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COGNITION-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER OF ODEWALE IN OLA ROTIMI'S THE GODS ARE NOT TO BLAME

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Abstract

This paper analyses the character of King Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* using Odebunmi's (2025) theory of Cognition Pragmatics (henceforth CosP). The study explores how Odewale's personal thoughts, cultural identity and societal expectations shape his language use and understanding of meaning. Drawing purposively on nine extracts from the play, the analysis is organised into three domains: personal thought, cultural identity and societal expectation. These divisions reveal how cognitive processes, such as inference, memory and belief, interact with sociocultural knowledge to influence speech interpretation and communication. In the personal thought section, Odewale's internal suspicion, misinterpretations and self-protective assumptions are highlighted. The cultural identity section shows how he views himself as an outsider and how this informs his defensive and symbolic speech. The societal expectation section reflects his public performance as king, his pressure to assert control, and his breakdown under the weight of public accountability. Across all sections, Odewale's failure to correctly decode indirect speech acts, proverbs and silences strengthens the escalating conflict in the play and Odewale's fatal end. The study argues that his downfall is not only predestined but cognitively constructed. This cognition-pragmatic reading provides deeper insight into how meaning is shaped in the play through culturally embedded language and mental framing that culminate into Odewale's fatality.

Keywords: Cognition Pragmatics; King Odewale; Language and Culture; Meaning Interpretation; Fatality

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Introduction

Engaging Odebunmi's (2025) theory of Cognition Pragmatics, this study examines the character of Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* with the objectives of exploring the theme of fatality and investigating how Odewale's thoughts, culture and society influence his language use. Over the years, the play has attracted scholarly attention for its theatrical innovation, thematic depth and cultural grounding. Researchers have explored its symbolic layers, postcolonial interpretations and religious and sociocultural content (Kpodoh & Olatunji, 2022; Nutsukpo, 2019; Osayomi & Adebua, 2023). Yet, one under-examined aspect is the central role of language in shaping misunderstandings and conflict that enhances the theme of fatality in the play. Communication in the play often involves silence, presupposition, indirectness and misinterpretation, features that demand pragmatic interpretation. These are crucial in understanding how context, belief and knowledge structure the tragic flow of events that culminate in fatality. Although there are existing studies that examine the play through religious, literary and sociolinguistic lenses (Daramola, 2008; Lawal, 2003; Ezeifeka, 2013), very few focus on how Odewale uses language within the frame of cognition and pragmatics. This paper addresses that gap by analysing how Odewale's mental representations, cultural background and inferential processes shape his language use. Consequently, this is an approach that deepens the understanding of the play's dominating theme, fatality, its linguistic richness and Odewale's character.

The Synopsis of the Play

Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* is an African domestication of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, situated within a Yoruba sociocultural setting (Atoye, 2008; Nwabudike, 2022). The play sustains the classical tragic arc but infuses it with local language, beliefs and worldviews, creating a distinctly African narrative experience (Kpodoh & Olatunji, 2022; Osayomi & Adebua, 2023). Hence, the drama creates a uniquely African storytelling knowledge by preserving the traditional fatal descent while incorporating indigenous language, beliefs and worldviews. Set in the fictional kingdom of Kutuje, it tells the story of Odewale, a man destined to kill his father and marry his mother. In making efforts to avert this prophecy, he unknowingly works towards its fulfillment, culminating in his tragic end (Odebunmi, 2008). Thus, the relevance of the play lies in its successful localisation of a universal theme through language and culture (Nutsukpo, 2019; Odekunbi, 2020).

The Character of Odewale

Odewale, the protagonist of the play, is a classic tragic hero, strong, charismatic and deeply flawed. Born under a cursed prophecy and adopted by strangers, he grows into a

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leader unaware of his true lineage. His journey from a war hero to a doomed king is marked by pride, suspicion, denial and ultimately, desperate search for self-discovery. While his actions may appear impulsive, they are shaped by how he processes the language and actions of others. Every step he takes is influenced by what he understands, misinterprets or refuses to believe. His story offers more than a moral lesson; it is a linguistic and cognitive puzzle.

Analysing Odewale provides insight into how language, memory, belief and social knowledge influence decision-making in life. His responses to prophecy, accusation and counsels are not based solely on emotion or fate, but on the information he has access to and how he processes it. He is a character shaped by both personal experiences, which he refuses to share, and collective cultural knowledge. These dimensions of understanding align with the core focus of CosP. Through his interactions, the audience witnesses a complex interplay of mental states, contextual assumptions and linguistic cues. Odewale becomes a lens through which we can study the role of cognition in discourse.

Moreover, Odewale is not merely a victim of fate but also a victim of meaning. His inability to correctly decode the intentions and implications of others' speech leads him closer to destruction and the fulfilment of his destiny. He questions those who speak indirectly, grows suspicious at silence, and becomes defensive when confronted with hidden truths. His repeated misreading of situations, whether through overconfidence or misapplied wisdom, shows the consequences of pragmatic failure. This makes him an ideal subject for studying how meaning-making functions within culturally specific contexts. In this sense, Odewale's fatality is as much linguistic as it is mythic.

Review of Literature

The review has been considered under two subheadings: (i) religious and cultural readings which discusses Kpodoh and Olatunji (2022), Osayomi and Adebua (2023) and Nutsukpo (2019) and (ii) linguistic approach that presents Odebunmi (2008) and Odekunbi (2019 and 2020).

Religious and Cultural Readings

Kpodoh and Olatunji (2022) consider the playwright's position on the effectiveness, potency and prospects of traditional medicine as an alternative medicine in the treatment of all manners of ailments. They contend that Africa is blessed with many potential which we often underestimate. They, therefore, conclude that traditional medicine should be considered, in case of any future occurrence of universal epidemic outbreak like that of COVID 19 pandemic that defied foreign cure. Kpodoh and Olatunji emphasise that traditional medicine is highly potent, was being used before the introduction of orthodox

medicine and can cure many ailments. It, however, needs to be stressed here that caution should be taken in using it because of the difficulty involved in determining the quantity to be taken. Second, the study is extremely religious and sociological rather than linguistic.

Osayomi and Adebua (2023), toeing the line of Kpodoh and Olatunji (2022), examine the relevance of the practice of Ifa divination in the play and contend that most of the actions in the play are strongly influenced by oracular consultation, and that personal and collective adversities are "the outcomes of a disharmony between disparate cosmos". They therefore conclude that Ifa divination among the Yoruba, as a way of life, has transcended traditional, Christian and Muslim beliefs. Agreeably, oracular consultation can be used to unravel many mysteries of life, but the problem with it, as evident in the play, is human sacrifices and bloodletting that it involves. Good as these two studies are, they differ clearly from the present study in that they are religious and sociological, and their foci are on curative power of traditional medicine and Ifa divination as demonstrated in the play, while the present study is pragmatic and its focus is on Odewale's actions in the play and how his thoughts, culture and society influence his use of language.

Nutsukpo (2019), working on the representation of women in the play, considers the play from a literary angle. She argues that the presence of more women characters in the play than the original play, *Oedipus Rex*, which features only one woman, does not only enhance its plot, essence and message, but also portrays women as being supportive, resourceful and courageous. This work also differs from the current work in two ways. One, it is literary while the present study is linguistic. Two, it is women centered while the present study is particular about Odewale's thoughts, actions and use of language.

Linguistic Approach

Odebunmi's (2008) study investigates the pragmatic functions of crisis-motivated proverbs in *The gods are not to blame* using Mey's theory of pragmatic acts. Unlike earlier works that broadly catalogued proverbs without theoretical grounding, Odebunmi offers a structured, context-driven analysis that highlights how proverbs function as tools of accusation, persuasion, caution and veiling. He classifies the proverbs into social and political crisis types, showing how they are activated by psychological and contextual factors such as shared cultural knowledge and inference. His analysis emphasises that proverbs in the play are not mere stylistic elements but pragmatic responses to unfolding tensions, shaped by the socio-political setting of Kutuje. This perspective aligns with the cognition-pragmatic focus of the present study, which centers on how Odewale's worldview and mental state shape his use and interpretation of language. Both studies highlight the role of context, belief systems and cultural codes in meaning negotiation. However, while Odebunmi focuses on the proverbs themselves, the present study

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examines Odewale's broader linguistic behaviour, including his misinterpretation of utterances, suspicion and defensive speech acts that leads to fatality. The present study expands the analysis from proverbs to a fuller CosP profile of the tragic hero. Together, the studies reinforce the value of pragmatic theories in African drama and emphasise how culturally embedded language influences dramatic outcomes.

Odekunbi (2019 and 2020) consider the play from a pragmatic perspective. Odekunbi (2019) works on the greetings in the play and their pragmatic functions. He identifies two types of greetings, namely culture-informed greeting which bifurcates into routine and culture- constrained greetings, and situation-informed greetings. Using Mey's theory of pragmatic acts, he submits that the greetings in the play pract, among others, respecting, encouraging, apologising, consoling, prodding, attracting, insulting and challenging. Odekunbi (2020) studies the discourse of pestilence and medication in the play. He picks out two treatment-related approaches: the folk and the institutional. He contends that the folk approach is characterised by face-threatening acts (FTA) with redress (positive politeness) and bald-on-record acts (FTA without redress) which demonstrate Odewale's ability to accommodate shock and rudeness from his subjects, in spite of his position as the king. The institutional approach, operationalised as a collective effort in seeking solutions to the pestilence, demonstrates a mix of positive politeness, non-performance of FTA, negative and bald-on-record politeness. He finally concludes that doctors should learn that rather than threaten the face of the patients by addressing them wrongly, they should be careful in their choice of words so as to get the cooperation of their patients in the diagnostic and therapeutic processes. Though the current work is also pragmatic, it differs from Odekunbi (2019 and 2020) because it dwells solely on how the protagonist of the play, King Odewale's thoughts, culture and society influences his use of language using Odebunmi's (2025) theory of CosP.

Theoretical Anchorage

The theory used for the study is Odebunmi's (2025) theory of cognition pragmatics. As submitted by him, the theory is premised on the inaugural lecture delivered by Prof. Albert Oyeleye of the Department of English, University of Ibadan on 25 February, 2016 titled: In my father's house, there are many languages. Working on the belief that in a large family there may be biological and adopted children, Odebunmi postulates that a language may have a native dialect and other non-native dialects. He therefore contends that even when dialects of the same language are spoken by interactants, what is said and what is understood may or may not jibe simply because the interactants have different meanings of the words used in their cognitions. This, according to him, may not necessarily mean that the interactants lack communicative competence, but may be because of their "exposure to the language and the degree of the exposure in the environment of

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cultivation". Situating the theory on English language, he argues that there are two varieties of English in Nigeria: Standard English (native), spoken by an extremely small percentage of Nigerians and Popular Nigerian English (non-native), which is a mix of standard and error form, spoken by larger percentage of the Nigerian English users. He therefore argues further that, because meaning is co-constructed, and language use and culture-ingrained values in a group's shared cognition cannot be separated, successful communication between a native English user and a Nigerian user of English requires conventional knowledge (formal knowledge), cultural knowledge (knowledge of Yoruba, Hausa or Igbo culture) and social knowledge (knowledge of society). Odebunmi finally makes it clear that in the Nigerian context, expressions like "brown envelope", "Manchester" "sugar mummy" and "market" when used in utterances, have meanings different from the SE meanings in the lexicons of the Nigerian users of English.

CosP is used because it offers a robust framework for analysing how speakers interpret meaning based on cognitive and contextual resources. It moves beyond surface-level language analysis to consider how individuals use memory, background knowledge and cultural expectations to make sense of utterances. In *The gods are not to blame*, many misunderstandings and conflicts arise not from what is said, but from how it is interpreted. Odewale's case presents a fertile ground for applying CosP to explore this dynamic. The model bridges mental processes and cultural patterns in meaning-making.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design to explore how cognition and pragmatic mechanisms construct meaning in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*. The play was purposively selected due to its rich use of Nigerian English, Yoruba expressions and culturally embedded communicative strategies. King Odewale's utterances offer a unique insight into how language reveals unspoken thoughts and internal processing, making him a fitting subject for CosP analysis. The study applies Akin Odebunmi's (2025) Cognition Pragmatic Theory, focusing on how mental representations, shared knowledge and contextual interpretation shape character behaviour. Nine extracts were selected and grouped into three domains: personal thought (Extracts 1-3), cultural identity (Extracts 4-6) and societal expectation (Extracts 7-9) – to capture the core of Odewale's psychological and linguistic journey.

The linguistic environment of the play mirrors real-life communication in Nigeria's multilingual context, where meaning is often implicit and layered. The integration of Yoruba proverbs and idioms into English discourse introduces interpretive complexity that demands both cultural awareness and inferential skills. Odewale's rise to kingship and eventual fatal end are closely tied to how he interprets, misinterprets and reacts to

information. The analysis aims to show how language becomes a cognitive tool that mediates identity, thought and fate in dramatic performance.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this study consist of nine purposively selected extracts from *The gods are not to blame*. These extracts were analysed using Odebunmi's (2025) theory of Cognition Pragmatics, which emphasises the role of memory, belief and shared knowledge in meaning construction. The analysis is organised into three domains that influence Odewale's language use: personal thought, cultural identity and societal expectation. Each domain highlights how cognitive processes and sociocultural context shape his interpretation of utterances and guide his responses.

Personal Thought

Extract 1 presents Odewale's monologue to the townspeople, revealing deep suspicion, anxiety and cognitive dissonance. His utterances reflect a mind overwhelmed by fear and the burden of identity as a stranger in a foreign land. Through metaphorical expressions like *white eyes, vacant eyes, innocent eyes* and the proverb *when crocodiles eat their own eggs…* , Odewale demonstrates how perception is filtered through internal beliefs shaped by past experiences and sociocultural positioning. According to the CosP framework, meaning here is not only constructed through linguistic input but also influenced by memory, background knowledge and belief systems. Odewale's language shows high inferential processing, where silence and looks are interpreted as threats. His mental state leads him to construct a hostile meaning from neutral or ambiguous cues, which aligns with Odebunmi's idea that cognition varies based on exposure and sociocultural context. Thus, this extract illustrates pragmatic failure resulting from internal cognitive bias and unshared knowledge.

Extract 1:

Townspeople: We hear that your highness wants us.
Odewale: Hmm. My people, I fear and I tremble. Suspicions,
heavy suspicions fill my heart. I look about me…
eyes, white, vacant, innocent, they stare back from
faces of sorrow and pain. But the faces may as well be
smiling. For who knows what is behind those eyes; white
eyes, vacant eyes, innocent eyes? When the frog in front falls
in a pit, others behind take caution. It would be me next. Me an
Ijekun man, a stranger in the midst of your tribe. [Stares at chiefs.]
When crocodiles eat their own eggs, what will they

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not do to the flesh of a frog? (P. 23)

In methodological terms, this extract was purposively selected to represent the personal thought domain of Odewale's cognition-pragmatic behaviour. His use of language is not only emotionally charged but layered with cultural metaphors that require contextual decoding. The frog and crocodile imagery evokes Yoruba shared cultural knowledge (SCK), used here to externalise fear and suspicion. His defensive stance indicates that he is constructing meaning not just from what is said but from what is unsaid, demonstrating high reliance on contextual inference (INF). This aligns with the study's objective of exploring how cognition, culture and social position shape linguistic interpretation. Odewale's inability to filter perception objectively leads to miscommunication and fuels his tragic arc. This cognition distortion, grounded in fear and personal bias, initiates the fatal chain of misjudgements that ultimately lead to Odewale's tragic downfall.

In extract 2, Odewale responds to the chiefs' challenge with a metaphorical proverb: *All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell which lizards suffer from bellyache?* This utterance is a cognitive-pragmatic act of veiled accusation, rooted in Yoruba proverbial logic. It reflects how Odewale processes suspicion through cultural imagery rather than direct reference. The proverb signals his belief that betrayal is hidden and that truth will eventually reveal itself through signs of distress. From a CosP perspective, his interpretation is shaped not by evidence, but by inference, emotion and culturally shared metaphor. His move from private dialogue with the chiefs to addressing the townspeople shows a shift from constrained discourse to performative accusation, influenced by his cognitive bias and need for affirmation. His assertion that *evil doers are many in this very land* exemplifies a breakdown of pragmatic clarity – he interprets political tension through a lens of paranoia fueled by internal fear and sociocultural expectation.

Extract 2:

First Chief: You have been King now eleven years; name one
among us who in words or action is seeking your downfall.
Odewale: I cannot name names.
Chiefs: Why not.
Odewale: All lizards lie prostrate: how can a man tell
which lizards suffer from bellyache? In time, the pain
will make one of them lie flat on its back, then shall
that which has been unknown. [Crosses to Townspeople.]
Minds are not clean, my people. Evil doers are many in this
very land; evil doers backed by heavy money, heavy
influence. The manner of your former king's death is

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all too clear to me now. Bribery. Men with money
bribed villains to kill King Adetusa… (P. 23)

Moreover, this extract is analysed under the personal thought domain, illustrating how unverified suspicion is framed as collective truth. Odewale's use of cultural proverbs and repetition demonstrates how cognitive strain can manifest as defensive, metaphor-rich language. The concept of shared cultural knowledge (SCK) is critical here: his message relies on the hearers' familiarity with the lizard proverb to legitimise his claim. His cognition framing transforms political ambiguity into certainty through overextension of inference (INF). The mention of *bribery* and *heavy money* localises his suspicion within the Nigerian sociopolitical experience, reinforcing the relevance of Popular Nigerian English expressions in dramatising corruption. This extract aligns with the goal of showing how internal cognition, shaped by culture and experience, influences meaning-making, often at the expense of clarity, accuracy and pragmatic success. This pattern of accusatory inference, detached from concrete evidence, intensifies his distrust and sets the stage for the fatal unraveling of both his reign and identity.

Extract 3 captures a pivotal moment where Odewale's cognition, belief and fear intersect. The Voice presents the prophecy as inevitable, in *It has been willed*, invoking divine determinism, a powerful force in Yoruba cosmology. In response, Odewale seeks agency, asking what he can do to avoid his fate. The proverb *the snail may try, but it cannot cast off its shell* is a cognition-pragmatic act of counseling through metaphor. It implies that destiny is inescapable, as nature itself enforces limitation. From a CosP perspective, the Voice's utterance draws on shared cultural knowledge (SCK) and inference (INF) to transmit meaning through symbolic imagery rather than explicit instruction. Odewale's reply mirrors this cognitive structure, responding with his own proverb: *the toad likes water, but not when the water is boiling*. He rejects passivity, framing his escape as logical resistance, not rebellion.

Extract 3:

Voice: 'It has been willed'.
Odewale: 'What must I do then not to carry out this will
of the gods?'
Voice: 'Nothing. To run away would be foolish. The snail may try,
but it cannot cast off its shell. Just stay where you are. Stay where
you are… stay where you are...'
Odewale: 'Continue to stay in the house of my father and mother? Oh, no,
the toad likes water, but not when the water is boiling.' [To Alaka.] That
was why I fled from home, my brother.

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This extract belongs to the personal thought domain, as it reveals how Odewale processes prophecy through internal reasoning and cultural metaphor. His cognition dissonance, between belief in fate and desire for survival, is negotiated through symbolic speech acts. His decision to flee is not based on disbelief in the prophecy but on his culturally-informed understanding of self-preservation. His language demonstrates the interaction between mental processing and cultural encoding of truth. The repetitive structure and metaphor used reflect emotional intensity and the need to justify past choices. This tragic reasoning, though culturally logical, ironically accelerates the fulfilment of the prophecy he desperately seeks to escape from. Ultimately, this extract illustrates one of the study's objectives by showing how meaning is constructed through mental framing, cultural reasoning and pragmatic interpretation of divine messages that result in Odewale's fatality.

Cultural Identity

Extract 4 reflects Odewale's defensive and emotionally charged cognitive state, triggered by a perceived insult from the Seer. His rhetorical questioning – *Sharing a bed with whom?* – shows a mind searching for meaning through inference, a core focus of CosP. The term *bedsharer* acts as a discourse trigger, activating layers of personal thought, suspicion and shame. Rather than seeking clarification, Odewale processes the label through self-referencing, interpreting it as an accusation of incest. His reaction reflects inferential overload, where meaning is constructed not just from what was said, but from what he fears it could imply.

Extract 4:

First Chief: My lord, you make charges sometimes without grounds.
Odewale: I do, do I? Very well then, tell me this: 'Bedsharer'. You heard
it. Didn't you? That blind bat who calls himself Seer says I am
a 'bedsharer'. What does that mean? Sharing a bed with whom?
Ojuola, Aderopo's mother. In other words I don't belong in that bed.

(P. 31)

From a methodological perspective, this extract fits into the cultural identity domain. Odewale's response is shaped by the Yoruba cultural weight placed on incest and family honour. His quick jump from *bedsharer* to *I don't belong in that bed* reveals culturally embedded beliefs that shape interpretation. He does not analyse the Seer's statement neutrally; instead, his reaction is filtered through intense cultural and moral values, revealing how cognition is molded by environment of cultivation (EC). This misinterpretation intensifies his identity crisis and accelerates the tragic self-recognition

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that seals his fatal end. His choice of words and repetition emphasises both disbelief and disgust, not only at the accusation but at what it could mean for his status.

The dialogue also features Nigerian English elements – sharp repetition, insult and culturally coded terms like *blind bat*, used to express emotional distance and contempt. His utterance becomes both a self-defense mechanism and a projection of inner confusion. Odewale's pragmatic acts in this exchange, challenging, clarifying and interpreting, are all shaped by a need to manage identity, guilt and societal perception. This supports the objective of showing how culturally situated cognition influences interpretation and meaning construction in dramatic conflict.

Extract 5 highlights Odewale's use of culturally symbolic language to express alienation and distrust. His cynical proverb, *The monkey and gorilla may claim oneness…* functions as a cognition-pragmatic act of negation and emotional distancing. Though Ojuola tries to affirm his belonging, Odewale's reply shows that he cognitively rejects this claim, drawing on a culturally familiar metaphor to expose the illusion of unity. The proverb relies on shared cultural knowledge (SCK) to convey the idea that external acceptance cannot erase deep-seated difference. His cynicism signals a breakdown in relational trust, suggesting that his personal thoughts override any social reassurances offered by his wife or community.

Extract 5:

Ojuola: Does that mean that my lord will not tell me why he is
angry at Aderopo?
Odewale: Very well, I will tell you everything.
Ojuola: [Sitting.] I am listening, my lord.
Odewale: Wife, I am an Ijekun man.
Ojuola: You have now become one of our tribe, my lord.
Odewale: [cynically.] Mmm… mmm… The monkey and gorilla may
claim oneness but the monkey is Monkey and gorilla, Gorilla. (P.51)

Methodologically, this extract fits under cultural identity. Odewale's utterance reflects how self-perception and group identity collide in high-stakes discourse. His reference to animal figures evokes a sense of innate, unchangeable difference, using cultural logic to validate his suspicion. His tone is defensive and mocking, showing how cognition under stress filters even affectionate gestures through mistrust. This interaction reflects the study's core claim: that cognition and meaning are deeply influenced by belief systems, background knowledge and context. Odewale interprets belonging not as a shared agreement but as a superficial performance, dismantled by his internalised outsider identity. This deep-rooted sense of non-belonging heightens his emotional isolation, pushing him further along the path to his fatal unraveling.

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In Extract 6, Odewale insists on public transparency by rejecting Aderopo's attempt to speak privately: *I refuse to listen alone. Speak openly, son*. His refusal signals more than mistrust – it reflects a cultural belief in communal discourse, where matters affecting the group must not be hidden. The proverb, *a cooking-pot for the chameleon is a cooking-pot for lizard,* draws directly from Yoruba shared cultural knowledge (SCK), asserting that if one is affected, all are affected. Odewale's choice of this proverb shows that he interprets identity and belongingness through collective cultural values rather than individual relationships. He is not just demanding openness; he is expressing what it means to be part of a shared moral and cultural framework.

Extract 6:

Aderopo: It is said that the secrets of a home should be
Known first to the head of the home. [Goes to
Odewale to whisper in his ear.]
Odewale: [shoving him off.] I refuse to listen alone. Speak openly, son,
Before all – a cooking-pot for the chameleon
is a cooking-pot for lizard. (P. 19)

This extract fits into the cultural identity domain because Odewale's utterances reflect his understanding of power, kinship and communication through Yoruba norms. His language choices, coded in proverbs, demonstrate that his sense of justice is tied to cultural expectations of equality and visibility. By invoking familiar imagery, he reinforces his alignment with indigenous beliefs, even as his suspicion grows. His need to display fairness in line with Yoruba traditions also reflects an identity shaped by communal belonging and ritual expectation. This aligns with how speakers construct meaning through culturally grounded cognition and the use of proverb-driven interpretation within dramatic dialogue. This rigid demand for public confrontation, though culturally rooted, further alienates Odewale from his kin and fuels the breakdown of personal bonds, accelerating the sequence of revelations that seal his tragic fate.

Societal Expectation

Extract 7 showcases Odewale performing a highly public and ritualistic speech act, swearing by Ogun – the Yoruba god of iron and justice. His declaration is a performative utterance with strong cognitive-pragmatic force, anchored in cultural belief and societal expectation. From a CosP standpoint, his oath is shaped by social pressure to act, cultural codes around justice, and personal conviction about loyalty to the people. The repeated invocations of Ogun and the vivid imagery used to describe the punishment *agony of slow death... crushed eyeballs* reflect not only emotional intensity but also a calculated attempt to project authority. This utterance performs multiple pragmatic acts: vowing,

threatening, persuading and asserting. His language is laced with culturally specific imagery that would be intelligible to a Yoruba audience familiar with religious and societal values attached to oath-taking and retribution. The use of Popular Nigerian English structures *I stand on oath, I shall straightway bring him* further localises the context and marks Odewale's speech as embedded in a Nigerian socio-pragmatic reality.

Extract 7:

Odewale: Before Ogun the god of Iron, I stand on oath.

> Witness now all you present that before the feast of Ogun,
> which starts at sunrise, I, Odewale, the son of Ogundele,
> shall search and fully lay open before your very eyes the
> murderer of King Adetusa. And having seized that murderer,
> I swear by this sacred arm of Ogun, that I shall straightway
> bring him to the agony of slow death. first he shall be exposed
> to the eyes of the world and put to shame – the beginning of living
> death. Next, he shall be put into darkness, his eyes tortured in their
> living sockets until their blood and rheum swell forth to fill the
> hollow of crushed eyeballs… (P. 24)

Methodologically, this extract belongs to the societal expectation domain, as it reveals how Odewale negotiates identity and authority under communal scrutiny. The structure of his oath reflects both internal cognition (belief in divine justice) and shared social knowledge (SSK) about what is expected from a just ruler. His speech is a strategic attempt to align with the cultural script of kingship – where the ruler must be seen as both fearless and just. Yet, from a CosP view, his language also foreshadows tragic irony: his resolute vow to punish the killer sets in motion a self-incriminating path. He assumes shared understanding, but his interpretation of truth and justice is filtered through limited and misinformed cognition. The extract captures the intersection of culture, cognition, language and role performance, aligning directly with the paper's objective of showing how speech meaning is shaped by both internal processing and external social forces. This oath, while asserting his authority, ultimately traps Odewale in a public vow that demands his own punishment, making his downfall not only inevitable but self-ordained.

Extract 8 presents a public confrontation in which Odewale expresses deep humiliation and betrayal before his people. His question – *must you shame me, too?* – reveals not just personal pain but a violation of societal expectation, where public honour and face are culturally sacred. In Yoruba society, public respect, especially for a king, is vital; calling someone a *bastard* in a communal setting is a direct attack on their lineage, dignity and legitimacy. Odewale's reaction, invoking *before the eyes of the whole world*, highlights the

performative nature of honour and shame in communal cultures. His outburst – *Stand back everybody!* – is a CosP act driven by a need to restore authority and control the narrative space. He sees this moment not as a private disagreement but as a breakdown of the collective respect expected of king and subjects. His choice of accusatory tone demonstrates the weight of social perception in interpreting meaning and assessing intent.

Extract 8:

Odewale: You… must you shame me, too? You an Ijekun man
like me. Stand back everybody!...You called me a bastard before
the eyes of the whole world?
Alaka: I did not call you a bastard (Pp.61-62)

From a CosP lens, this extract reflects how Odewale interprets Alaka's words through a lens of cultural and social vulnerability. Though Alaka denies calling him a *bastard*, Odewale's mental framing, shaped by cultural understanding of lineage and communal judgment, leads him to over-interpret and emotionally respond. This fits within the societal expectation domain as his reaction is less about what was actually said and more about what the audience heard or perceived. In this context, identity is not privately held but publicly affirmed, and any threat to it – especially in speech – triggers a defensive stance rooted in social performance. The extract underscores the study's focus: meaning-making is not just linguistic but is constructed through shared cultural expectations, emotional inference and context-bound interpretation. This moment of public humiliation heightens Odewale's sense of isolation and perceived betrayal, accelerating his descent into irreversible actions that seal his tragic end.

In Extract 9, Odewale confronts Baba Fakunle with public pressure and accusatory language, driven by the weight of leadership expectations. His urgency – *I shall count to three... Baba, feel this...* – illustrates how cognitive pressure pushes him to abandon diplomacy in favour of coercion. His reference to Ogun, the god of iron, is both a performative and spiritual act, invoking a divine witness to reinforce his social duty to reveal the murderer. This aligns with societal expectation, where a Yoruba king is both judge and protector, expected to act swiftly in times of crisis. His frustration – *My people ail and die; you are headstrong and silent* – shows a collapse in trust, redirecting responsibility to the elder who fails to meet communal expectations of truth and guidance.

Extract 9:

Odewale: I shall count to three… Baba, feel this…

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[Lets him feel his sword.] I have sworn by Ogun to expose
The murderer before the eyes of all at the feast of ogun that
ends tonight. I brought you all the way from Oyo to help us;
and you are headstrong. My people ail and die; you are
headstrong and silent.

Baba Fakunle: Rage all you can, King, I will speak no more.
Third Chief: Pray you, Old One, to be silent is to be –
Odewale: Don't beg him. He will not talk. The murderers have
sealed his lips with money. Hmm, our race is falling fast,
my people. When the elders we esteem so highly can sell
their honour for devil's money, then let pigs eat shame
and men eat dung.
Baba Fakunle: You called me pig! You are the murderer! (P. 27)

The use of Nigerian English expressions, *devil's money*, *let pigs eat shame and men eat dung*, reflects culturally charged condemnation, meant to provoke public outrage. These metaphorical constructions resonate with local speech patterns and demonstrate Odewale's loss of confidence in traditional authority. His speech becomes a CosP act of naming, blaming and shaming, using strong imagery to reflect the social decay he perceives. The explosion from Baba Fakunle – *You called me pig! You are the murderer!* – shows how societal expectation of respect has been shattered, leading to direct confrontation. The breakdown of elder-king relations here reinforces the study's thesis: in moments of tension, meaning is negotiated through layers of shared cultural codes, emotion-driven inference and social roles under threat. This heated exchange, driven by public pressure and cognitive misjudgment, forces a premature revelation that fatally accelerates Odewale's journey toward self-destruction.

Conclusion

This paper examined the character of King Odewale in Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame* using Odebunmi's (2025) Cognition-Pragmatic theory. Through nine purposively selected extracts across three domains of personal thought, cultural identity and societal expectation, it analysed how meaning in Odewale's utterances emerged from mental framing, contextual triggers and cultural knowledge. The personal thought domain revealed Odewale's internal tensions, emotional impulsiveness and interpretative flaws. His use of proverbs, idioms and collective expressions within the cultural identity domain reflected Yoruba traditions, communal belonging and the authority of shared knowledge. Societal expectation extracts exposed how the weight of kingship, public perception and

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communal norms pushed Odewale into high-stakes speech acts. Across these domains, his language served as both a weapon and a shield, used to assert, defend and interpret his reality.

Ultimately, these language choices and cognition-driven responses hasten King Odewale's fatal end. His tragic flaw was not inaction but the misjudgment of speech, driven by flawed assumptions, cultural pressure and emotional urgency. His vows, oaths, accusations and public declarations, all shaped by context and cognition, set in motion irreversible consequences. By swearing to punish a murderer he later discovers to be himself, Odewale becomes the victim of his own utterances. His downfall illustrates that in dramatic discourse, meaning is not just what is said but what is inferred, misunderstood and performed under cultural and social constraints. This confirms the power of CosP analysis in exposing how tragedy unfolds not by fate alone, but by the intersection of language, thought and social reality.

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