning or caution and response that portrays issues of culture, and the indirect acts are employed through contextual features such as reference, shared situational and cultural knowledge, inference and relevance. The Semiotic analysis shows that the signate such as sand, leaves, sticks, fairly-used or unused cutlass, red cloth, òpàrá (a kind of tree grown in West Africa whose seeds are eaten and the bud used for symbolic communication), and cotton wool are one of the significant components of ààlè as symbols of warning or caution. The paper shows that ààlè is a subset of àrokò. While àrokò is the hyponym of symbolic communication among the Yorùbá, ààlè is a super-ordinate of symbolic means of communication among the Yorùbá, mainly for directions and warning. The paper also revealed that two or more objects could be used as ààlè, but their use context will determine the kind of information they are disseminating.

Keywords: *Semiotics; pragmeme; Yorùbá; ààlè; communication*

A. INTRODUCTION

In cultural discourse, *ààlè is seen* as a symbolic means of disseminating information among the Yorùbá. Yorùbá has a rich cultural heritage which reflects in their symbolic means of communicating their intended messages the moment the symbols are used. Despite the advancement in information communication technology (ICT), the Yorùbá in the rural areas still makes use of *ààlè* to express their messages. It



is a common assumption among the Yorùbá that *ààlè* features diabolic elements, which makes its use effective. Hence, its use abounds among the farmers. *Ààlè* is a symbolic component of *àrokò*. While *àrokò* has several ways of communication, *ààlè* concentrates on only one aspect of communication. Several objects can be used to represent the intended meaning. An object can be used in communication in certain settings from place to place. *Ààlè* is also described as "a symbolic object placed on a property to prevent it from being stolen or forbidden any form of trespass on a such property (Okunola and Ojo, 2011, p. 83).

Mey's (2001) pragmatic act evolves due to J. L Austin's (1962) speech acts failure to situate speech acts to words in isolation. Pragmatic act theory allows a speaker to co-opt others, set them up, influence them through conversations, and deny certain claims without betraying such acts through lexical choices (Mey, 2001, p. 216). The meaning of a word can only be understood in a context, not a word pointing out a particular act. A pragmatic act is instantiated through an "ipra" or "a pract" which realizes "a pragemme" as "every pract is at the same time an allopract that is a concrete instantiation of a particular pragemme" (Mey, 2001: 224). In this theory, a pract is only determined by a particular knowledge of the interactional situation and the effect of the pract in a particular context. Mey (2001: 221) opines that "what is realized as a pract under pragemme as an allopract of its own, is wholly determined by the understanding an interactional or individual has of the situation, and by effects of these practs have or may in a particular context. Pragmatic acts consider the term 'implied identification' which does not focus on the "said " but on the "unsaid" The hearers or readers/receivers are either set up, co-opted, or denied to achieve the speaker's or writer's acts. In this kind of situation, the act is not made explicit, and there is the absence of a speech act to reveal a pragmatic act. It is therefore left for the receivers to look out for it.

The interaction of the textual and activity part realizes the pragemme. The activity part consists of choices such as speech acts, and indirect speech acts, conversational acts (dialogue), psychological acts (emotions), prosody (intonation, stress), and physical acts, among others. The activity part allows speakers to carry out any function of choice. Hence, for pragmatic functions to be realized in a given communicative event, there must be focus on activity part and the textual part referring to (INF); inference, (REF);



reference (REL); (VCE); voice (SSK); shared situational (or dialogue); knowledge, which relies on the context for the meaning potential to be realized by interacts.

Semiotics is concerned with the study of signs. [Wale \(1990\)](#) defines semiotics as the analysis of signs of human use in different societies and cultures. [Peirce \(1931\)](#) sees semiotics as the process of sign interpretation. The relationship between the signifier and the signified that formed the sign must be learned concerning the context of its use. Peirce sees the sign as situated within the social context, social semiotics. [Cuddon \(1991\)](#) modernized Peirce's work and redefined the triadic relationships in semiotics as (1) The iconic: This is a sign that resembles its referent, e. g, red light for a stop on roads. (2) The indexical: This is when the sign is associated with the referent, e. g, smoke is associated with fire. (3) The symbolic: This concerns an arbitrary relationship the sign and referent have. Signs comprise the signifier (the form the signs take) and the signified (the concept the sign represents). The sign is the whole that results from the signifier's and signified's association ([Saussure, 1983, p. 67](#)). Working on the pragmatics of sign, [Morris \(1938: 6-7\)](#) sees semiotics as traditional branches of linguistics that entail semantics (the relationship between the signified and what it stands for), syntax (the formal structural relationship between signs), and pragmatics (the relationship of sign to the interpreter).

Symbols are signs used for communication between a sender and a receiver. Symbols stand for an event or situation. They are meant to pass across information as well as focus the mind on an idea or ideal ([Udechukwa, 2019](#)). According to [Otute \(1979: 179\)](#), symbols are agents impregnated with messages and an invitation to conform and act. Symbols can be contextualized in relation to social and cultural context for cognitive and emotional meaning. Symbols are overt expressions of what is behind the veil of direct perception ([Nabifa: 1996](#)). For proper understanding and acceptance, symbol must possess the following characteristics, as mentioned by [Udechukwa \(2019\)](#): One, it must be meaningful through the setting in life; that is, it must consider the people for whom the symbol is proper. Two, there must be consensus about the meaning, that is, the meaning attached to it in society. Three, the symbol as a mediator and giver of the meaning of things and events is the meaning conveyed by the presence of a given object and its best use by an individual.



Symbols can be culturally used to communicate using symbolic objects that are conventionally accepted among the people. Cultural symbol is something that expresses or stands for people's beliefs, identities, traits, moral values, ethical ideas, virtues, religion, signs, sacrifices, arts, civilization, and the likes (Nwaorgu, 2001: 3). Cultural symbols in Yoruba land include palm fronds, sticks, sand and leaves, cutlass, cotton wool, snail shell, corn cob, gourd, a stick of broom, calabash, gun, blood, cowries shell, fly whisk, chewing stick, etc. Cowries are objects of beauty and adornment. If two cowries are found facing each other, it means agreement; three cowries sent to someone means disagreement or confusion. Six cowries tied together mean the sender is longing to see the receiver. A cowry shell sent with a string depicts an unpleasant situation. If an empty calabash is sent to someone, especially a king, he should leave the throne or commit suicide. Palm fronds are used on farmland to stop anybody that wishes to trespass the land. Chewing sticks are used to profess one's love for another or acceptance. Cutlass or knife, sword and red cloth signify disagreement and war. Whenever a weapon is wrapped in a leaf and sent to someone, it means invitation for the receiver to go into exile. A comb is a symbol of the irreconcilable end of a relationship. We should note that the above objects can be used as *ààlè* which can only be understood based on their contextual interpretation.

Language is a process for the production of meaning by at least two people, which may occur either as spoken or written and which functions in contexts of situation and culture (Daramola, 2019: 40). From the wording of the above definition, the following words: process, meaning, people, spoken/written, functions, contexts, situation, and culture need to be expatriated to know the whole essence of communication. Process is synonymous with a tool and realizes the medium or channel of communication. Meaning is the nucleus of language use; that is, it shows the essence of language for its realization of expression. Before a sender and a receiver can understand each other, meaning must come into being. The reference to people in the definition shows that language is purely a human attribute which differentiates him from other mammals. This corroborates Sapir's (1923) definition of language as a "purely human and non-instinctive way of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires employing voluntarily produced symbols." Language as spoken/written is an aspect of verbal communication that uses pictures, drawings, signs, gestures, etc. For functions, language is used to play



some roles or functions which Halliday's (1978) identifies as ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. The context specifies the environment where language is used to express certain meaning. Situation considers the formal or informal modes through which language comes into being.

Lastly, culture concerns the worldview, mannerisms and ways of life of people who use the language. Language and culture are inextricably intertwined because the former cannot be discussed in the absence of the latter. Culture is the determinant of code, symbols, signs, context, and meaning of language, while language is the 'life wire and social lubricant' of any society (Ademola and Okunola, 2013). One cannot study one's language without considering one's culture. According to Leigh and Stanb (1991: 2), culture is a mixture that incorporates behavior (thoughts, actions and language), knowledge, beliefs, morals, law, custom, and other qualities acquired by a man as a social being." It is obvious from the argument that the culture of a language user shapes his/her behavior, knowledge, and other qualities. According to Odebunmi (2008), the four components of culture in sociological literature are: values, norms, instructions and artifacts. While values control other components of culture and deal with what a society attaches importance to, norm relates to behavior patterns in a particular situation. And while instructions relate to the divisions of a society where values and norms are applied, artifacts are objects produced from a culture's values and norms. The context of language use can never be overlooked if the meaning is realized in communication. The context of *àdàlè* as a symbolic means of communication considers the setting or environment of its use. We can conclude here that language is culture and vice versa.

Various scholars have different definitions of culture (see Levinson 1983; Thomas 1995; Yule 1996; Palmer 1996; Mey, 2001, 2009, and others). Context refers to an environment or setting in which language is used. It is the totality of the environment in which a word is used (Mey, 2001). Adebite (2000) sees context as an abstract category employed by language scholars to provide a link between linguistic items and the social and situational factors of communication. Context helps in the interpretation of the meaning of words and the central feature of meaning (Odebunmi, 2006). Moreover, Malinowski's (1923) and Firth's (1972) concept of context of the situation is mainly concerned with meaning-making in terms of context.



While Adebite (2000) identifies the two types of context, Odebunmi (2006) identifies the two levels of context manifest. The two types of context by Adebite are *verbal and situational context*. Verbal context is concerned with interpreting linguistic items in terms of their linkage and relationship. Verbal context aids the reduction of instances of syntactic or lexical ambiguity that may emanate from a word used in isolation. Odebunmi's two levels of context manifestation - language and situation level see the former as having a possibility if the same language of communication is at the disposal of interactions. The latter is concerned with assumptions that are based on the shared code (linguistic or non-linguistic) and experience of the communications. There exist three important features of context. They have shared knowledge of subjects or topics, shared knowledge of word choices, references, and shared socio-cultural experience. In the context of *ààlè*, a culturally approved communication pattern is used.

Previous studies on *ààlè* have been generally discussed under *àrokò* which focuses on issues peculiar to its symbolic means of passing information from one person to another. Many scholars have worked on *àrokò* (Ogundeji, 1997; Ojo, 2013; Orimoogunje, 2015; Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2009; Akanbi et al, 2014). Perhaps, Okunola and Ojo (2011) carried out research that is related to the present. They examined the symbolism of *ààlè* as a quest for anthropological criminology and the utility of traditional crime prevention methods. They reveal that *ààlè* is still effective in protecting property from theft and trespasses among those rural dwellers. Therefore, they recommend the extension of the uses of *ààlè* into urban areas. The study provides insights into the present research endeavor. Therefore, the present study differs from the existing studies; it seeks to fill the gap in symbolic means of communication among the Yoruba. Thus, the paper seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the select *ààlè* used on different farms in Yoruba land. This intends to examine the pragmatic pract in *ààlè*, its context of use, and its symbolic components. The focus of this paper is to examine the pragmatic pract in *ààlè*, its context of use, and its symbolic components.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper adopted a descriptive method to arrive at the findings and conclusions of the study adequately. Firstly, the data sources were through participant observation,



informal questions technique, and samples from the farmlands where the *ààlè* were placed.

Secondly, the method of data collection allowed the researcher, through participant observation, to snap the samples of *ààlè* used on various farmlands. The collection had been going on for six months. Favorable items that met the researcher's needs were chosen for analysis. Eight (8) samples of *ààlè* were selected by snapping with the help of a camera and grouped into figures 1-8. *Aale* that have similar functions to the ones previously selected were discarded to avoid repetition.

Table 1. Ààlè with Their Context Features and Practs

<i>Ààlè</i>	Context Features	Pract	Symbols
Figure 1	SCK, SSK	Warning	sand wrapped in fresh leaves, placed on fire woods
Figure 2	SCK, SSK	Warning	three sticks of palm fronds erected on the maize farm
Figure 3	SCK, SSK	Warning	two sticks representing danger sign
Figure 4	SCK, SSK	Warning	two sticks representing danger sign
Figure 5	SCK, SSK	Warning	a fairly used cutlass tied with red cloth, placed at the farm entrance
Figure 6	SCK, SSK	Warning	cotton wool attached to a stick
Figure 7	SCK, SSK	Warning	<i>opara</i> inserted inside an erected stuck
Figure 8	SCK, SSK, reference	Warning	two sticks with two small piece of stick forming a multiplication sign

Finally, the analytical procedure adopted in this study focused on the pragma-semiotic analysis of *ààlè*. Therefore, analysis and discussion provide answers to the research questions. In order to answer the research questions convincingly and account for the study's aims, an eclectic approach, namely the pragma-semiotic framework, is used to explicate the data. The pragmatics and semiotics framework is used to analyze both pictures and communicative functions found in the data. Thus, the pragma-semiotic analytical method is adopted using Mey's (2001) pragmatic acts and Peirce's (1931) framework, respectively. A pragmatic act is instantiated through an "ipra" or "a pract" which realizes "a pragememe" as "every pract is at the same time an allopract that is concrete instantiation of a particular pragememe" (Mey, 2001: 224). In this theory, a



pract is only determined by a particular knowledge of the interactional situation and the effect of the pract in a particular context. Mey (2001: 221) opines that "what is realized as a pract under pragrameme as an allopract of its own, is wholly determined by the understanding an interactional or individual has of the situation, and by effects of these practs have or may in a particular context. Peirce sees sign as situated within social context, social semiotics. Cuddon (1991) modernized Peirce's work and redefined the triadic relationships in semiotics as: 1) the iconic (his is a sign that resembles its referent, e. g, red light for a stop on roads; 2) the indexical (this is when the sign is associated with the referent, e. g, smoke is associated with fire); and 3) the symbolic (which concerns an arbitrary relationship the sign and referent have). Signs comprise signifiers (the form the signs take) and the signified (the concept the sign represents).

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

In this paper, the focus is on the visual signs used in *ààlè*. The visual signs used in the component of *ààlè* are leaves, sand, palm fronds, red cloth, sticks, fairly used or unused cutlass, and cotton wool. From time immemorial, Yoruba cannot read and write, but they have a symbolic way of communicating among themselves. Hence, the signs used here do not need any level of education. It is only a cultural and conventional communication among the Yoruba through the contextual features of SSK, SCK, REL and INF. All the symbolic signs used in the selected *ààlè* are mainly meant for caution or warning. The findings revealed that the pract of warning in a given *ààlè*.

Discussion

The study revealed that *ààlè* is used in traditionally motivated contexts characterized by a pract of warning or caution and response that portrays the issue of culture. The indirect acts are employed through contextual features such as reference, shared situational and cultural knowledge, inference and relevance. From the findings above, the pract is primarily performed in the traditional situation as the symbols entail contextual features of SCK, SSK, REF, INF and REL. The practs are examined thus:

Warning

Warning found in the *ààlè* in traditional Yorùbá setting (context) deal with the issues of culture through socio-cultural knowledge (SCK), socio-situational knowledge (SSK), reference (REF), inference (INF), relevance (REL). The selected data are discussed below.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 4/4/2022 5.10 pm Nigeria time

Picture 1. Sand Wrapped Inside Leaves Placed on A Bundle of Firewood to Prevent Theft at Èbúté Igbóorò Village Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

To communicate the intended meaning of the selected *ààlè*, the setting of the cultural symbol is surrounded by different types of non-verbal interactions. In the first picture (picture 1), sand is wrapped in leaves and placed on firewood to chase a thief who dares to steal the owner's property. Applying the SCK and SSK of traditional and cultural meaning within this context, the pract of warning and capturing the firewood owner's intentions is communicated. It is obvious from the context of this *ààlè* that whoever steals the firewood will die, as presented in appendix 1. It is a common belief that, in the book of Genesis, chapter 2:12, human beings are made from dust and will one day die and turn to dust. Hence, the effect of this *ààlè* is death. The context of this *ààlè* tells the victim (the thief) to beware of death if s/he steals the firewood.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 4/04/2022. 5.20 pm Nigeria time

Picture 2. Aale (Palm Front) Placed on the Maize Farm to Prevent Theft at Èbúté-Igbóorò, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Another example of the pract of warning is in picture 2, where palm fronds are spread all over the farmland. Applying the SCK and SSK of the *ààlè*, as presented in appendix 1, shows that the farm owner does not want anybody to enter his corn farm. Therefore, the pragmatic act is a warning/caution from the farmer to anyone who trespasses his/her warning. Again, the application of SCK, SSK of Yorùbá cultural belief is important for understanding this *pract* of warning. In every society or community, color terms have different meanings.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 4/4/2022, 5.45 pm Nigeria time).

Picture 3. Aale (piece of Red Cloth and Sticks) Placed on A Beans Farm to Prevent Theft at Abúlé Ègbá village, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Red cloth tied on each stick is placed on a beans farm. In Yorùbá land, red is associated with danger. Its use on farmlands as *ààlè* warns anyone that moves closer to the farm to avoid women observing their menstruation not to enter the farm. The effect

of their entering will cause the bean flower to either. This is evident in the interview results presented in appendix 1. Hence, wherever red cloth is placed, it reminds women to observe their menstruation, not to come closer. The red cloth also symbolizes death from *Sàngo* (God of thunder). Furthermore, picture 4 has two sticks erected on the ground crossing each other to make a danger sign.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 03/5/2022, 2.30 pm Nigeria time).

Pictue 4. Aale (two pieces of stick crossing each other) Placed on An Animal Trap to Prevent People from Being Trapped By It at Olópè-mèta, Village, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Picture 4 is another example of *ààlè* that is used by a hunter who has set a trap (*pàkúté*) for any animal that passes within the vicinity. As contained in appendix 1, it is an *ààlè* that tells anybody that approaches where the trap is set to warn him/her that a trap has been set there. The recipient or viewer of this *ààlè* can only understand this message via the application of Yorùbá SSK and SCK, inference and relevance.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 04/05/2022, 3.30 pm Nigeria time

Picture 5. *Aale* (old cutlass, piece of red cloth) Placed at The Entrance of A Palm Tree Plantation to Prevent Theft at Ìmèdú, Village, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Picture 5 shows a fairly used/unused cutlass tied at the entrance of a palm plantation. The *ààlè* used in figure 5 is found in Yorùbá traditional context to portray culture through SCK, SSK, REF, and REL. The *ààlè* of fairly-used cutlass is a reference to *Ògún Lákáayé Osìnmolè*, a Yoruba god of iron. The Yoruba believe that whoever does terrible things would be killed by *Ògún*. Therefore, cutlass as a component of this *ààlè* tells that *Ògún* will kill anybody that disregards the user of the *ààlè* intended warning/message. The red cloth stands for danger. The death penalty is not stated here, but it infers that such a person can be killed by a car, motorcycle, gunshot, or any mishap. In addition, figure 6 presents cotton wool inserted into a small stick placed very close to a coconut tree.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 04/5/2022, 4.30 pm Nigeria time

Picture 6. *Ààlè* (Cotton wool attached to a stick placed on a coconut tree to prevent theft at Rèfùrèfù, Village, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

In Yorùbá culture, the SSK and the SSK application infers that cotton wool inserted in a stick infers the effect of not taking caution. The indirect act of warning and responding pract is inferential in traditional Yorùbá land. According to the interview result, as contained in appendix 1, Yorùbá believes that if cotton wool is used as a component of *ààlè*, and the viewer does not take warning, he or she will fall sick. Cotton wool will start growing out of his/her body. In Yorùbá land, this kind of ailment is called *tèfùtèfù*.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 05/05/2022, 4.30 pm Nigeria time).

Picture 7A & B. Paluko Apará (an indigenous type of leguminous plant) inserted inside an erected stick placed on palm tree and beans farm to prevent theft at Ìyálóde, Village, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Picture 7A & B present òpàráseed bud, popularly known as "òsánpón ñ kákò" in Yewa (Ketu land) area of Ogun State. It means let me fold when it's noon." The intention of placing this ààlè on palm fruits and beans farm is to tell viewers who may wish to steal any of the farms produce that as òpàrá folds in the noon so shall it be for whoever steals the owner's farm produce (as stated in the appendix). It is a cultural belief among the Yoruba that when òpàrá is placed on any farm produce, nobody should steal it. Therefore, if anybody tries it, it is either s/he has a stomach ache or gets folded like òpàrá.



Source: Photo taken by the researcher on 09/05/2022, 6.30 pm Nigeria time

Picture 8. Two Sticks with Two Small Pieces of Stick Forming A Multiplication Sign Placed on A Beans Farm to Prevent Trespassers at Ìmèdú, Yewa North Local Government Area, Ogun State, Nigeria.



Picture 8 presents two sticks that are inserted as symbols of *ààlè*. The *ààlè* is placed on farmland to communicate the owner's intended message. Based on the interview information, the context of this *ààlè* shows that nobody should cultivate the land. Applying contextual features of reference, SSK, SCK, and inference, the viewer will quickly interpret the message without any challenge.

In Yorùbá culture, all the signs together bring out their cultural beliefs and practices. A sign is used to represent something or a concept. It stands for something or someone else (Danesi, 2004). *Ààlè* serves as a signifier in Yorùbá land, and the meaning and idea it portrays is signified (Saussure', 1983). Likewise, Peirce sees the symbolic semiotic sign as the relationship between the signifier and signified that comprises the sign that must be learned concerning its use context.

D. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the pragma-semiotic analysis of Yorùbá concept of *ààlè*. The *ààlè* is a super-ordinate of *àrokò*, a nonverbal form of Yorùbá communication, and it is rich in Yorùbá cultural norms and practices. Based on Mey's theory of pragmeme, the findings revealed the pract of warning/caution. This pract, through interaction with the contextual features of share situational knowledge (SSK), socio-cultural knowledge (SCK), inference (INF), and reference (REF), addresses the issue of warning the trespassers. Based on our analysis so far, we can say that the significance of *ààlè* in Yorùbá community is to pass across information in the form of a warning in its respective context of use. Unlike previous studies on *aroko* which are generally meant for communication, the use of *ààlè* is restricted to farmland, where appropriate interpretation could be given based on the symbolic component of *ààlè*. Therefore, the study is relevant to cultural means of communication in rural and urban areas if the necessary context is put in place. Failure to use appreciated context will lead to misinterpretation. The semiotic signate that features in the *ààlè* are visual (non-verbal) in the form of leaves, sand, palm fronds, sticks, red cloth, fairly used or unused cutlass, and cotton wool, which show the 'signification' that is common and unique to the Yorùbá culture and world view. It should be noted that two or more objects can be used as *ààlè*, but their context of use will determine the kind of information they are disseminating.



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