

Postmodern Disintegration and Communicative Presence: Toward Another Perspective on Words and Things

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Abstract

The current rejection of any metaphysical unity of words and things may be viewed as one aspect of a broader Postmodern rhetoric of denial and the social disunities that accompany a larger moral-cultural disintegration. This rhetorical situation, appearing in randomly selected Nigerian fictional prose and in a popular linguistic textbook in the US, should be critiqued according to an incarnational theory that implies an interpretive unity of words and things and may in fact complement social constructivist approaches to cross-cultural communication theory and practice. Ultimately, this reconsideration may point to the possibility of a transcendence greater than the mutable “linguistic worlds,” cultural identities, and other potentially fragmenting phenomena within multi-cultural education today.

Introduction

The growing dialogue today about multi-cultural education is most encouraging, as technology, travel, and international commerce blur geographical and cultural boundaries. The time has never been better to explore multi-cultural or cross-cultural pedagogy and communication, to identify teaching strategies, techniques, and curricula that would enhance our work as instructors and researchers. But that stimulating exploration should be done only with a vigilant eye toward the larger postmodern contexts in which different languages and cultures meet and interact. In today’s assessment-driven education, so much attention can be given to the immediate, day-to-day details of teaching and learning, that broader questions are either ignored or, with the best of intentions, deferred until a more convenient time.

I would therefore begin by raising one such broader question: do language and cross-cultural communication have any transcendent origin, definable aesthetic, or higher meaning? Responses from critics such as Derrida, Lyotard, Eagleton, Foucault, and Rorty are somehow unsatisfying, though these critics do offer a deep and resilient skepticism about the nature of meaning, texts, and knowledge. Such skepticism also, along with much improved global travel and communication, may have contributed to a tolerant mood that has reduced social barriers to multi-cultural

interaction. Unfortunately, the same skepticism has played a role in undermining public confidence in academics because written texts (the mainstay of research) are described as slippery slopes descending into numerous linguistic worlds of arbitrary mental constructs.¹ Moreover, the once distinctively Western setting of postmodernism has broadened into an international phenomenon, affecting Asian countries that are experiencing both rapid modernization and social change (Adams, 1997, pp. 519-20). These countries also are facing the idea that any statement can be true, in the words of one well-known prophet of popular culture, "from a certain point of view." The prophet is of course Obiwan Kenobe. While important research does go on, the deconstructionist and postmodern dogma known as difference and a ubiquitous rhetoric of denial associated with it represent a foundational, philosophical, and multi-cultural problem, particularly with regard to questions about words and things.

This paper is intended to place that problem before us, to sketch recent criticism in America, and to offer a few suggestions about responding to the problem. I would claim only to furnish a few observations about three issues: postmodern rhetoric in the academy, layers of that rhetoric of denial illustrated in several randomly chosen texts (two pieces of Nigerian prose fiction and a chapter on language and culture in a linguistics textbook), and a recommendation to add to the professional dialogue about the problem. My thesis is that the Postmodern rhetoric of denial of a metaphysical unity of words and things, this denial being part of a larger moral-cultural fracture expressed in social disunities, should be re-examined in light of an incarnational theory that supports a transcendent oneness of physical object and word. Implicit throughout my remarks is a guarded optimism that social constructivist approaches to cross-cultural communication and interpretation do not necessarily exclude the possibility of a greater transcendence, one beyond language, culture, and the myriad of difficulties facing multi-cultural education today.

Postmodern Rhetoric and Academic Discourse

A look at Postmodernism and the academy provides some useful context and perspective for comment on the aforementioned rhetoric of denial. The phrase rhetoric of denial I take to mean discourse that constructs an aura of non-binding commentary whose potential persuasiveness lies in the fortuitousness of its own point of view.² A suitable context for considering this rhetoric of denial is the opening chapter in Stephen Connor's recent book entitled *Postmodern Culture* (2nd ed, 1997). There Connor argues that despite the so-called "radical incommensurability" of Postmodernity (the term is Foucault's), contemporary discourse is both self-reflective and definable, though in need of fuller awareness of its own epistemology. In short, Connor implies that difference and diversity, two

signatures of Postmodernism, have not prevented the development of a larger unity of discourse within the academy.

Overall, Connor's book examines themes and structures of critical discussion within a number of disciplines, including architecture, art, literature, the performing arts, and studies in popular culture. Ultimately he shows that each discipline is not a heterotopia, one of many islands uninhabited by Postmodernity, but a linguistic-cultural diversity that constructs a larger critical discourse. Connor's analysis must operate within a climate of rhetorical negativity, whose impulses lie in the deconstructionist practice of denying linguistic integrity and authorial intent, with a growing disregard of universal moral principles. Most curious is the underlying ontological affirmation that somehow gives rise to this negative rhetoric. As Kenneth Burke noted some time ago, "the negative is a peculiarly linguistic marvel, and . . . there are no negatives in nature, every natural condition being positively what it is" (p. 19). If things are, instead of are not, then the rhetorical stance of denial common in deconstructionist commentaries is in fact an aberration; moreover, the very existence of that phenomenon as such requires a dismantling of the affirmations of language, literature, and culture. Admittedly, the inherently self-refuting nature of this entire process only affirms the multiple contradictions that constitute deconstruction and postmodern theory in the first place. If my reasoning is even partially valid, then deconstructive and postmodernist thought relies far less upon binary opposition and far more upon elaborate circularity.

Denial and Disintegration: Some Textual Examples

In any case, Connor describes an academic discourse that no longer sets out to transmit culture but to interrogate texts and to withhold credibility from artifacts. Implicit in this scenario is that many issues and questions are not just currently unresolved but ultimately irresolvable. This irresolvability, in turn, is part of the very infrastructure of other texts. Two are a Nigerian short story and novel; the third, a popular textbook in introductory linguistics.³ My brief comments about these works will highlight the multi-level influence of this rhetoric of denial upon words and things.

The Nigerian short story entitled "This Is Lagos" (1971) by Flora Nwapa (1931-), reflects the disintegration and irresolvability characteristic of postmodern rhetoric. In this story, like Chinua Achebe's well known novel *Things Fall Apart*, a traditional, coherent (if imperfect) philosophy of life seems discredited, truth and orderliness no longer defining personal identity and self worth but rupturing within a wider societal decay.

Nwapa's story explores a young woman's decision to leave her Igbo village and move to the modernized city of Lagos, where she eventually abandons her kind aunt and uncle who had helped her to get settled after her move. This young woman (Soha) described earlier by the narrator as a "sweet," "charming," and "dutiful" girl

(Nwapa, p. 1798), becomes inexplicably defiant, moving out of her aunt's home into a hostel on Ajagba Street, a habitat of what Soha's aunt calls "Rotten girls" whom "No man will bring . . . into his home and call . . . wives" (p. 1802). Soha already has a boyfriend, however, one Ibikunle, a young, affluent Lagosan gigolo by whom Soha becomes pregnant. The two young parents decide to elope. Later, as Soha has refused to return to visit her mother, who at one point had been ill but was recovering, so Ibikunle never takes his new wife to meet her parents or establish any relationship whatsoever, though being advised to do so by Soha's aunt and uncle. Here the story does not end but rather breaks off.

In all fairness, Nwapa's interest in Nigerian youth as they face a time of transition and cultural change is a useful entree to the exploration of social clashes and other human crises. This entrée could lead to a fallacious argument based upon false cause—i.e. reading a preconceived agenda back into the text—if abundant evidence of postmodern rhetoric were not a part of the story itself. Here is some of that evidence. The story narrates a multi-dimensional fragmentation characteristic of postmodern thought, and often that fragmentation is communicated thematically, as events form a pattern showing a weakening of the self, the family, and the culture. First, Soha dissociates herself outrightly from family and friends. Her cousin Eze, pun apparently intended, takes a more subtle approach in separating himself from the family; he keeps quiet about her romantic involvement with Ibikunle by keeping watch over Ibikunle's car—for money, of course. This division within families, however, is part of a much more complex dissociation, a once foundational belief system now—and without good reason—in decline.

This disintegration appears in the words of Mama Eze (Soha's wise, respectable aunt—whose view of acceptable social conduct is, ironically, anything but easy) as she struggles with her niece's dilemma of pregnancy and possibility of elopement: "You hear, Mr. Ibikunle, we don't marry like that in my home. . . . Home people will not regard you as married. This is unheard of. And you tell me this is what the white people do. So when white people wish to marry, they don't seek the consent of their parents, they don't even inform them." Mama Eze, using rational argument to address the immoral thinking of her niece and boyfriend, speaks directly to Soha: "You have not done well. You have rewarded me with evil. Why did you not take me into confidence? Am I not married? Is marriage a sin? Will I prevent you from marrying? Isn't it the prayer of every woman?" (p. 1804). More is taking place here than just a transition from arranged marriages to those established by the couples themselves; a once coherent, unified social and moral consciousness is giving way to—and being dissociated by—the ideological pressure of a non-rational relativism lacking respect for history, tradition, continuity, and moral consensus.

This fragmentation is nowhere more climactic than in the closing sentences, as even the narrator uses a satiric swat to draw away from Soha's husband: "A whole

year passed. Mr. Ibikunle did not have the courage, or was it the money, to travel to Soha's home to present himself to Soha's parents as their son-in-law" (p. 1804). We cannot be sure of Ibikunle's motivation for staying away; perhaps he himself is unsure. Maybe he has claimed to have too little money for the trip. Whatever the case, we are sure of a complex separation, occurring on a personal and a societal level and expressed in the abrupt conclusion of this forceful clash between old and new.

The personal and societal fragmentation explored in Flora Nwapa's "This Is Lagos" had been developed earlier by Chinua Achebe (1930-) in his well known novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Here lies a more extensive development of the alienation, contradiction, and irresolvability that are characteristic of postmodern thought. While Flora Nwapa employs relatively little irony in her exploratory piece, Achebe's full-length work exposes a deepening strife between timely events and a pervasive irony created by them.

The personal conflict centers on the fierce warrior and single-minded elder Okonkwo, whose inflexible traditionalism sets him against Nwoye, his firstborn son who eventually converts and joins Christian European missionaries. Leading to that moment is a poignant story of personal alienation and cultural disintegration. First, Okonkwo has to participate in a ceremonial human sacrifice; then he endures a seven-year exile after his gun accidentally kills the son of the deceased warrior Ezeudu. After Okonkwo returns to his village Umuofia, he finds it devastated by Western European exploitation. Shortly, he commits suicide after he decapitates a white messenger who oversteps his authority. To dramatize the intensity of this transplanted European autocracy, Achebe's narrator reveals the District Commissioner's mental absorption with a book he is writing, which he plans to title *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

My overview of the plot ends with this book title not only because it shows the breathless barbarism displayed by "civilized" Europeans but also because it highlights the ironic vision by which Postmodernism characterizes reality as ultimately only perceptual, filled with inescapable indeterminacy and unresolvable contradictions. The briefest glance at *Things Fall Apart* shows a rich complex of irony, which makes for stimulating reading and succeeds splendidly if art is intended to pose more questions than it answers. Here are a few examples of that irony, the first group consisting of word plays, the other group emphasizing scenes from the story.

Ironic casts that depend upon particular words show Achebe's literary confidence in the un-Saussurian process of naming. The word *umuofia* means "children of the forest" but these supposedly uncivilized people display far more civility than do the European colonizers. Granted, Okonkwo's clansmen do offer a young boy and a virgin girl as sacrifices to an idol, in repayment for a wife's death in Mbaino, but the offering of these sacrifices was one of only two alternatives

required by the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. The other option was outright war. The young boy offered, by the way, is Ikemefuna, whose name means “my strength should not be dissipated.” Another pointed irony occurs within Okonkwo’s family circle. Because one of his wives has lied to him, he beats her—during the period that his village calls the Week of Peace (Achebe, p. 2110). So much for domestic harmony.

Still another instance of verbal irony involves two characters—Ogbuefi Ndulue and his elderly wife Ozoemena. His name means “life has arrived” but as Okonkwo observes more and more cultural fragmentation among his people, Ogbuefi Ndulue dies (p. 2129), his wife’s death coming soon thereafter. Her name means, interestingly, “another bad thing will not happen.”

As one may suspect, Achebe’s ironic vision involves the European missionaries as well. First, the elders of the village Mbanta decide to honor the missionaries’ request for land for a church building. The elders therefore donate a tract that has served as a burial site for victims of evil diseases (e.g. smallpox and leprosy) and as a dump for the fetishes of prominent medicine men after their deaths. The tract is known as the Evil Forest and is regarded as “a real battlefield . . . alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness” (p. 2167). All of the evil spirits, moreover, do little or nothing to hinder the establishment and growth of the church. Elsewhere in a wonderful twist, Achebe introduces us to Mr. Brown, a white missionary who nonetheless cares about the plight of Okonkwo’s people, quite a contrast—this gracious, compassionate layman whom the narrator always refers to as Mr. Brown, compared to his predecessor, the harsh, uncivil Rev. Smith.

A crucial, if short-lived, compromise in this ecclesiastical criticism is a shrewd bit of translation by Okeke, Smith’s interpreter. When the village men, i.e. the *egwugwu*, protest about the church building and want to destroy it, Smith characteristically responds, telling Okeke, “Tell them to go away from here. This is the house of God and I will not live to see it desecrated.” In a fine piece of diplomacy, Okeke says to the *egwugwu*: “The white man says he is happy you have come to him with your grievances, like friends. He will be happy if you leave the matter in his hands.” The deep contradiction in the two cultures reappears as the *egwugwu* explain their rejection of Smith’s proposal: “We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. Let him go away” (pp. 2185-86). Here is yet another instance of Achebe’s use of rhetorical incongruity, a simple syntax negotiating the effects of a cutting irony. The issue is not simply the typical conflict between two cultures unfamiliar to each other or even Achebe’s artful juxtaposition of unexpected incivility and civility. The primary effect, culminating a social comment developing throughout the novel, is the ultimate irreconcilability of the two diverse worlds. Granted, Okonkwo and Smith are

mutual foils, sharing in their own ways untiring self-reliance and incontrovertible identities; but the story has no substantive supporting characters who can mediate between the two extremes and thus no internal sign of reconciliation—at any level. This dilemma, it seems to me, points to a postmodern centerlessness in the novel, a feature of a much larger rhetoric of denial.

Denial and Disintegration in a Comment on Language and Society

The rhetoric of denial associated with cultural disruption in this Nigerian text is observable, though within a different framework, in another text, Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman's popular book entitled *Introduction to Language*, now in its 6th edition since the first one appeared in 1974. Fromkin and Rodman's approach to language is particularly revealing in their discussion of language and society, chapter 10. A summary of that discussion displays assumptions about language that I believe subvert linguistic integrity and traditional cultural identity. Here, then, are some of the major statements in Fromkin and Rodman's discussion of language and society.

First, the main principle utilized throughout the chapter is not unity or coherence but difference. One example, though not the most dramatic, is the authors' description of English—not a single language spoken by innumerable people throughout the world, each person integrating his or her distinctive cultural identity into pronunciation, syntax, and semantics. Fromkin and Rodman deny any single language called English, arguing instead for some 400,000,000 idiolects, one for every speaker of what the authors call "almost English" (pp. 399-406). Thus, the task is not language study but idiolect study, as implicit in Fromkin and Rodman's subheadings: "Phonological Differences" (p. 403), "Lexical Differences" (p. 405), and "Syntactical Differences" (p. 406).

Second, the authors go on to reject the ideas of correctness and standard usage, satirizing advocates of such ideas as "language purists." One example of such "purists," according to the authors, is found in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* because it displays the inequality in traditional social hierarchies: "Prescriptive grammarians, or language 'purists,' usually consider the dialect used by political leaders and the upper socioeconomic classes, the dialect used for literature or printed documents, the dialect taught in the schools, as the correct form of the language." Against this claim, however, is the practical question Can so many people be so mistaken about language? I intend no postmodern exercise in regressive denials here, so let me go on to a more affirmative point; Fromkin and Rodman are taking a Marxist position, covertly rejecting the idea of linguistic standards because of their supposed origins in the superstructures of politics, material wealth, writing itself, and educational institutions. Indeed, as the co-authors remark, using well-known Marxist code words: "The dominant or prestige dialect is often called the standard dialect" (p. 408, emphasis added).⁴

With no singular language of English in existence and no objective standards for correctness, the authors' third step is to marginalize the moral dimension of language by claiming that taboo words "have no linguistic basis" (p. 431). The presumed multi-cultural audience for the book knows about forbidden words, and Fromkin and Rodman have an evasive response to the topic. In the familiar rhetoric of denial the authors seem intent to avoid an over-arching judgment about taboo language and different cultures. First they attempt a burlesque of Hamlet's soliloquy by entitling the section "Taboo or Not Taboo?" No further comment here needed. Second, Fromkin and Rodman point out that words considered unacceptable in one culture are acceptable in another (p. 430); and third, the authors offer a subtle affirmation-denial. They acknowledge that words related to religion, sex, sexual organs, or natural bodily functions are considered taboo in many cultures. Here is the statement: "there is no linguistic basis for such views, but pointing this fact out does not imply advocating the use or nonuse of any such words" (p. 431). Once more, within the rhetoric of this divergent claim we sense the "repressive absolute" described by Australian Niall Lucy. Fromkin and Rodman earlier deny that an English language exists; what should be denied, however, is a value-free language; and Fromkin and Rodman's effort to construct one through this sentence simply does not work.

All in all, the authors' continuous reliance upon disclaimer, detraction, and disavowal raises questions: Which words do not deny which things? What knowledge is not "knowledge of nothing?" If "language is neither good nor evil but its use may be one or the other" (p. 439), as Fromkin and Rodman claim, is this claim itself good? Is even partial disagreement with it for altruistic reasons therefore evil? My point is that responses to these and other questions about language and society should draw not just upon the mechanics of the language and culture but also upon assumptions about transcendence. More specifically, using this context of diversity and difference, may I suggest that language originated in a transcendent Deity who gave life, existence, and communicability to human beings; that language as originally intended was a good thing in and of itself, and that its use was originally good as well?

Conclusion

I would conclude with two recommendations. One is that our thinking about cross-cultural communication give additional attention to the following questions: What exactly is Postmodern theory affirming? How would such affirmation affect the study of language and culture? Do these influences reach a healthy, useful balance between individual and cultural identity? A scholar of such stature as Terry Eagleton notes in the preface to his book *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, "I am not . . . proposing that we have some fully-fledged alternative to postmodernism at our fingertips, just that we can do better" (p. ix). His very last statement in the book

is even more direct: “postmodernism is in the end part of the problem rather than of the solution” (pp. 134-35). If so, we have a number of crucial, difficult questions to answer as best we can.

My other recommendation is that we re-examine an incarnational theory of words and things, the reasonableness of such a theory shown in recent scholarship by Georgia Christopher, George Steiner, and Kevin Vanhoozer. Also of note, at least as a point of reference, is I. A. Richards’ interactive theory of metaphor, i.e. the concept that the implied comparison lies not in the first term or in the second, but in the correlative dynamics between them; the first term, the second, and those dynamics together constitute the metaphor. In the statement “necessity is the mother of invention” (Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*), the metaphor is not simply “necessity” or “mother of invention” but those terms as part of a larger incarnation of need and the origin, strength, and nurture of creative thought. This theory of metaphor seems akin to an incarnational view of words and things, though I doubt that Richards would approve of my term incarnation. Another look at such a view would in the very least prompt a review of some of Ferdinand de Saussure’s ideas about language. Among his many helpful insights, perhaps his theory of a purely arbitrary relationship between signifiers and signifieds warrants a deep and resilient skepticism of our own. Not so much for what that arbitrariness implies about language but for what it implies about human presence, human communication (cross-cultural and otherwise), the material world, and the possibility of a transcendent Being who originated and sustains life and who gives value to humanity itself.

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Notes

¹ Postmodernism, according to researcher Stanley Grenz, was "born" in St. Louis, Missouri in 1972, with the razing of the architecturally modernistic Pruitt-Igoe housing project. This structure had combined the best of technology and planning to provide at least a spatial and temporal base of opportunity for everyone there, but residents had so defaced and degraded the buildings that even government planners and millions of dollars could not solve the problem (Grenz, p. 11). This event, symbolizing the end of modernity, signaled a momentous cultural shift, a rising "heterotopia" or centerless world (Foucault, p. xviii, cited in Grenz, p. 20) of countless linguistic worlds lacking social, political, or moral consensus—an ethos, in other words, without a coherent worldview (See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

² In literature, this aura is well known far beyond the shores of America; Australian scholar Niall Lucy writes, "postmodern literary theory is committed to a certain 'knowledge of nothing' as a sort of repressed absolute within thought as limited to presentable concepts or to understandings arrived at by determining judgement" (p. 174). Another critic calls this rhetoric a negation of knowable, material reality (Grenz). To still another critic, it is a linguistic surrender to otherness instead of an attempt to use words to express—and express consistently and accurately—the inner workings of the mind (Connor, p. 42, citing Lyotard's *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby [Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991], p. 67, where Lyotard uses the word "impassibility").

A couple of familiar examples of this rhetoric of denial. One is, interestingly, a major study of postmodernism itself. Lyotard's widely-cited book *The Postmodern Condition*, in the words of Stephen Connor, "made the idea of the postmodern credible, comprehensible, and describable. What belongs most 'authentically' to the postmodern moment for Lyotard is now its very indescribability . . ." (p. 43). Another example is Stanley Fish's simultaneous rejection of a stable, overarching textual meaning and an affirmation that meaning originates in different communities of readers (*Is There a Text in This Class?*). For this contradiction to be a valid paradox would require concession that, first, there is in some sense an overarching meaning and second, that *one* or even *two* or *three* communities of readers at *some* point can realize it. It would follow, of course, that other communities' readings (however interesting) would become nonessential. In all fairness Fish shows the complex and important role of readers in interpretation. His rhetoric is much more, however; he sets forth a subversive dichotomy that

displays what Lucy calls a “repressed absolute.” In practice Fish negates any definitive knowledge, leaving us instead with a sort of knowledge of nothing.

³ One practical outworking of this denial of objective standards is Fromkin and Rodman’s rejection of the incorrectness of double negatives in English sentences. While hearers may be able to understand the intent of someone who utters a double negative, that statement is incorrect none the less, as shown in the following hypothetical situation (which I include because it is so much fun to analyze).

Two visitors to New York City are confronted on the street by two or three knife-wielding people in jeans and sleeveless undershirts. When the visitors resist the attempted robbery, one of the antagonists looks at the two visitors and says, “Just hand over your wallets. We don’t want no trouble.” Under Fromkin and Rodman’s commentary, this statement is correct. Closer examination, however, will show the mistake not just in syntax but in meaning, all of which justifies insistence on single negativity in an English sentence. The robbers say that they “do not want no trouble.” Perhaps one negative is a reiteration of the other, in which case the *no* echoes the *don’t*. But this juxtaposition of two undesirables could communicate the opposite effect as well. In short, they want to dodge “no trouble,” i.e. peace—surely an outcome different from the robbers’ apparent motive.