

**BEYOND ERROR: NON-STANDARD ENGLISH
AS PRAGMATIC STRATEGY IN ABI DARE'S
*THE GIRL WITH THE LOUDING VOICE***

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Abstract

This study reframes non-standard English in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice* as a pragmatic strategy rather than a linguistic error. Using Sperber and Wilson's (1986, 1995) Relevance Theory, it examines how Adunni's non-standard utterances achieve meaning, identity, and social critique through explication, implicature, and contextual inference. Analysis of 100 purposively selected excerpts reveals that Adunni's

speech is not a marker of communicative incompetence, but a resource for meaning construction, contextual adaptation, and emotional expression. Through pragmatic enrichment, readers retrieve intended meanings with minimal cognitive effort, achieving optimal relevance. The findings demonstrate that non-standard English in the novel functions as linguistic creativity and cultural authenticity, serving as a tool for effective communication and social commentary. This study challenges deficit views of non-standard varieties and highlights their role in literary meaning-making.

Keywords: Non-standard English, relevance theory, pragmatic strategy, The Girl with the Louding Voice, linguistic creativity

Introduction

Non-standard English has often been viewed in literary and linguistic scholarship as a marker of error, deficiency, or communicative inadequacy. In postcolonial literature, deviations from Standard English are frequently evaluated against normative grammatical standards rather than examined as purposeful stylistic and communicative choices. Such perspectives overlook the capacity of non-standard varieties to convey identity, cultural experience, resistance, and social meaning.

In the Nigerian context, the coexistence of Standard English, Nigerian English, and other localised varieties reflects a complex sociolinguistic reality. Consequently, Nigerian writers have long employed non-standard forms to represent cultural authenticity, social background, and character identity. Studies by Adegbite (2005), Bamiro (1991), Igboanusi (2006), Oha (2002), and Jowitt (1991), among others, have demonstrated the stylistic and sociocultural significance of English variation in Nigerian literature. These studies show that linguistic deviation often functions as a creative resource rather than a deficiency.

Despite these contributions, relatively little attention **have** been paid to the cognitive-pragmatic processes through which readers interpret non-standard language in literary texts. Existing scholarship has largely focused on structural features, stylistic effects, and sociocultural meanings, while neglecting the inferential mechanisms that enable readers to derive meaning from linguistically unconventional forms. Questions concerning how context, background knowledge, and pragmatic reasoning contribute to the interpretation of non-standard English remain underexplored.

This gap is particularly evident in Abi Daré's (2020) *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The novel tells the story of Adunni, a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl whose

aspiration for education and self-determination is expressed through a distinctive non-standard English narrative voice. While scholars have examined the novel from feminist, sociocultural, and thematic perspectives (Firgiawaty and Nurcahyani, 2020; Saputri and Harianto II, 2023; Chukwudera 2020; Agha-Jaffar, 2021), they have paid comparatively little attention to how Adunni's language functions pragmatically. Although commentators frequently acknowledge the uniqueness of her voice, few studies have explored how readers recover meaning from her unconventional linguistic expressions.

To address this gap, this study applies Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) Relevance Theory to the analysis of Adunni's speech. Relevance Theory explains communication as an inferential process in which hearers construct meaning through explicature, implicature, and contextual inference. The framework is particularly suitable for analysing literary language that departs from standard norms because it accounts for how meaning is derived beyond the literal linguistic form. This study therefore investigates how Adunni's non-standard English functions as a pragmatic resource rather than a linguistic deficiency. Specifically, it examines how explicature, implicature, and contextual inference contribute to the interpretation of her utterances and how these processes enable readers to derive culturally and emotionally significant meanings. In doing so, the study

contributes to literary-pragmatic scholarship by demonstrating that non-standard English can serve as a powerful medium for characterisation, identity construction, and social critique in contemporary Nigerian fiction.

Literature Review

Despite growing scholarly interest in linguistic diversity in Nigerian literature, the cognitive-pragmatic aspects of non-standard English remain underexplored. Many existing studies have concentrated on grammatical features, stylistic effects, and the socio-cultural relevance of non-standard varieties. For instance, Adegbite (2005) analysed the stylistic use of Nigerian English in literary texts, noting how authors creatively use deviations to reflect their social and cultural environment. Igboanusi (2006) discussed Nigerian English as a form of identity expression and emphasised how its localised features function effectively within specific contexts. Bamiro (1991) studied the different forms of English in Nigerian literature and argued that authors shift between standard and non-standard varieties to signal character identity, class, and tone. Oha (2002) examined language and ideology in Nigerian literature, showing how linguistic choices reflect power relations and cultural resistance. Similarly, Jowitt (1991) provided a foundational analysis of Nigerian English, identifying its structural patterns

and usage among educated Nigerians, while Gut and Fuchs (2013) discussed the phonological and grammatical variation in Nigerian English and its implications for intelligibility and literary expression.

While these studies offer useful insights into the stylistic and cultural roles of non-standard English, they pay little attention to how readers actually interpret such language. Specifically, they do not focus on how readers use context, background knowledge, and inference to understand meaning when characters speak in non-standard forms. This area of interpretation remains largely ignored in the analysis of Nigerian literary texts.

In Nigeria, the coexistence of standard and non-standard English varieties reflects a complex sociolinguistic environment. Standard English is dominant in formal settings such as education, media, and governance. However, non-standard forms such as Nigerian English, Pidgin English, and regionally influenced speech are widely used in everyday communication. These varieties are often viewed as incorrect or substandard, especially in academic contexts. As a result, voices that speak in non-standard English are sometimes overlooked or undervalued.

In Nigerian literature, especially works by postcolonial and contemporary writers, non-standard English is often used to represent authenticity, cultural context, and the

experiences of marginalised people. Yet, many linguistic studies of literature tend to describe the features of this language without exploring how readers understand it. For instance, Akere (2009) examined how Nigerian writers blend English with local languages but did not study how readers make meaning from such blends. Onuigbo (2001) focused on Achebe's language use, showing how it reveals culture and style, but did not analyse how readers interpret those expressions. Ayoade (2014) discussed how postcolonial writers use language to break norms, though he did not explore how this affects the reader's comprehension. Elugbe (1995) explored Nigerian Pidgin in literature and society but did not consider its interpretive function. Alo and Mesthrie (2004) focused on the sociolinguistic significance of English variation in Nigerian fiction but offered little insight into how such variation is processed by readers. Babalola and Taiwo (2009) examined stylistic choices in Nigerian prose fiction and emphasised authorial intention, with less attention to reader engagement. Odebunmi (2003) applied pragmatic tools to the analysis of dramatic texts but did not fully engage with inferential processes in narrative fiction.

Furthermore, scholarship on language in postcolonial fiction has increasingly recognized non-standard varieties as sites of resistance and identity construction. Scholars such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002)

have argued that linguistic deviation can function as a “writing back” to imperial norms, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) frames language choice as central to cultural politics. Within literary linguistics, studies of African novels in English have begun to treat non-standard speech as stylistic and ideological, rather than merely mimetic (Azuonye, 1993; Simo-Bobda, 2001). However, much of this work remains descriptive, cataloguing features of non-standard English without explaining how readers process meaning from it.

Existing studies on Abi Daré’s *The Girl with the Louding Voice* have largely examined the novel from thematic, feminist, and sociocultural perspectives. Firgiawaty and Nurcahyani (2020) apply the Matrix of Domination to explore how intersecting oppressions motivate Adunni’s resistance and self-definition. Saputri and Harianto II (2023) identify various forms of feminist resistance in the novel using structuralist frameworks. Other analyses, such as those by Chukwudera (2020) and Agha-Jaffar (2021), highlight Daré’s creative use of non-standard English to capture Adunni’s voice and background, noting its emotional and cultural impact. However, these works stop short of applying a cognitive-pragmatic framework to explain how such non-standard language guides the reader’s interpretation, generates implicatures, or achieves relevance. Thus, while they acknowledge the linguistic uniqueness of the text, they

do not account for the inferential processes by which readers derive meaning from Adunni's voice.

Relevance Theory has been widely applied to literary discourse, particularly in studies of metaphor, irony, poetic effects, and implicature (Pilkington, 2000; Yus, 2008; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). While pragmatic approaches have enriched our understanding of inferential meaning in literary texts, relatively little attention has been paid to how readers interpret non-standard English varieties in African fiction. Existing studies tend to focus on figurative language, stylistic effects, or conversational implicatures, leaving the cognitive-pragmatic processes involved in interpreting non-standard literary voices largely underexplored. This study addresses that gap by using Relevance Theory to analyse how Adunni's non-standard English in *The Girl with the Louding Voice* guides readers to recover intended meaning with minimal processing effort, thereby revealing its function as a pragmatic strategy rather than linguistic error.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the use of non-standard English in Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The data for this work comprised of one hundred (100) excerpts of non-standard English, purposively selected from Abi Daré's

(2020) *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. However, due to space constraints, only fifteen (15) excerpts were selected for pragmatic analysis in this study. Using insights from Sperber and Wilson's (1986,1995) Relevance Theory, the analysis focused on explicatures, implicatures, and contextual assumptions in order to show how the non-standard English expressions in the novel achieve communicative effects and optimise relevance between speaker and hearer/reader.

Relevance Theory (henceforth, RT) builds on Grice's notion of implicature. It explains communication as an inferential process in which interlocutors seek the greatest cognitive effects for the least processing effort. The theory assumes that human cognition is geared towards the maximisation of relevance and that every communicative act carries a presumption of optimal relevance.

Central to RT is the concept of the cognitive environment, that is, the set of assumptions, beliefs, and background knowledge available to an individual at a given moment. Meaning is derived not only from linguistic forms but also from the contextual information that hearers bring to interpretation. RT therefore emphasises the interaction between language and context in the construction of meaning.

A key distinction within the theory is between explicature and implicature. Explicatures are contextually enriched meanings derived from the linguistic content of an utterance, while implicatures are meanings inferred from the interaction between the utterance and contextual assumptions. Both processes rely on inference, through which hearers identify an interpretation that satisfies their expectation of relevance. The theory further highlights contextual effects, which arise when new information strengthens, modifies, or contradicts existing assumptions within a hearer's cognitive environment.

The relevance of RT to this study lies in its ability to explain how readers interpret non-standard English in literary texts. Rather than viewing non-standard language as a communicative deficiency, the theory accounts for how readers draw on contextual cues, shared cultural knowledge, and inferential processes to construct meaning. RT therefore provides an appropriate framework for examining the communicative and stylistic functions of non-standard English in Nigerian fiction, particularly how such linguistic forms contribute to characterisation, thematic development, and reader engagement.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis is guided by the understanding that communication is not limited to literal linguistic structures but also involves pragmatic enrichment, inferencing, and contextual interpretation. Explicature concerns itself with the explicit meaning obtained after contextual enrichment of an utterance; implicature addresses the implied meaning derived beyond what is explicitly stated; and contextual inference examines how the listener retrieves meaning using background knowledge, situational context, and cognitive effort.

In examining Adunni's speech, the study acknowledges that non-standard English does not automatically equate to communicative deficiency. Rather, it often displays creative restructuring, contextual innovation, and pragmatic adaptability. Each excerpt provided in this chapter is drawn directly from the novel, and each is accompanied by a detailed explanation of the meaning-making process as understood through the lens of Relevance Theory. The analysis that follows below is done on three levels: contextual, explicature and implicature.

Excerpt 1 (p. 1)

“This morning, Papa call me inside the parlour.”

– Contextual inference

At this point in the story, Adunni narrates the morning that marks a major turning point in her life. Papa's summons precedes his decision to end her schooling and arrange her marriage, setting the tone for her struggle against patriarchal control. The reader understands more than just the literal meaning. By calling her “inside the parlour,” Papa is exercising authority. In a Nigerian setting, when a parent summons a child early in the morning, it usually signals discipline or the delivery of critical news. Even though Adunni's English is broken (“Papa call me”), the meaning is clear, and it also shows her limited education. According to Relevance Theory, the explicature (the direct statement) is simple, but the hearer enriches it using contextual assumptions (knowledge about fathers' authority in patriarchal homes). The implicature is that Papa is about to make an important decision that bears serious implications for her life. With little cognitive effort, the reader achieves optimal relevance: Adunni is powerless under the authority of her father, and this moment foreshadows the bigger struggles she will face.

– Explicature

She says her father summoned her inside the parlour into the living room for a conversation in the morning.

– Implicature

This implies the start of a serious conversation, possibly with an authoritative or disciplinary undertone. The act of being summoned by a parent, especially in a patriarchal setting, suggests control and a lack of personal freedom.

Excerpt 2 (p. 1)

“Papa have this way of looking me one kind. As if he wants to be flogging me for no reason, as if I am carrying shit inside my cheeks and when I open mouth to talk, the whole place be smelling of it.”

– Contextual inference

This statement follows shortly after Adunni is called into the parlour, showing the tense atmosphere and emotional distance between father and daughter. Her description of his gaze helps the reader feel the fear and intimidation that define her home environment. Here, the reader understands more than just the literal meaning. Adunni is not simply saying Papa looks at her strangely; she is showing how his gaze carries judgment and intimidation.

In Nigerian culture, a parent's look often communicates silent authority or disapproval, so the hearer uses this contextual assumption to interpret the meaning. Even though her English is non-standard ("looking me one kind"), the image is vivid enough to guide interpretation. According to Relevance Theory, the explicature (Papa's look) combines with implicature (that he sees her as worthless or bereft of intelligence) to give a strong cognitive effect. The metaphor of "carrying shit inside my cheeks" shows how her voice is treated as offensive, and the reader infers that her opinions are silenced in her home. With little cognitive effort, the hearer achieves optimal relevance: Papa's gaze represents oppression, and Adunni's non-standard language still communicates deep fear and intimidation.

– Explicature

She says Papa looks at her in a strange way, as if he wants to flog her for no reason, as if she is dirty and her words smell bad.

– Implicature

This implies constant judgment, fear, and the degrading way she is made to feel. The simile about carrying "shit inside my cheeks" reflects how her voice and opinions are treated as worthless or irrelevant. It suggests a broader theme of silenced girlhood.

Excerpt 3 (p. 1)

“I tell you true, the day I stop school and the day my mama was dead is the worst day of my life.”

– Contextual inference

At this stage, Adunni reflects on the two defining losses of her life, her mother’s death and the abrupt end of her education, both of which shape her later. The statement goes beyond its literal meaning because it connects two painful losses, schooling and her mother. In a Nigerian context, losing access to education means losing opportunity, while losing a mother means losing protection. The hearer uses these contextual assumptions to enrich the explicature and see why Adunni equates both events. According to Relevance Theory, the implicature is that education and maternal love are her lifelines. Even though the phrasing is broken (“was dead”), the meaning is clear with little cognitive effort. The optimal relevance achieved is that without education and her mother, Adunni feels hopeless, and this sets up the novel’s central struggle between her dreams and her reality.

– **Explicature**

She says that the day she stopped school and the day her mother died were the worst days of her life.

– Implicature

This implies that education and her mother's presence are the two most important sources of comfort and hope in her life. Their loss symbolizes both personal grief and the death of opportunity.

Excerpt 4 (p. 1)

“Our parlour is the small of a Mazda car.”

– Contextual inference

This description appears early in the narrative, when Adunni introduces her home environment and living conditions. It situates the reader in a scene of material poverty, reinforcing the social and physical limitations she experiences from childhood. This is more than a simple comparison. By likening her parlour to the inside of a car, Adunni shows how cramped and poor her family's living condition is. The hearer, using contextual assumptions about poverty and rural homes, infers that her world is restricted both physically and socially. The explicature gives us size, while the implicature points to deprivation. According to Relevance Theory, the non-standard phrase (“the small of a Mazda car”) may require slight cognitive effort, but the vivid imagery makes the meaning accessible. The optimal relevance here is that her small house symbolises the limited space and

opportunities she has in life, reinforcing poverty as a key barrier to her dreams.

– Explicature

She says their parlour is as small as a Mazda car.

– Implicature

This implies poverty and deprivation. By comparing her home space to a car's interior, she highlights the suffocating limitations of her domestic environment.

Excerpt 5 (p. 4)

“Papa, the remote-controlling is missing.”

Contextual inference

This line occurs in a domestic scene where Adunni tries to please her father despite their poor living conditions. The missing remote becomes symbolic of the family's effort to maintain dignity and appearance despite poverty. The utterance is not only about a missing object; it exposes the family's poverty and pretense. The hearer relies on contextual assumptions knowing that in poor households, pretense in the presence of visitors is common. The explicature is that the remote control cannot be found, while the implicature is that Papa is trying to maintain appearances. In Relevance Theory

terms, the broken expression “remote-controlling” requires some cognitive effort, but it still leads to strong cognitive effects, such as humour and irony. The optimal relevance is that Adunni’s language reflects her limited schooling, while the situation reflects her family’s attempt to hide shame, linking poverty to social status and pride.

-Explicature

She says she tells her father that the remote control is missing.

-Implicature

This shows how small, ordinary objects become exaggerated in their household, almost as a way to cover poverty. The statement also shows her obedience in responding to her father even when she knows it is a pretense.

Excerpt 6 (p. 4)

“Papa like to be sitting in front of the fan in the evening, crossing his feet’s at his ankles and drinking from the bottle that have become his wife since mama have dead.”

– Contextual inference

Adunni's early narration of life after her mother's death showing how the household's emotional balance has collapsed. Papa's new evening routine introduces his detachment and sets the tone for the neglect that follows. This description is not just about Papa's evening routine; it shows his dependence on alcohol. The hearer uses contextual assumptions (that in many Nigerian homes, men often turn to drinking after loss or hardship) to enrich the meaning. The explicature is his sitting and drinking, but the implicature is that he replaces the role of a wife with alcohol. According to Relevance Theory, even though the grammar is non-standard ("feet's," "mama have dead"), the cognitive effect is strong: Papa has abandoned emotional responsibility and parental care. The optimal relevance is that alcohol becomes a symbol of neglect and grief, foreshadowing the challenges Adunni will face under his weak authority.

– Explicature

She says her father usually sits in front of the fan in the evening, with his ankles crossed, drinking alcohol. Since her mother died, the bottle has taken the place of a wife in his life.

– Implicature

This implies Papa's dependency on alcohol as a coping mechanism for his grief and loneliness after his wife's death. The description suggests that alcohol is not just a habit but a replacement for companionship, intimacy, and stability. It also paints him as detached from his parental duties, absorbed instead in self-indulgence.

Excerpt 7 (p. 4)

“Why is he telling me something I have already know? Something that have cause a hole inside my heart and fill it with block of pain that I am dragging with me to everywhere?”

Contextual inference

This utterance follows Papa's insensitive reminder of Mama's death, occurring in the same emotional moment of grief and misunderstanding. It connects to the broader co-text of Adunni's ongoing struggle to cope with loss while still being expected to serve and obey. The statement shows that grief is not momentary but a constant burden. The hearer relies on contextual assumptions about how loss shapes everyday life to enrich the meaning. The explicature is that Papa is repeating something she already knows, while the implicature is that this memory continues to hurt her.

Relevance Theory helps us see how the metaphor of a “hole” and a “block of pain” adds strong cognitive effects, turning emotion into a physical image. Even with non-standard phrasing, the optimal relevance is clear: Adunni carries her sorrow like a heavy object, showing resilience but also deep suffering.

-Explicature

She asks why her father is reminding her of something she already knows, something that has created pain in her heart and which she carries everywhere.

-Implicature

This implies that grief is not just an event but an ongoing burden. The metaphor of a “hole” and “block of pain” shows how trauma follows her daily life. It suggests she feels abandoned in her suffering, with no relief or healing.

Excerpt 8 (p. 4)

“Since Mama have dead, he keep saying things that didn’t make sense and sometimes he talk to hisself, cry to hisself too when he think nobody is hearing.”

Contextual inference

This reflection occurs as Adunni observes her father's behaviour in the days following her mother's death, providing background to his emotional collapse. The context here helps the reader understand that Papa's harshness stems from grief, not just cruelty. This line shows another side of Papa. The explicature is that he talks and cries when alone, while the implicature is that his harshness comes from grief. The hearer, using contextual assumptions about how men in patriarchal settings often hide emotions, infers that Papa is shattered beneath his authority. According to Relevance Theory, the non-standard English ("talk to hisself") may require slight cognitive effort, but it achieves strong cognitive effects by revealing vulnerability. The optimal relevance here is that Papa's cruelty is mixed with hidden sorrow, making him a complex character rather than just a villain.

-Explicature

She says since her mother died, Papa often talks nonsense, speaks to himself, and cries when he thinks no one is listening.

-Implicature

This implies Papa's brokenness and grief, even though he hides it. It shows that beneath his harshness, he is also vulnerable and overwhelmed. His authority is damaged by sorrow, yet he expresses it in silence and secrecy.

Excerpt 9 (p. 5)

“You want me to fetch water for your morning baff?”

– Contextual inference

This utterance occurs in a domestic morning scene that highlights Adunni's routine responsibilities before school. It connects to the co-text of her daily servitude and reflects the patriarchal expectations placed on her as a girl-child. The utterance is more than a simple question. The explicature is Adunni asking if Papa wants water for his bath, while the implicature is her obedience and role as a servant in the home. The hearer uses contextual assumptions about Nigerian patriarchal households where daughters often perform domestic chores to enrich the meaning. Relevance Theory explains that although “baff” is a non-standard form, the hearer easily reaches optimal relevance with little cognitive effort. The cognitive effect is that Adunni is positioned

as a domestic helper rather than a child free to learn, foreshadowing how gender roles will limit her education.

– Explicature

Adunni asks her father if he wants her to fetch water for his morning bath.

– Implicature

The use of “baff” instead of “bath” signals non-standard English influenced by Nigerian Pidgin. The utterance also implies her attitude to service within the family, showing obedience and the expectation that she performs domestic duties for her father.

Excerpt 10 (p. 5)

“Where we will find that kind money”

– Contextual inference

This line appears in the co-text where Adunni’s father dismisses her desire to return to school, using poverty as justification. It situates the reader in the harsh economic reality that crushes her educational dreams. The literal meaning is a question about money, but the wider context reveals poverty as the main barrier to her dreams. The explicature is that they cannot afford school fees, while the implicature is that Adunni’s hopes are

dismissed because of financial hardship. The hearer uses contextual assumptions about rural Nigerian families struggling with poverty to enrich the statement. According to Relevance Theory, the non-standard phrasing (“that kind money”) does not block understanding; instead, it achieves optimal relevance by stressing frustration and resignation. The cognitive effect is that her dream of education is tied to her family’s economic limits, making poverty a powerful antagonist in her story.

– Explicature

Adunni expresses doubt about where they would find such money.

– Implicature

The non-standard structure (“where we will find” instead of “where will we find,” “that kind money” instead of “that kind of money”) reflects Nigerian Pidgin influence. Beyond grammar, it implies the family’s poverty and inability to afford her schooling. It carries a tone of frustration and resignation.

Excerpt 11 (p. 5)

“morufu is having four childrens that didn’t go to school”

– Contextual inference

Adunni is trying to understand why a man with four children with no education would want to marry her. The literal meaning is that Morufu's children do not attend school. The hearer, using contextual assumptions, infers that marrying Morufu would mean the same denial of education for Adunni. The explicature states the fact, while the implicature is Adunni's fear of losing her own schooling. According to Relevance Theory, the errors ("is having," "childrens") require little cognitive effort to correct because the context is strong. The optimal relevance is that her words expose her resistance to early marriage and show how education is at the center of her struggle.

– Explicature

Adunni tells her father that Morufu has four children who do not go to school.

– Implicature

The errors in "is having" and "childrens" mark her limited proficiency in Standard English. At a deeper level, the statement implies that if she marries Morufu, she too will be denied education, just like his children. It shows her resistance and fear toward the marriage arrangement.

Excerpt 12 (p. 6)

“I don’t want to marry any mens or any boys or any another person forever so I ask Papa again, talking real slow so he will be catching every word I am saying and not mistaking me in his answer: lapa, is this bride price for me or for another person?”

– Contextual inference

This is more than a refusal; it is a desperate plea. The explicature is her rejection of marriage, but the implicature is her fear of being sold off. The hearer draws on contextual assumptions about forced marriage in patriarchal societies to enrich the meaning. According to Relevance Theory, her broken grammar (“any mens,” “any another person”) does not weaken her message; instead, it highlights her urgency and lack of power. The optimal relevance is that Adunni is fighting for her voice to be heard, but her father ignores her, showing how poverty and patriarchy silence girls.

– Explicature

Adunni tells her father that she does not want to marry any man, boy, or anyone at all. She repeats her question slowly to make sure her father understands that she is asking whether the bride price is meant for her or for someone else.

– Implicature

The repeated negative formulations and non-standard forms (“any mens,” “any another person”) show her limited command of Standard English. Yet, the emotion in her words implies desperation and fear. She is pleading for clarity, hoping her father will deny that she is the one being sold off into marriage. It shows her strong rejection of early marriage and her yearning for education instead.

Excerpt 13 (p. 6)

“And my papa, he nod his head slowly slow, not minding the tears standing in my eyes or the opening wide of my mouth, as he is saying: ‘The bride price is for you, Adunni. You will be marrying Morufu next week.’”

– Contextual inference

Here, Adunni talks about how her emotions are being neglected by her father and she has no say in her own life. The literal meaning is Papa’s confirmation, but the deeper interpretation is betrayal. The explicature is his statement, while the implicature is that Adunni’s fate is sealed regardless of her feelings. The hearer uses contextual assumptions about bride price in Nigerian culture to interpret this moment as commodification of

girls. Relevance Theory shows that the reader achieves optimal relevance quickly, the father values money over his daughter's dreams. The cognitive effect is strong: parental authority is used against her, turning her into property.

– Explicature

Adunni's father confirms that the bride price is indeed for her and informs her that she will marry Morufu the following week.

– Implicature

The phrase "slowly slow" and the unpolished phrasing indicate non-standard usage. Beyond this, the implicature is his lack of compassion: he ignores her tears and distress, treating her emotions as irrelevant. The statement signals finality, her fate is sealed regardless of her protests.

Excerpt 14 (p. 7)

"When the sun climb down from the sky and hide hisself deep in the crack of the night, I sit up on my raffia mat, kick Kayus' leg away from my feets and rest my back on the wall of our room."

– Contextual inference

This is not just a description of sunset; it reveals Adunni's creative voice. The explicature is that the sun has set, while the implicature is that night brings reflection and fear. The hearer uses contextual assumptions about her poverty (sleeping on a raffia mat, sharing space with siblings) to enrich the meaning. According to Relevance Theory, the non-standard phrasing ("hide himself") requires minimal cognitive effort but produces strong poetic effects. The optimal relevance is that her humble setting mirrors her limited freedom, while her imagination foreshadows her ability to narrate her pain vividly.

– Explicature

Adunni describes the evening scene, saying that when the sun sets, she sits up on her raffia mat, moves her brother Kayus' leg from her feet, and rests against the wall.

– Implicature

The poetic phrasing "sun climb down" and "hide himself" shows her creative but non-standard use of English. It implies her limited formal education but also her imaginative perception of the world. Her casual

interaction with Kayus reflects their sibling bond, suggesting comfort despite hardship.

Excerpt 15 (p. 7)

“My head been stoning my mind with many questions since this morning, questions that are not having answers. What is it meaning, to be the wife of a man with two wives and four childrens? What is making Morufu to want another wife on top the already two? And Papa, why is he wanting to sell me to a old man with no any thinking of how I am feeling? Why didn’t he keep the promise he make to Mama before she dead?”

– Contextual inference

Adunni is lost in confusion. She questions what her father was thinking and how he could easily sell her to an old man for money. The explicature is that Adunni has been troubled by questions, but the implicature is confusion and helplessness. The hearer, using contextual assumptions about forced marriages and broken promises, infers that her father has betrayed both her and her late mother. Relevance Theory helps us see that the metaphor “stoning my mind” requires little extra processing yet delivers high cognitive effects it conveys mental torment. The optimal relevance is that her pain is both emotional and symbolic: forced marriage feels like an attack on her dreams.

– Explicature

Adunni reflects on troubling questions in her mind: the meaning of being the wife of a man with multiple wives and children, Morufu's desire for another wife, and her father's decision to marry her off despite her mother's promise.

– Implicature

The imagery "my head been stoning my mind" reveals her struggle to process overwhelming thoughts. Her questions imply confusion, fear, and betrayal. The grammatical errors ("wives," "childrens," "before she dead") show her linguistic limitations but also amplify her innocence. The implicature is her sense of helplessness and deep disappointment at her father's broken promise.

Findings and Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Adunni's non-standard English in *The Girl with the Louding Voice* functions not as a communicative limitation but as a rich pragmatic resource. Through the mechanisms of explicature, implicature, and contextual inference, meanings that appear fragmented at the linguistic level are transformed into coherent, culturally resonant, and emotionally powerful expressions. The analysis shows that readers

actively engage with contextual cues and background knowledge to recover meanings that extend beyond the literal form of Adunni's utterances.

Viewed through the lens of Relevance Theory, the findings affirm that successful communication depends less on conformity to standard linguistic norms than on the inferential processes through which speakers and hearers negotiate meaning. Abi Daré's stylistic deployment of non-standard English not only lends authenticity to Adunni's voice but also foregrounds the social realities, cultural experiences, and educational struggles that shape her identity. The study therefore highlights the expressive potential of non-standard English in literary discourse and underscores its value as a vehicle for characterisation, cultural representation, and social critique.

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