

The aesthetic nature of language in southern African drama with reference to plays of Smith Likongwe and others

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore the extent to which language and other stylistic devices, through the multi-dimensional Neorealist style, address multiple contemporary trends in five selected Southern African plays. This realism refers us to a cultural situation or reality (meaning) whose complexity and variety can no longer be represented by any single text or mode of writing but only by a set of relations within a growing plurality of cultural styles and modes of writing. This approach embraces varying styles of writing to communicate varying and wider perspectives regarding the current human experience without falling into the parochial trap of objective reality which is typical of 19th-century realism and post-structural realism. Most of the studies on Southern African drama are focused on Athol Fugard covering the apartheid era (the past) and some on Mda Zakes covering post-apartheid events or post-colonial literature about South Africa. In view of this gap, the study focuses on the 21st-century Southern African drama and demonstrates that truth (reality) or meaning is not absolute or fixed but is constructed within the social context through the text and context relationship, as meaning is context-dependent. This is because the material flow or the floating signifier leads to the unstable signified. Since language is an important tool that captures reality, the study, thus, puts its focus on investigating the aesthetic nature of language in Southern African plays to explore the floating nature of diction, neologism, intertextuality, dialogic self, the significance of ordinary language and translanguaging, and identify rhetorical devices and their respective dramatic effects. In a multicultural society, writers have the right to choose any language they are competent in to write, and we do not expect the African aesthetics to remain the same throughout history. The findings indicate that the language employed in the plays is largely everyday register coupled with scanty figures of speech resulting in rhetorical devices, though not all rhetorical devices are expressed in literary language. Intertextuality presented itself through parody, allusion and representation. The assertion that meaning or reality (truth and representations) are mere constructions has demonstrated the postmodernist and modernist pessimistic attitude towards reality or meaning. Furthermore, translanguaging is evident only in *Cards*, *Mzansi Hopes* and *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, but *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, is bereft of neologism. Finally, the selected plays revealed varying fractions of realities within the Southern African milieu in the 21st century. In terms of implications, policy developers should endeavour to develop policies that promote inclusive communication in public institutions and in the society at large. In the case of researchers, there is a need to conduct further studies on the impact of language on social attitudes towards marginalised groups in the multicultural society of Africa. Finally, there is a need for educators to incorporate critical language awareness into language teaching curriculum to improve students' effective communication skills and comprehension of language's role in shaping reality.

Keywords: Floating Signifier, Intertextuality, Postmodernism, Neorealism, Semantics, Translanguaging

I. INTRODUCTION

This study is concerned with an investigation into how Smith Likongwe and other established Southern African playwrights have communicated in form, style and content the contemporary African condition, in other words, the realities of life today in Southern Africa. Contrast is made between this contemporary realist tradition and a traditional approach to theatre and drama. Considering neorealism as a multi-dimensional style of writing, attention is paid to the form and style of the plays themselves and the language used, as well as the psychology, ideology, history, social role, and contemporary significance of the situations and characters depicted. The study questions how far the form, structure, style, language, props, costumes and settings of traditional African drama have succeeded or failed in addressing the realities and problems of contemporary African society, for example, through allegory, myth, ritual, riddles and folktales. The study's primary focus and its main concern, however, are contemporary social problems, and thus it seeks to find out how effectively it applies neo-realist techniques in the modern era to bring these problems to the fore in the minds and experiences of today's audiences being addressed using language. The study is largely concerned with current realities. This position runs counter to those indigenous African plays that have often struggled to speak to our current day-to-day socio-economic chaos, expectations, technological advancements, disillusionment and lifestyle or our present-day life experiences. In the same vein, it can be argued that the phenomena of migration and globalisation have an overwhelming impact on African literature, generating diverse perspectives of the evolving

nature of African literature and the depiction of the contemporary African condition... the phenomena of migration and globalisation have an overwhelming impact on African literature, generating diverse perspectives of the evolving nature of African literature and the depiction of the contemporary African condition (Ojaide, 2008, pp. 43 – 46).

Indeed, we do not expect the African aesthetics and content to remain static. In view of this argument, Bgoya (2001) observes: “Little room is given to creativity that demands higher levels of education and higher levels of interpretation of contemporary realities ... not limited to traditional props and traditional genres” (pp. 283 – 292).

Regarding the writer’s language of choice, the following five considerations could be significant in this regard: language bears the tint of a user's experience as a medium of subjective communication; 2) A writer can express themselves in any preferred language and may address any chosen audience: local or international. 3) The purpose of literature is to express any subject matter in a contemporary mode; 4) In an environment of cultural diversity, a writer may use language on the basis of competence and communicative criteria; and 5) African culture is not in assertion in a multicultural context in which the reign of Western cultural universalism has receded (Isaiah, 2016, p. 90).

Therefore, some playwrights may choose to employ English in its current form owing to their family and education background; some may choose to infuse or transliterate, if they can, today’s local expressions into the English language (translanguaging) owing to their competency in their local language, and others may employ only a local language in their works. The factor of language and other stylistic elements in communicating or capturing multiple contemporary realities (meaning) in plays such as Smith Likongwe’s *Mzansi Hopes* and *The President’s Prerogative*, Cheela Chilala’s *Dead Roots*, Paul Grootboom’s and Mothusi Mokoto’s *Cards*, and Blessing Hungwe’s and Rumbidzai Karize’s *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* is the focus of this study.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The Neorealist technical approach implies the use of everyday and literary language with modern-day expressions and the use of other stylistic elements to enable dramatic representation to communicate or capture fractions of the present-day (or contemporary) Southern African human experience as opposed to being clingy to the past African life of myths, folktales, riddles, etc., whose nature is frozen in time and space. Focusing on the neorealist perspective, reality or meaning is not fixed but is unstable because of the floating nature of linguistic elements like diction, whose construction of reality is context-dependent. Africa must rise to the current occasion, redefine herself on the global stage and demonstrate responsibility towards her underdevelopment because “The world has moved on from the age of folk tales to that of global media, technology and popular culture, which requires a new mode of representation” (Isaiah, 2016, p. 89).

Most of the studies on Southern African drama and theatre are focused on Athol Fugard and John Kani, covering the apartheid era, and some on Mda Zakes and John Kani, covering the post-colonial literature about South Africa. In view of this gap, the study focuses on 21st-century Southern African drama. Therefore, the focus is on the 21st-century Southern African dramatic texts, namely *Mzansi Hopes*, *Dead Roots*, *Cards*, *The President’s Prerogative* and *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*. The plays under study do not in any way depict the period before the 21st century, and neither do they deal with the Apartheid era. These plays depict fractions of the socio-economic, political and sociopsychological realities using language and other stylistic techniques within the plays’ dialogic and sentential contexts. In addition, the paper explores self-talk, translanguaging, neologism, intertextuality, literary language and the significance of everyday language. Finally, the entire study is hinged on neorealism, and it focuses on the relationship between language and reality; thus, "postmodernism's argument that truth is impossible and truth claims are constructions" (Toth & Brooks, 2015, p. 119) is one of the hallmarks of the study. Thus, writers employ varying styles to communicate multiple meanings or realities. That being the case, the problem under study expressed in question form is: How do language and other stylistic elements in the five selected contemporary Southern African plays communicate multiple meanings or fractions of socio-economic and political realities and sociopsychological realities of the characters’ contemporary society?

1.2 Research Objective

To investigate the aesthetic nature of language in terms of the floating signifiers (diction), translanguaging, neologism, everyday language, literary language, dialogic self and intertextuality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Relationship between Language and Reality

Coenen (2017) writes about Toth’s view on this return of realist aesthetics namely “Renewalism, a term he coined” (Toth & Brooks, 2015, p. 216). This new realist aesthetic is about a renewed faith in what postmodernism deemed impossible: “a belief in truth and representation and thus mimesis” (Toth & Brooks, 2015, p. 216). Toth named this neo-realism or ‘Renewalism’ because “neo-realism implies an association with nineteenth century realism

(Josh & Brooks, 2015, p. 216) but he avoids “this association because he argues that a return to modernism or nineteenth century realism is impossible because of the assertions of postmodernism which claimed that representation and truth are constructions” (Toth & Brooks, 2015, p. 216). First, in terms of content, neorealistic novels or plays “return to the tradition of reflecting reality; second, in terms of artistic techniques, they adhere to the basic creative principles of realism and absorb the creative ideas and creative methods of modernist and postmodernist works of art” (Wang, 2022, p. 172). Postmodernism often experiments with or explores language, form and the structure of works of literature. To clarify this characteristic or technique, here is the submission: Therefore, postmodern realists concern themselves with the content (their plot, the content of what their language represents) as much as with the form. As such, they tend to insist in their work on a correspondence, even if it cannot be a one-to-one, perfect type of correspondence between the word and the world, or the signifier and the signified. In various ways, they illustrate the perils of conceptualizing the world as solely a play of verbal surfaces, insisting, instead, on the depth and “givenness” of the world; in postmodern realism, the word and the world exist in a relationship to one another, and they show that to discard one in favour of another is to risk a dangerously distorted vision of the world (Chabko, 2022, p. 207).

According to the 19th century realist philosophy, Chabko (2022) comments on its myopic or restricted nature saying “there exists a possibility of various relations between the conceptual and the non-conceptual order” (p. 22), such as of “representation, approximation, accuracy, truth, correspondence, or their likes” (Ronen, 1995, p. 191). However, in postmodernist philosophy (from which Neorealism borrows), such nexus cannot exist because these two orders never meet, and their relationship is entirely limited or “parochial” (Rorty qtd. in Ronen, 1995, p. 193), and is constructed by humans “and, as such, relative and arbitrary” (p. 23). Put differently, the postmodern or post structural doctrine contends that “[o]ne could never hope to get at the signified (the concept, the Idea) beyond the material flow of signifiers. One could never arrive at the referent (the thing itself, reality) apart from that reality’s employment” (Konstantinou, 2010, p. 117) within this or that genre, thus, the material flow (signifier) is context-dependent whose context (the thing itself, events, actions) is either expressed in word, sentence, or dialogue format or may refer to the entire play. In short, reality is not simply there as something given but it must be understood or constructed. Therefore, the differences between traditional Realism and Neorealism are that the former upholds the objectivity of meaning or reality. This means that reality is fixed, thus, making the 19th century Realism very limited in the face of the plurality of reality.

Regarding diction (words or phrases), this study restricts itself to Lexical-Semantics as opposed to Semiotics. To this effect, Stringer (2019) clarifies this position saying, “Lexical semantics is concerned with inherent aspects of word meaning and the semantic relations between words, as well as the ways in which word meaning is related to syntactic structure” (p. 180).

In view of this, an important traditional distinction in lexical semantics that has been influentially articulated by Frege (1980 [1892]) and Saussure (1983 [1916]) is between reference and sense. Therefore, the “reference of a word is the thing, event, or state that it points to in the world” which is external to the mind”. In contrast to reference, “the sense of a word is its meaning in relation to the linguistic system of which it is a part” (Stringer, 2019, p. 181) referring to the semantic context which comprises either the dialogic context or the sentential context. This refers to the surrounding information (other words or situations) to which the target word is part of, and “this meaning is internal to the mind” referring to words as concepts contrary to objective reality. For example, the clear meaning of the word “chair” in English is related to a broader interpretation: “other words such as beanbag, bench, pew, seat, sofa, stool” (Stringer, 2019, p. 181), or it may signify a person chairing the meeting, etc. Therefore, a floating signifier is a word with a broad, unstable or undefined meaning that people of the world interpret differently. Contrary to the Referential (denotational) theories of meaning which “focus on how words manage to pick out the set of things to which they refer” (Stringer, 2019, p. 182) or fixed meaning, this section focuses on the Representational theories of lexical semantics which “do not consider any aspect of meaning as external to the mind” (p. 182) because the emphasis in lexical semantic research is on words as concepts.

The meaning of a word or phrase is just constructed by the cognitive process since a word as a floating signifier may suggestively point to varying senses (of a word) or concepts (unstable signified) but the target word or phrase is often disambiguated by the plays’ semantic context. On this basis, “one cannot compare a linguistic representation with reality to determine truth, ...” (Stringer, 2019, p. 182), but by establishing the relationship between reality and representation, highlighting the constructed nature of meaning or reality, for instance, “Bingo” in *Dead Roots* may signify various representations but the dialogic context (word relationships, other surrounding words and social setting) coupled with knowledge of its alternative representations could be constructively helpful. At this juncture, the study will delve into pertinent issues of form or style and investigate each play regarding the aesthetic nature of language by finding out the availability of linguistic elements that include the diction as floating signifiers. Focusing on the multiplicity of styles or playfulness with language and form in postmodernism from which Neorealism borrows, Neorealism values the diversity of languages, perspectives and meanings by recognising that ambiguity and complexity in comprehending reality are key elements of human communication.

2.2 Intertextuality

Neorealism borrows the technique known as “Intertextuality” from Postmodernism and refers to the art of interrelationships among literary works or artistic works such as drama, poetry, music, painting, etc. To propound on this key feature, Shahariar writes: Intertextuality is a postmodern element of art and literature that symbolizes that each text bears the influence, denotation and connotation of other previous texts. It is not limited in literary texts, but also frequently used in music, paints, films, and advertisements in similar contexts. In postmodern thought, any writer or artist can neither be individually iconic nor write without the influence of other works. The intertextual elements are allusion, pastiche, parody, representation, and simulation... Parody mocks or satires any previous work with a ridiculous manner. Allusion gives explicit or implicit reference of any previous work... Representation imitates any certain reality (Shahariar, 2023, p. 180).

The study, however, focuses on Allusion, Parody and Representation through construction of reality or meaning.

2.3 The Self or Individual Consciousness

Since Neorealism borrows styles or techniques (modes) and forms from modernist methods, the representation of reality at the level of the character’s consciousness is crucial in understanding reality. In view of this self-talk, Latinjak et al. (2023) submit: “Human language is a unique phenomenon in nature that is used to communicate with other members of the species ... to a similar extent, to communicate with oneself” (p. 355) leading to the “Narrating self” and “Experiencing self”. In view of these two concepts, Kowalska et al. (2022) propound that the experiencing self describes its feelings, needs, and desires, and reveals its own attitudes toward the situation and its circumstances. The narrating self aims to give a detailed account of the event, circumstances and its own actions, without saying much about its emotional state.

2.4 Flexibility in its Application (opposed to Rigidity)

Neorealism adds flexibility as another characteristic to its nature. In view of this significance the “new realism is meant to contribute to an understanding of the plurality of choices in which we currently live. The new realism, ... it is one with its own flexibility and aesthetic potential to respond to changing times” (Fluck, 1992, p. 65 – 85). The new realism can be regarded as a variant of realism in a postmodern context, with continuous development and changes. In this regard, playwrights may rely on their creativity to employ a variety of diction, tropes and other stylistic techniques to achieve their maximum purpose.

2.4.1 The Concept of Multiplicity (Plurality) and Complexity of Reality

The return of realism in the form of Neorealism as well, noted by Wang Cong in *A Literary Review of Neorealism in British and American Literature* (2022) implies that: this realism refers us to a cultural situation whose complexity and variety can no longer be represented by any single text or mode of writing, only by a set of relations within a growing plurality of cultural styles and modes of writing (Fluck, 2022, p. 65 – 85).

Therefore, Neorealism employs a variety of styles and modes of writing which entails that a playwright’s creative potential leads to the freedom to employ varying forms of styles such as coined words (neologism), tropes, translanguaging, intertextual elements, etc. to communicate the multifaceted nature of reality or meaning. In view of the theoretical barometer set up by neorealism, the following is the theoretical representation of independent variables (in tandem with the objective) against which the selected plays will be measured or analysed comparatively:

Modernist and Postmodernist Style: Truth and representation as mere constructions (floating signifier versus unstable signified – blurred reality)

19th Century Realism: Emphasis on everyday language (English language in its current form)

Postmodernism: Multiplicity or Plurality of cultural styles (use of various forms of diction like coined word or neologism, translanguaging, etc.), Intertextuality (parody, allusion, representation, etc.).

Modernist methods: The “Dialogic self” leading to “Narrating self” and “Experiencing self”

Therefore, in brief, the independent variables are diction as floating signifiers, translanguaging, neologism, everyday language, literary language, dialogic self and intertextuality. Note that some plays may respond positively to all the variables or elements, but some may not or may respond to some elements, thus, there lies the differences, comparatively.

2.2 Empirical Review

To set matters in motion, few studies have, arguably, been done on Southern African drama in the 20th century and the focus has been on Athol Fugard as one of the founding fathers of Southern African drama. Haidar Laique Hashim in *The Representation of the Self/ Other Dialectic in Post-Colonial Drama: A Study of Selected Plays by Athol Fugard* (2016) made an “attempt to give a complete definition of postcolonialism and the fields that it covers. There is also an explanation to the philosophical and psychological background of the terms of the “self and other”” (p. vii). Haidar Laique Hashim further surveyed the major critics who endeavour to define the relationship

between the “self” and the “other” on “intellectual, psychological, educational basis or on the basis that can strengthen the relation between different races in one community” (p. vii).

Katundu Bronah Namatama did a study framed as *Towards an Understanding of Translanguaging Among Traders and Customers at Soweto Market in Lusaka* (2020) in the field of Linguistic Science in which she attempted to address: The dearth in literature about real life language practices by using a marketplace as a point of departure from the focus on translanguaging in bilingual education. The study recognises the fact that little is known about translanguaging practices among those in the trade domain in Zambia (Namatama, 2020, p. vi).

Namatama investigated the dominant and other languages that feed into and provide empirical evidence for translanguaging practices and revealed the motivation behind translanguaging strategy. In addition, she demonstrated how it is practiced among traders and customers of Soweto market in Lusaka. These were all analysed on the tenets of Conversational Analysis, Speech Accommodation Theory, Translanguaging Theory and Multilingualism.

Cheela Chilala studied *The Cultural Factor in the Semiotics of Contemporary African Drama* (2010), and the significance of this study was that it lay emphasis on the influence of culture on the semiotics of modern African drama, or the investigation of how cultural factors influence the production and interpretation of meaning in the African dramatic texts. He placed emphasis on meaning-related signs which are both verbal and non-verbal as opposed to semantics which is “concerned with the meaning of words in various contexts such as phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs” (Chilala, 2010, p. 1). Chilala argued that the reader needs to possess knowledge of the writer’s cultural orientation to conduct a meaningful semiotic reading of a text. In addition, the study focused on the relationship between culture and semiotics of the contemporary African dramatic text. In other words, Chilala (2010) was concerned about how cultural factors influence the semiotic reading of the African dramatic text in which he uses traditional and modern properties to interpret meaning or themes, for instance, in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* “Nana’s walking stick as an extension of her character. It signifies the authority that goes with old age in a traditional African society” (p. 152)). Therefore, the study wholly focuses on verbal and non-verbal signs to interpret the plays, and the process is culturally specific.

However, this paper focuses on the 21st century Southern African dramatic texts namely *Mzansi Hopes*, *Dead Roots*, *Cards*, *The Presidents Prerogative* and *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*. The plays under study do not in any way depict the period before the 21st century and do not deal with the Apartheid era, colonialism or neocolonialism. These plays depict fractions of the socio-economic, political and sociopsychological realities using language and other stylistic elements. In addition, the paper explores lexical semantics as opposed to semiotics. Finally, the entire study is hinged on Neorealism, and it focuses on the relationship between language and reality thus, “postmodernism’s argument that truth is impossible, and truth claims are constructions” (Al-Mugbil, 2025) is crucial in communicating fractions of realities. Though Namatama studies translanguaging, she focuses on the marketplace whereas the current study explores translanguaging in drama. In the case of Chilala, the difference lies in his choice to explore plays from different regions in Africa namely *The Black Hermit* (East Africa), *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (West Africa), *The Black Mamba II* and *Nothing but the Truth* (Southern Africa) using Semiotics, yet the current study explores multiple styles including lexical semantics to demonstrate the fluidity of meaning. Finally, Haidar Laique Hashim does not focus on language but explores thematic issues of race, segregation and identity in the post-Apartheid era. However, this study focuses on the 21st century Southern African drama depicting today’s aesthetics in relation to communicating meaning.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research design is qualitative approach using Desk Research, particularly, a comparative literary analysis. This study focuses on five primary Southern African drama texts which constitute the primary data or units of analysis namely *Mzansi Hopes*, *The President’s Prerogative*, *Cards*, *Burn*, *Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* and *Dead Roots*. Neorealism anchors the use of multiple styles or forms to communicate or capture the contemporary Southern African realities in the five dramatic texts against a backdrop of the literature that is deeply rooted in riddles, myths and folktales. Apart from primary units of analysis, the study employs secondary sources within the context of the theoretical framework.

Regarding sampling, this study focuses on the 21st century Southern African dramatic texts. The plays under study do not in any way depict the period before the 21st century and neither do they deal with the Apartheid era, colonialism or neocolonialism. In addition, the plays *Mzansi Hopes*, *The President’s Prerogative*, *Cards* and *Burn*, *Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* are some of the main collections of *Southern African Plays II*, published in 2018 by Smith Likongwe as a contributor, pioneer and editor. Next, *Dead Roots* is one of the collections of *Dead Roots and Other Plays* by Cheela Chilala and was published in 2023. These are some of the profound projects aimed at contributing to the development of Southern African drama and theatre in the 21st century after periods of stagnation of arts in the region.

Regardless of whether or not one’s art makes a resemblance of a mixture of few elements from Modernist and Postmodernist literary traditions, it still adheres to the traditional style and content of the 19th century Realism to some

extent; giving us a multi-dimensional approach because reality is multifaceted. From a methodological standpoint, the plays constitute primary data units and interpretative strategies include close reading of the texts, thematic analysis or stylistic examination and these serve as analytical tools for data analysis as guided by the following theoretical principles:

1. 19th Century Realism (Emphasis on everyday language)
2. Postmodernism's Multiplicity or Plurality of cultural styles (use of various forms of diction like coined words, use of literary or everyday language, translanguaging, intertextuality (parody, allusion, representation, etc.)
3. Truth and representation as mere constructions (floating signifier versus unstable signified – blurred reality)
4. The relationship between language and reality (meaning is fluid, context dependent, everyday register and literary language)
5. Playfulness with forms and modes of writing (or Versatility and Flexibility in terms of modes of writing and forms); for instance, everyday and literary language can be employed in the text to maximise than limit how multiple the realities depicted maybe (events, emotions, thoughts or memories, etc.
6. Modernist methods; the “self” leading to “Narrating self” and “Experiencing self”

Using the comparative literary analysis approach, variations in the nature of the language employed depends on the nature of the dramatic texts, thus, the similarities and differences are inevitable.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Text Analysis

Considering language as a tool for capturing or communicating fractions of realities in Southern Africa in the 21st century, this section investigates the aesthetic nature of language under independent variables namely diction as floating signifiers, translanguaging, neologism, everyday language, rhetorical devices, dialogic self and intertextuality

4.1.1 Diction as Floating Signifiers

A close analysis of the dialogues in *Mzansi Hopes*, *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, *Cards*, *Dead Roots* and *The President's Prerogative* reveal that they are largely characterised by words and phrases or current diction whose messages or meanings are unstable but can only be accurately understood within the dialogic context of the plays. In the article *Ferdinand de Saussure and Sign* (2025), Saussure argued that signs consisted of two parts: the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (concept). The bond between the two is determined by tradition rather than some sort of natural connection. By tradition, meaning is socially constructed (society or the school system). In the Neorealistic perspective, theorists reject the idea of a stable, fixed meaning (signified) that the signifier reliably points to, thus, it focuses on “the Floating Signifier and Instability of the Signified” implying that a word as a signifier does not point to something fixed or stable in the real world as meaning is not inherent but constructed or context-dependent. Representation in all the five plays is only possible through the construction of reality or meaning.

Diction, in this case, has to do with the choice of words the writer makes in crafting the work of literature, which largely depends on the writer's exposure to a particular language. In *Mzansi Hopes* the following sampled diction or words are not stable in terms of meaning but their meanings are context dependent or constructed within the confines of the play's context or sense relations within the system of language itself.

Sharing and Others (p. 26): these two words spoken by Tsala, Affidavit's wife in, “I think I shall be sharing with others when you go away” (Scene 1, p. 26), are floating signifiers whose concept or reality (signified) is unstable in each case. For instance, the word “sharing” may invoke the cognitive idea (concept) of sharing food with friends, and “others” may point to male or female friends who may be neighbours or church mates. The consequence of the floating nature of both words is that they both point to the unstable meaning or broad meaning, that is, his wife Tsala will be sharing her sexual organs with other men in his absence. The ambiguity is disambiguated when she gives him the Bible to carry, meaning, she will be sharing the Bibles belonging to other church members.

Therefore, all the words in the play such as “walkie-talkie”, “ignoramus” and “affidavit”, etc. are floating signifiers pointing to the unstable concepts (the unstable mental images or internal realities of what they may represent in the real world). They are the constructed signified and they communicate the English language in its current form, the modern African aesthetics and the urban milieu.

Next, a close reading of *Cards* reveals that the floating diction is characterised by vulgar slang such as “shit”, “bitch” and “bullshit”. The other key words that signify the decadent nature of realities in *Cards* are “cum”, “brothel”, “hooker”, etc. only within the context of the play (sense relations within the system of language) because these words are floating signifiers whose meaning or signified is unstable in each case and are explained here:

Cum (p. 139): this word “cum” is a floating signifier pointing to two different concepts or realities (concepts/mental images), for example, according to conventional rules, Elizabeth Walter (2008) submits: “-cum-” can be used as “a preposition when joining two nouns showing that a person or thing does two things or has two purposes, e.g. This is my bedroom-cum-study” (p. 341). However, in *Cards*, the word “cum” is a noun which is

a sexual slang term for semen, orgasm, or ejaculation (including female ejaculation) because meaning is not inherent but constructed or context dependent, and the target word is disambiguated with the help of contextual clues (word relationships and surrounding words) in “if you are looking for a release, whether of stress or cum, you’ve cum to the right girl Honey ... blow jobs...” (p. 139) namely “looking for a release”, “honey”, “the right girl” and “blow jobs”.

In the play, *Burn Mukwerekwere, Burn*, we have a variety of words that are either informal or formal, yet they all represent the elusive nature of meaning because all the dictionary or lexical elements are floating signifiers, for instance: Gay (p. 75): in old fashion English, the word “gay” in this stage direction: “*A gay white Russian man approaches*” (Scene 2, p. 75) is a floating signifier too because it may signify “happy or bright and attractive” (Walter, 2008, p. 595). As a slang, it may mean “not very good quality,” but the signified or concept in the context of the play is “homosexual” (Walter, 2008, p. 595), and it is referring to Uri who is marrying his fellow man as disambiguated in the following dialogic context:

NJABULO: (*Angrily.*) And they don’t want two Zimbabwean spoiling the party.

FARAI: It’s two man.

NJABULO: It’s two man what?

FARAI: It’s two men getting married to each other.

(*There is silence.*) (Scene 2, p. 76).

Furthermore, the play, *The President’s Prerogative*, has words coined as “floating signifiers” whose relationship between the word and the signified becomes unstable, arbitrary, and often dissociated from any fixed meaning or reality but its reality is only constructed. However, our concern here is not all the words that constitute the written play but a few selected or sampled words.

Sovereign (p. 37): the lexical item “sovereign” is a floating signifier as it points to nothing concrete or fixed in the real world. In one instance, it signifies “a supreme ruler or crowned head or grand duke” and on the other hand, it points to a former British gold coin worth one pound sterling created for commemorative reasons. In this play’s sentential context: “I mean leading in making this place a sovereign country” and “... But at least there must be some political leadership to become our new country ...” (Scene 1, p. 37), it points to a country ruled by an elected political ruler. Phrases such as “political leadership” and “our new country” disambiguates the whole semantic chaos. Diction as in “prerogative”, “sedition”, “constitution”, “injunction”, “blacklist”, etc. as floating signifiers communicate the English language in its current form, the postmodern African aesthetics and the urban milieu. Finally, Cheela Chilala employs words according to his choice to craft the play, *Dead Roots*, and the sampled words demonstrate their floating and subjective nature in the text and context relationship. The “floating signifiers” have an unstable relationship with the signified because they are often dissociated from any fixed meaning or reality as exemplified here.

Bingo (p. 35): In this respect, Kavuluvulu shouts, “Bingo!” in response to Rita’s and Chisela’s chants like “Man of Action”, “The African Mother Theresa” and “Kavuluvulu – Hope of the Nation” leading to ecstasy reinforced by Rita’s positive move to help mend and build his public image. The word “Bingo” may mislead the audience into thinking that Kavuluvulu responds to praises about him using insults such as calling Rita and Chisela by a dog’s name. To the contrary, the word “Bingo” is a floating signifier and may point to other senses like the “Bingo Game of Chance”. Secondly, the comment is an alternate way of exclaiming “Exactly!”, to confirm a thought, observation or discovery. Therefore, Kavuluvulu is merely exclaiming “Exactly!” to confirm the great thoughts and discovery of such praise names. The words such as “wealth” (p. 16) and “calibre” (p. 12) including all the other words that constitute the text (a play) are floating signifiers pointing to nothing fixed in the real world. “Bingo” may imply varying realities. Thus, reality or meaning is only constructed or context dependent. Therefore, this section explores Semantics and differs from Chilala’s study on Semiotics whose focus is on cultural signs or symbols.

4.1.2 Ordinary Language

Regarding ordinary or the everyday register, the findings indicate that all the five plays are mainly written in everyday language (ordinary English in its current form). For example, the mundane communicative situation in which Bheka, Vusi and Skhu are engaged in *Mzansi Hopes* is created by the ordinary or everyday language, and this kind of language performs the following further functions in drama:

It grounds the action in reality as in illegal mining and corruption.

It builds relatable characters as in illegal miners like Bheka, Vusi and Skhu.

It creates a sense of immediacy; this quality brings Bheka into direct and instant involvement or contact with Affidavit and Zinhle who have been hiding from Bheka giving rise to a sense of urgency and panic.

In *Cards*, Tana and Mimi employ American colloquial English (still ordinary) by using words such as “wanna” and “gonna”. There are many examples of such expressions, but these ones may suffice to prove the case in point:

MIMI: I ’m gonna push it some more ...

.....
TANA: Do you wanna screw? (p. 139)

The Russian gay named Uri, in the play *Burn Mukwerekwere, Burn*, whose English language is ordinary but grammatically incorrect and represents language as a complement of reality helps depict Uri's real situation faithfully as a typical Russian who is not an English fluent speaker: "My friends you enjoy yourselves (*With concern.*) My Zimbabwe brothers come, come, drank some vodka" (Scene 2, p. 80).

In *The President's Prerogative*, we witness a formal register being employed by a less sophisticated person, Ndazona (a village prostitute), in an informal situation whose function is to ironically excite humour, for instance:

DOKO: But, I think the money got lost as we were running away. I will pay later.

NDAZIONA: Your friends don't give problems like this. I will put you on my blacklist.

No more services without advance payment (Scene 1, p. 18).

Therefore, we can arguably agree that sometimes an illiterate person may sound very sophisticated in plain language such as uttering scientific or commercial jargons such as "blacklist", "advance payment" and "services", and this is still the reality of organised prostitution.

Based on the everyday register in *Dead Roots*, Kavuluvulu employs jargon or technical language (specialised language) like "European history" (field of history), "modern society" (sociology/literature), "democracy" (modern politics) and "classical period" (literature) mingled with loaned words such as "alpha and omega" (Greek) and "sine qua non" (Latin) to denotatively express his sophistication as a highly learned African elite in contemporary African society. This is observed in the dialogue between Rita and Honourable Kavuluvulu:

RITA: How will the New Dispensation ensure that the pillars of democracy stand intact.

KAVULUVULU: There you go again – talking as if democracy is the alpha and omega, the sine qua non, of modern society. This is an old idea borrowed from the Greeks, who developed it in the classical period of European history ... (Scene 8, p. 47).

Furthermore, everyday language can be expressed in one of our local expressions with English being the dominant language resulting in translanguaging. The investigation has proved that the instances of Sandwiching and Code-switching are evident in *Mzansi Hopes*. In view of this, the playwright has fused the local language into the English language using words or expressions of Nguni origin such as "manyoras" (p. 29) meaning "crooked buddies", "indoda" (p. 29) meaning "man", "izambane elibondiwe" (p. 41) meaning "mash potato", etc. Instances of Code Switching include such examples as "Ufanani lapha" (p. 44) meaning "What do you want here". The ability to employ sandwiching and code switching depends on two factors: the playwright's choice and competence or familiarity with the local language.

In *Cards*, the playwrights have fused the local language into the English language using words or expressions of Zulu origin such as "Kwerekwere" (p. 197) meaning "foreigner", and a Nigerian expression "Oga" (p. 183) meaning "boss", etc. Instances of code Switching include such instances as "Ku valiwe mfana wam" (p. 188) meaning "I don't know ... they will not ask me" and "ba uzwa bini ... Ngithi" (p. 188) meaning "My son has been arrested". The playwrights' choice and familiarity with the local language enabled them to employ sandwiching and code-switching techniques.

One stylistic feature that makes *Cards* unique is the sandwiching of colloquial or vernacular such as "wanna" and "gonna" in "I'm gonna push it some more ... Do you wanna screw?" and they are known as "grinders or subs" In *Burn Mukwerekwere, Burn*, the playwrights have fused the local language into the English language using words or expressions of Nguni origin such as "varume ndapota" (p. 72) meaning "gentlemen, have mercy on me or I plead with you", "mwana wamai" (p. 73) meaning "child of my mother", "manjmbos" (p. 73) meaning "guys", etc. The play has Instances of Code Switching which include such examples as "Murisei baba" (p. 74) meaning "How are you", "Umunye wangukona" (p. 73) meaning "There is someone from my corner here", etc.

The dominant language in these three plays is English in its current form. However, the differences between Bronah Namatama's study and this current study are that this study shows Isizulu, Shona, Ndebele and one aspect Igbo expression as local languages that characters use to codeswitch and sandwich in their daily interactions in drama. Secondly, the aspect of translanguaging in the current study is dramaturgical as opposed to the marketplace-situation. Thirdly, in Bronah Namatama's study, the local languages with which fusion occurs include: Nyanja, Bemba, English, Tonga, Lozi, Luvale, Lunda, Lenje, Ila, Soli, Mbunda, Tumbuka, Chewa, Ngoni, Kaonde and Swahili, with Nyanja being the dominant language" (Namatama, 2020, p. vi). The similarity lies in the fact that translanguaging enables the wider audience to appreciate these plays and the marketplace because it promotes inclusion, participation, approval, ascertain social identity and understanding to express complete meaning.

4.1.3 Dialogic Self

In the same play, Kowalska et al. (2022) propounds that the experiencing self describes its feelings, needs, and desires, and reveals its own attitudes toward the situation and its circumstances. The narrating self aims to give a detailed account of the event, circumstances and its own actions, without saying much about its emotional state. Therefore, the content that Njabulo brings out positively adds to the dialogic value and plausibility of the plot by defining “the narrating self” which refers to the unfolding violence coupled with imminent death, and “the experiencing self” that describes emotions such as hopelessness and anxiety experienced by Njabulo in South Africa or Khayelitsha, and helps propel the narrative forward, for instance:

NJABULO: I am running (Pause.) they say death comes at you in the night
like a thief... I was two blocks away from my “home”.
A cobbled up plastic shack with a bit of cardboard on the side; ...
I stood there frozen. It wasn't fear that paralysed me. It
was hopelessness, for from where I stood I saw a billow of
smoke rising. It wasn't hard to see that, that was my home
up in smoke... (p. 67 – 68).

4.1.4 Neologism

The play, *Mzansi Hopes*, has instances of Neologism, and these include Borrowing of *tsotsi* from the Nguni languages and blending of two words to create new expressions like “public provider” of sex services and “horizontal services” referring to sexual intercourse. And finally, three initials have been coined as BB for Brainy and Bold, BB for Brainy and Beautiful and BB for Brains and Body (Scene 11, p. 60). In *Cards*, we have instances of Neologism, and these include Blending of two expressions such as “vagina” and “ist” and “vagina” and “ism” to create new words like “vagina-ist” as if to refer to a specialist in loving the vagina and “vagina-ism” (Scene 1, p. 149) implying “vaginaism” as a tradition or philosophy or belief (religion) in which Piper believes since the expression “ism” refers to a distinct doctrine, cause or theory or philosophy. In addition, it has been established, etymologically, that the word “pussy” has over the years evolved leading to a variety of meaning from “puss pocket or pouch”, and Old English “pusa bag” to “a weak or cowardly man”, “cat family such as cat, lion, tiger, leopard, etc”. and “the external parts of the female genital organs”.

The President's Prerogative has instances of Neologism such as Initials like NGO meaning Non-Governmental Organisation, PH meaning Potential Hydrogen and H.E. (Scene 1, p. 23) meaning His Excellence for a male President. Lastly but not least, *Dead Roots* has instances of Neologism, and these include word building processes like Borrowing such as *voila* as French slang and *sine qua non* from Latin. In addition, Blending of two words “mini” and “star” to create a new word like “mini-star” (Scene 1, p. 5) and “Dictocracy” (Scene 8, p. 47) which is the product of blended parts of the words from “Dictatorship” and “Democracy” and was coined by Predrag Matvejevic.

4.1.5 Literary Language

In terms of amplifying multiple meanings (realities), Al-Mugbil (2025) says that the potential of pluralistic meanings can be found in literary language. He further notes that Connotative meaning goes over referent of a word and hints at its attributes in the reality. In view of this, the playwrights employ such a style to achieve varying unique effects apart from clarity, emphasis and intensity depending on the type of trope employed at the time as elaborated here: “in emotive meaning, literary language is used to express attitudes or personal feelings to the receiver or to the subject that matters of his discourse” (Al-Mugbil, 2025). However, Rhetorical devices can either be expressed in ordinary or literary language, and here are some of the examples of rhetorical devices in the selected plays:

To be precise, the playwright employs metaphors to enable Bheka describe women in *Mzansi Hopes*:

BHEKA: ... Just go to the shebeen I was drinking from. There are women
there. Real women. Sotho women. Coca-Cola shaped goddesses.
Women with multiple hips. Women with extra-large behinds.
Women with needle shaped nipples ... (Scene 3, p. 44).

To express clarity, Bheka compares the bodily shape of the woman he is talking about to a bottle of Coca-Cola, and the shape of their nipples to needles. And these Metaphors include the following expressions:

Coca-Cola shaped goddesses.
Women with needle shaped nipples.

In *Cards*, we have one instance in which Olayx is trying hard to convince Mimi not to abort:

MIMI: There are better words, you know. Like abort ...
OLAYX: Abort, terminate, kill, murder ... to me it's the same difference
(Scene 3, p. 170).

Thus, the following expression is an Oxymoron because the words “same” and “difference” appear side by side and are contradictory to each other to express emphasis.

One instance of personification is observable in *Burn Mukwerekwere, Burn* when Farai prepares to stab his fellow compatriot, Njabulo, and utters this: "... The ringleader looked at me waiting to see what I wanted to do. As if to spur me on the police sirens started wailing in the distance" (Scene 2, p. 73). Thus, the word "wailing" expresses personification for clarity.

In *The President's Prerogative*, David expresses the literary technique referred to as Onomatopoeia to vividly demonstrate the sound of the machine gun during riots: "... And before I could realize it ... (*mimes shooting.*) ka ka ka ka ka! ka ka ka ka ka ka!. There were gunshots all over!" (Scene 1, p. 27).

In *Dead Roots*, the playwright expresses clarity or a vivid picture of what Kavuluvulu intends to communicate to Rita using a Metaphor:

KAVULUVULU: ... I am news in human flesh. I am probably the greatest thing ever to happen to this godforsaken country (Scene 2, p. 16).

This expression "I am news in human flesh" implies how popular and famous Kavuluvulu claims to have become though the whole thing is about his self-inflated ego. The tropes explored in this particular section are all rhetorical devices.

4.1.6 Intertextuality

In *Cards*, the allusion here is: "She is "Aphrodite – incarnate"!! A direct reference to "Aphrodite" has been made. This is a reference to the Greek goddess of sexual love and beauty, implying that Eva has the qualities of sexual love and beauty that can satisfy Modise's libido.

Furthermore, the question whether or not Judge Molemela is buyable leads to this statement:

"That's his Achilles heels. Little girls – especially underage..."

The Allusion is: "That's his Achilles" and "Achilles heel" references a weakness or vulnerable point and it is rooted in the Greek myth of Achilles' mother who dipped him in the River Styx, causing his whole body invulnerable except for the part of his foot where she held him. Therefore, Judge Molemela's weakness is that he loves having sex with little girls, especially the underage. And true to his weak nature, he consequently succumbs to corruption.

In addition, *Cards* employs Allusion as a postmodernist technique to express intertextuality. Shaharia (2023) writes: "Intertextuality is a postmodern element of art and literature that symbolizes that each text bears the influence, denotation and connotation of other previous texts" (p. 180). For instance:

EVA: Then you're a virgin to me. Don't worry honey, I'll give you the best sex of your life ... It'll be like you've never done it before ...

PIPER: And she's not lying, believe me. She is "Aphrodite – incarnate"!! ... (Scene 1, p. 150 – 151).

The play *Burn Mukwerekwere, Burn*, bears intertextual element which Neorealism borrows from Postmodernism, and one example of such an element is Allusion. To demonstrate this, the song starts off strong (*loudly*) with an allusion to Julius Malema's charismatic and critical style or speech: "SFX MALEMA'S AMARACISTS MAN THEY ARE ALL RACISTS. WE MUST CHASE THEM ALL AWAY MAN AMARACISTS MAN" (Scene 2, p. 79). In the same vein, Farai takes up the character of Malema, "(Changes into Malema character)" (Scene 2, p. 79) – (imitation) and speaks like him as he lambasts and lampoons South Africans for failing to come up with a proper name for their country, failing to understand their own problems, etc. and refers to them as buggers.

Shahariar (2023) says, "Unlike pastiche, Parody, another intertextual element, imitates the work of past or original work in a satirical manner. It's a humorous imitation of literature, language, art, religion, and culture" (p. 193), and the ancient book "the Bible" is parodied precisely in *The President's Prerogative*, as Khomo engages Doko in a parodic exposition:

KHOMO: For Njobvu so loved the country that he gave his only special assistant, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting prosperity. Now, can you repeat after me; For Njobvu so loved the country ...

DOKO: For Njobvu so loved the country ...

KHOMO: That he gave his only special assistant ...

DOKO: That he gave his only special assistant ...

KHOMO: That whosoever believeth in him ...

DOKO: That whosoever believeth in him ...

KHOMO: Should not perish ...

DOKO: Should not perish ...

KHOMO: But have everlasting prosperity.

DOKO: But have everlasting prosperity (Scene 4, p. 57).

This agrees with Karl Marx's and Friederick Engels's view that religion is the opium of the poor, and it is used as a tool by some politicians and some religious zealots to manipulate the docile masses. Consequently, Doko (head man) is manipulated by appointing him Minister of Resettlement just to use him to convince his fellow villagers to accept being relocated to another area and give way to oil exploration. The moment that matter is achieved, Doko is dropped and dumped making it difficult for him to go back to his people he once betrayed because of short-lived luxuries.

Dead Roots presents aspects of Allusion in the form of political slogans uttered by Rita, Chisela and Kavuluvulu as he swims in praise and self-praise. In view of this, the following dialogic context is exemplary instrumental:

KAVULUVULU: ... The minister of Transport should develop a running stomach when he sees the photos, with captivating captions
Like, 'Kavuluvulu – Man of the People'

RITA: 'Man of Action'.

CHISELA: 'The African Mother Theresa' (Scene 6, p. 35).

Slogans include expressions such as "Kavuluvulu – Man of the People" from the novel's title *Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe and "The African Mother Theresa and Kavuluvulu are political slogans built on the principle of Allusion as one of the techniques of Intertextuality. Parody is one of the rhetorical devices expressed in ordinary language.

4.2 Summary of Findings

Putting style into consideration, selected words or diction were picked among many other examples from the plays under study for the sake of demonstrations. Therefore, all the words in five selected plays demonstrated ambiguity or instability in terms of meaning when put out of context. However, the introduction of the sentential context and dialogic context helped establish or construct truth or reality and minimise levels of semantic chaos because contextual clues ignited disambiguation. In brief, the postmodernists and modernists believe that reality or meaning is not there, and words or language can only communicate the sense of the word, not meaning, using sense relations within the system of language itself (in this case, using context signals within the dialogic or sentential context).

The dialogues of each play have revealed that all the five plays largely comprise everyday language expressed in English in its current form. For instance, we have technical expressions or jargon in *Dead Roots* and the formal register in *The President's Prerogative*. However, we have broken English spoken by Uri in *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, and American vernacular expressions in *Cards* representing varying and complex realities in different social settings. Considering the multicultural nature of Southern Africa, some playwrights have exercised their freedom of choice to fuse local expressions or African languages into the English language (Translanguaging) as a dominant language, and this is evident in plays such as *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, *Cards* and *Mzansi Hopes* except for *Dead Roots* and *The President's Prerogative*. And most of these local expressions are either sandwiched or code-switched and are mostly of Nguni origin and a bit of Shona, and Ndebele including "oga" which is of Igbo origin shortened from "ogaranya" meaning rich man or boss.

In *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* we have one of the stylistic elements that mimic the modernist style namely the "dialogic self" leading to "Narrating self" and "Experiencing self". In this case, language has been employed to demonstrate self-talk or the "dialogic self" emphasizing the human consciousness. Regarding Neologism, only four plays have aspects of coined words or expressions crafted using different morphological methods. For instance, we have word building methods like Borrowing in *Dead Roots*, *Mzansi Hopes*, and *Cards*, Blending in *Cards* and *Dead Roots* and Initials in *The President's Prerogative* and *Mzansi Hopes*. It is only *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* that is bereft of Neologism.

In terms of figurative or literary language, all the selected plays have instances of such tropes namely Metaphors in both *Dead Roots* and *Mzansi Hopes*, Oxymoron in *Cards*, Personification in *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn* and Onomatopoeia in *The President's Prerogative*. All the tropes mentioned so far are some of the examples of Rhetorical devices expressed figuratively (literary language). However, Parody is one of the examples of Rhetorical devices expressed in ordinary language. The five plays have aspects of Intertextuality in the form of Allusion in *Cards*, *Dead Roots* and *Burn Mukwerekwere*, *Burn*, and Parody in *The President's Prerogative*, yet Representation through construction of reality is present in all the five play as demonstrated by the floating signifier and unstable signified relationship. The findings have indicated that Intertextuality, as a borrowed postmodern technique, has proved that there is no dramatic text that is individually complete and self-iconic.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study argues that it takes more than one story (play) to establish the truth as each narrative expresses its unique language, perspective and realities. Indeed, today's modern African writers may not fully understand the world of our forefathers laden with riddles, fairytales and myths because the Africa they understand better is contemporary in nature as it speaks to their dreams, expectations, times, spaces, fears, chaos and experiences. Reality may be a subjective matter raising violent philosophical debates within ever resurging mirrors bottled up with heated disagreements and ambiguities. Stylistic elements such as neologism, translanguaging, the everyday day language and literary language maximise the communication of the multiplicity or plurality of realities without being parochial or restrictive.

5.2 Recommendations

Following the findings based on the investigation into the aesthetic nature of language or the variations in the writers' aesthetic or creative potentialities, the practical recommendations for studying language as a tool that communicates reality are set out as follows: Policy developers should endeavour to develop policies that promote inclusive communication in public institutions and in the society at large. In the case of researchers, there is need to conduct further studies on the impact of language on social attitudes towards marginalized groups in the multicultural society of Africa. Finally, there is need for educators to incorporate critical language awareness into language teaching curriculum to improve students' effective communication skills and comprehension of language's role in shaping reality.

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