Breaking the Norm: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Mixed-Gender Conversations in Selected Contemporary Nigerian Drama Texts

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Abstract

This study entitle: Breaking the Norm: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Mixed-Gender Conversations in Selected Contemporary Nigerian Drama Texts interrogates female dominance using tools from Sociolinguistics (SL) and Conversation Analysis (CA). The study is a mixed research comprising both qualitative and quantitative methods. It adopts Itakura’s (2001) model in presenting the data analysis from three drama texts in tabulated and chart forms using simple percentage in order to establish sequential, participatory and quantitative dominance from the mixed-gender conversations, while Soliz and Giles’ (2012) theory of Communication Accommodation (CAT) is used to account for the communicative adjustment of the female attitude in order to subjugate the males. Findings from the study reveals a clear break in the norm whereby the females are portrayed as assertive and the males subservient. Also, in a bid to adjust their communicative attitudes, females in the drama texts used the over-accommodation strategy portraying them not only as assertive but also as insulting/abusive leading to the loss of self-esteem of the males which is contrary to the typical culture in Nigeria that is patriarchal.

Keywords: Sequential dominance, participatory dominance, quantitative dominance, over-accommodation, under-accommodation.

Introduction

Many African societies are patriarchal which in turn tend to espouse male supremacy- an ideology that is reflected often, in many of the cultural values and beliefs of the people. Social norms do not only systematically discriminate against women in many traditions, they tend also to determine the roles that men and women play in the family and the community at large (Mukama, 1995). Also, in a number of societies within the Nigerian setting, there seems to be some underlying assumptions that women are marginal, weak, powerless, subordinate and dependent on men (Ibekwe, 2018, Ojukwu, 2015, Atsenuwa in Lewu (2015). Such assumptions do not only form some framework within which such societies operate in terms of the place of the women, they get encoded in linguistic practices. The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba cultures,
which are largely patriarchal and pro-male are not immune to such traditions (Ozumba, 2005; Salami, 2003).

In most cases, marriage relations are entered into from the status of unequal power with the man as the breadwinner – supporting his wife financially and therefore, authorizes her comings and goings and must give permission in whatever the wife wants to do. Thus, a relation of dependence and dominance tends to permeate and regulate many aspects of wife-husband interaction including the use of language (Salami, 2003). In the Yoruba culture for instance, a husband is considered as the ‘boss’ or head of house-hold and therefore has a higher rank. The wife is therefore expected as a rule to show deference through referring to him by the use of a teknonym or a pet name usually coined by her. The allocation of these linguistic resources within the household tend to help shape the status of the Yoruba woman and reinforce her subordinate status. It therefore follows that examining the way people use language for effective communication in different social contexts provides a wealth of information about the way language works as well as the social relationship in a community and the way people signal aspects of their social identities through their language.

Many studies have been carried out on gender discourse. Notable among them include: Ahmad and Shah, 2019; Amerian & Esmaili, 2015; Dunbar 2015; Okata 2019; Pakzadian & Tootkaboni, 2018; Wahla & Buriro, 2019; Yadav, 2015. Many of such studies have focused on the idea of male dominance neglecting the fact that with the changes taking place in women, it is likely to affect their pattern of communication with the men folk. This study therefore, seeks to deconstruct female supremacy thereby breaking the norm by underscoring that females dominate males in conversations extracted from three selected contemporary African drama texts using a blend of theories from Sociolinguistics and CA in order to give a good picture of what dominance is, its types and as well account for why the dominance.

The choice of drama as source of data for this study is anchored on the premise that such texts serve as mirrors of reality in society. This suggests an anthropological function of literature and drama. It is necessary to point out that African literature Nigeria inclusive does not only reflect the African society but it also reflects upon and interrogates the happenings within the African society. Irele, (2001, p. 1) infers that African drama interacts with the social, cultural, political and economic issues in Africa.
Solomon Iguanre’s drama text-“The Visits” published in 2016 is a hilarious comedy laced with topical nuptial matters that threaten most unions especially when challenges of life set in. It is all a tale of bliss at the home front until trouble rears its ugly head in the office of Segun Richards, leading to his suspension and the stoppage of salaries. That singular situation becomes the turning point that threatens the fabric that holds the family together.

Onyeka Iwuchukwu’s drama text- “Enough is Enough” published in 2017 explores the themes of girl-child education, male-child preference and undue interference of in-laws in marriages in a traditional society that is trying to come to terms with conflicting modern influences. The play dramatizes the problems, struggles, betrayals and triumphs of mothers and daughters.

Tosin Jobi-Tume’s “The Victims” published in 2019 explores the diverse issues which are related to insurgency in Nigeria, and it specifically addresses how that affects the lives of the average youth and girl-child in Northern Nigeria. Interrogating the diverse angles through which terrorism is enabled, religious fanaticism, die-hard cultural practices, do-or-die politics, and poor family structures are identified as the main drivers of insurgency in Nigeria.

**Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**

Another way to explain or think about the difference in male and female communication is through the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT). This theory states that people change or adjust their communication patterns to match those to whom they are speaking (Giles, 1973). One facet of this is over-accommodation, or changing speech patterns too much. When a female takes an aggressive tone, indicative of masculine communication, there is the potential for backlash. All of this leads to the question of whether there is too much accommodation. The culture difference between masculine and feminine communication may be behind the difference in how males and females are described. CAT consists of two main accommodative strategies- convergence and divergence. The theory also consists of three other widely acknowledged and commonly applied strategies referred to as- under-accommodation, over-accommodation, and counter-accommodation that are all considered as divergence strategies.

Convergence is the most studied communication accommodation strategy and is the historical foundation of CAT (Soliz & Giles 2012, 5). Giles defines convergence as a strategy used by individuals to adjust their communicative behaviours in such a way that it appears similar to
that of others including their behaviour (Soliz & Giles 2012, p. 4). This can be achieved in quite a number of ways, such as changing one’s speech rate or body language to match that of the other’s. The underlying motive for converging behaviour is the desire to gain approval from others and as well to achieve a perceived level of similarity with others. That is, individuals apply and adjust to a wide array of linguistic, paralinguistic and nonverbal behaviours to match that of others. Converging behaviour is considered as a genuine and natural ingredient in communication and that conversation can lead to convergence as long as the communicators have an interpersonal mindset whereby they regard themselves and the others as autonomous individuals representing only themselves (Griffin 2012).

On the other hand, divergence consists of various accommodation strategies of which the following three are widely recognized and appear recurrently in the existing literature. Under-accommodation is a strategy whereby individuals refrain from altering their communicative style in spite of the other person’s behaviour. The reason for under-accommodation, or maintenance as it is also often called, lies perhaps in avoiding uncharacteristic behaviour and remaining coherent. Insecurity over linguistic and nonverbal skills can also be a contributing factor. Under-accommodation can manifest for example in greetings, where one or both communicators are unsure how they should greet the other. Under-accommodation can also be used intentionally to get the other to accommodate. Such a situation could occur between a nurse and a patient where the nurse uses a calming and reassuring tone to ease the anxious patient. In other words, under-accommodation can serve as tool for convergence between communicators. (Griffin 2012). Over-accommodation can be seen as belittling or patronizing talk that is often the result of oversimplifying and overstating the message and its content. It can lead to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes and restrict interaction between communicators, or even groups of people. (Griffin 2012). Counter-accommodation is a strategy where differences between communicators are maximized. It is a strategy that evokes the reinforcement of group identities and finds the communicators on the opposite ends of a spectrum. Counter-accommodation can be used to highlight group identity and the distinctiveness of the communicators, but also as a face saving technique. For example, a programmer might enjoy discussing the technical aspects of company’s website but seek a way out of the conversation and draw the attention to his role as a programmer if he feels unskilled discussing the more commercial aspects of the website. (Griffin 2012).
Conversation Dominance

Itakura (2001) operationalizes the notion of dominance in such a way that it facilitates the comparison of speakers' interactional behaviour in a conversation in order to investigate relationships between gender and conversation dominance. Within this framework, conversational dominance refers to an overall pattern of asymmetry measured in terms of the distribution of controlling actions between speakers over the course of an interaction along: sequential, participatory and quantitative dimensions. The term sequential dominance refers to one speaker’s tendency to dominate the other speaker regarding the direction of the interaction. This is seen through the way speakers share initiating and responding moves, and by how often a speaker makes initiating moves, because a speaker who makes an initiation determines what constitutes an appropriate response (Coulthard & Brazil 1981; Rommetveit 1987; Schegloff & Sacks 1973). Dominance on the sequential dimension is measured by comparing the proportions of sequential successful controlling actions (SSCAs) achieved out of the total number of successful controlling acts (SCAs) performed by the male and the female speakers. If the male speaker achieved a significantly higher proportion of SSCAs than the female speaker, he would be considered to have dominated her or vice versa.

Participatory dominance on the other hand refers to one speaker’s tendency to control the other speaker’s participation in interaction by restricting his or her speaking rights, in particular through interruptions, overlaps, and completion offers (Sacks 1992a, 1992b). Participatory dominance is measured by comparing the proportions of participatory successful controlling actions (PSCAs) achieved out of the total number of participatory controlling acts (PCAs) performed by the male and the female speakers. The speaker who achieves a significantly higher proportion of PCAs is considered to have dominated the other party.

Finally, quantitative dominance refers to a pattern where one of the speakers makes a greater contribution towards the text of a conversation than the other. It tends to be analysed in two major ways: distribution of the number of words between two speakers and turn length for each speaker (Itakura, 2001). If the two speakers produce a similar number of words, it can be assumed that both speakers have participated more or less equally. Otherwise, one speaker may have caused the other speaker’s participation in the creation of the mutual text to be reduced. In such cases, the former can be assumed to be dominant and the latter dominated along the dimension of quantitative dominance.
Methodology
This research adopts a mixed method therefore it is both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative approach makes it possible for descriptions to be made since the purpose of the research is to describe a phenomena. The quantitative analysis on the other hand is used to determine the frequency of occurrence of dominance in the conversations between the males and the females from the selected literary texts. In other words, the quantitative analysis assists the qualitative analysis in accounting for the preponderance of a particular conversational act by working out the frequency count analysis through the use of simple percentile statistical data analysis. The data used for this research are drawn from three contemporary Nigerian drama texts published within 2016-2019 randomly selected. The secondary method of data collection is adopted. The texts are studied for identification of mixed-gendered conversations and thereafter, purposive sampling technique is used to select conversations that are female dominated. While Itakura (2001) model accounts for the frequency of occurrence and type of conversation dominance from selected contemporary Nigerian drama texts, Soliz and Giles (2012) model in Sociolinguistics is employed to tie in all the findings and proffer reasonable explanations as to the adjustment in the communicative attitude of the females leading to a break in the norm.

Analysis, Findings and Discussion
A total of 48 SSCAs are discovered from the excerpts in the 3 texts out of which 06 (12.5%), 04 (8.3%), and 02 (4.2%) are made by the males respectively while 17 (35.4%), 13 (27.1%) and 06 (12.5%) are achieved by the females. Likewise, in the aspect of PSCAs, the females achieved more participatory successful controlling actions (PSCAs) than the males. In the aspect of quantitative dominance, both males and females had the same number of turns. However, the females occupied the floor longer as can be seen from their number of words-552, 495 and 373 words as against 278, 231 and 210 words uttered by the males. The summary is captured on table 2 below:
Table 5.1: Frequency Distribution of Conversation Controlling Actions in the Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of CCAs</th>
<th>Text 1 (the Visits)</th>
<th>Text 2 (The Victims)</th>
<th>Text 3 (Enough is Enough)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total Freq.</td>
<td>Freq.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(SCAs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSCA</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACA</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(PCAs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSCA</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PACA</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(QCAs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOW</td>
<td>2,139</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>373</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Likewise, the 2 charts below are a back up to the frequency table above which underscores female dominance from the texts analysed.

Figure 5.1- Showing SCAs and PCAs Achieved by Males and Females in the 3 Texts
Sequential Dominance

The excerpt below clearly demonstrates the manner in which questions are used as tools in controlling conversations between males and females in the texts in line with the submission of Linell (1990). This is seen as examples of instances that elicitations are seen to be in form of interrogations whereby Evelyn interrogates Segun on the issue of land in order to find out whether or not he has sold it off. Segun responds by making clarifications.

Excerpt 1

Evelyn: You what? Come Segun, I hope you have not sold those plots of land.
Segun: Em…em…not really.
Evelyn: You don’t sound convincing, Segun. O.k. where is the C of O?
Segun: It is still where I kept it.
Evelyn: So, where did you get the money?
Segun: I said it just now.
Evelyn: where?
Segun: I took a loan from the cooperative society.

Likewise in text 2, Gimbiya interrogates Nura using ‘WH’ questions portraying her in the play as domineering while he is compliant. He ended up not only revealing his identity but as well furnishing her with details of how and why he joined the movement and what it is all about as seen in excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2
Gimbiya: How did you get here?
Nura: (Shrugs.) I was misled.
Nura: (Reluctantly.) After soldiers raided our homestead and destroyed my family, in my misery and hopelessness, I left Dadin Kowa for another village. There I met the people of this Movement. I was brainwashed…
Gimbiya: What really is The Movement about?
Nura: Same question I have been asking everyone since I got here. Frankly, I don’t know. I doubt if even the Commander does. The Movement has become an illness, an epidemic. A mass mental illness.

A similar scenario plays out in excerpt 3 below, where the female - Ugochi interrogates her brother in-law again using the ‘WH’ type of questions that demand short answers. Consider the excerpt below:

Excerpt 3
Udoka: We have agreed that Nkechi should not go to the university but should marry immediately.
Ugochi: Who are the ‘we’?
Udoka: I have decided. My brother is dead so I am Nkechi’s father that we see today…
Ugochi: Whose decision? You cannot decide for me who should marry my daughter and who should not. This is a personal issue.

Enough is Enough, pp. 67-68
Participatory Controlling Actions

At the level of participatory controlling actions (PCAs), there is evidence of interruption in the course of the conversation between the females and their male counterparts in the texts which is classed under PSCA. Again we see a break in the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo cultures whereby the man should be respected. The excerpts below demonstrate this clearly.

Excerpt 4
Segun: family planning? With just Cynthia- a grown-up girl in the boarding house? A girl of thirteen…
Evelyn: look Segun, family planning is not just child spacing, it is tightly linked with the economic situation of the family.
Segun: all the same…
Evelyn: no further comment (picks the bill on the table) is this the bill?
Segun: Yes

The Visits p. 90

Similarly, in text 2, Gimbiya is portrayed in the excerpt below as having interrupted Nura a terrorist who seeks for forgiveness from her for being part of the group that raided her family.

Excerpt 5
Nura: (Almost in tears.) Forgive me, Gimbiya…
Gimbiya: Forgive you? Never. Not now, not ever. Stay away from me, Nura. Stay very far away from me. (She begins to walk away from Nura.)

The Victims p. 23

Likewise in text 3, a similar scenario plays out between Ugochi and Udoka.

Excerpt 6
Udoka: You are our wife, an ordinary woman and I have the right to insult you or even beat you… We married you with our money and…
Ugochi: I am a woman, yes. Ordinary, no. I am a wife, yes. A slave, no. I am a human being, yes, property, no. I was married by your brother yes, bought by your brother, no.

Enough is Enough p.48

Quantitative Controlling Actions

There is every indication from text 1 – “The Visits”, that even though both Evelyn and Segun had same number of turns (31 each), Evelyn uttered more number of words (552) than Segun
(278) which is an indication that she dominated the floor longer than Segun. It is clear however, from the texts that when a female plays a higher role in the home (she is the bread winner), she is far from being subservient. Similarly, in text 2- “the Victims”, Nura utters 241 words while Gimbiya utters 372 words in the course of their conversation. Both Gimbiya and Nura had same number of turns (29 turns each). However, considering the fact that Gimbiya occupies the floor longer during her turns, this accounts for why she has higher number of words than Nura. This, of course shows dominance. Likewise, in text 3, Ugochi utters more number of words than Udoka portraying her as dominating him.

The Use of Over-Accommodation in the Portrayal of Dominance

Drawing insights from Spender’s (1998) Dominance Model which is based on the view of male dominance through the way they use language for their interests, for instance, that a man can be masculine, strong and fearless, we see a clear break in the norm in the texts under study. Here the females in the texts are portrayed as being assertive as well as aggressive to the point ofcornering the males who happen to be either-husband/boyfriend/ in-law and demanding for explanations. They appear to have adjusted their communication attitudes from that of being subservient to that of being domineering and over-bearing on the males against the backdrop of the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa cultures that tend to portray women as subservient. This is clearly in line with Soliz and Giles’ (2012) submission on the theory of communication accommodation (CAT) that suggests an adjustment in the attitude of interactants in order to fit into a particular communicative behaviour. This, too is in consonance with the submission of Pitts and Harwood (2015) on convergence which is a major move under CAT, that the overall, multiple reasons as to why people converge, is simply out of the immediate or permanent desire to control another speaker.
In text 1 for instance, there is an extreme situation whereby Segun greets his wife Evelyn but she chooses to ignore him and keeps mute. This is not unconnected with the fact that from the shared background knowledge that the reader is given in the text, she (Evelyn) is the bread winner in this instance, therefore, she is in–charge and sees everyone in the house under her beck and call- Segun her husband inclusive as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt 7**

_Segun:_ welcome  
_Evelyn:_ (no response)

_“The Visits” p. 86_

Evelyn orders her husband Segun in another instance by adjusting her communicative attitude as is seen from the excerpt below:

**Excerpt 8**

_Evelyn:_ Just before you go back to your stupid sleep, let me tell you some measures I’ve taken to cushion the effects of your suspension. Are you listening?  
_Segun:_ Speak on.

_Evelyn:_ Well, you listen or not, the measures have come to stay.  
No 1, there will no longer be breakfast in this house. Lunch will be light and supper will be lighter. No 2, I have already sold your car in the mechanics workshop. The proceeds have been used to defray some expenses. No 3, Uncle Kunlex will either comply with my, sorry our rules or be shown the way out. No 4, nobody send Kelebe on an errand except with approval…  

_The Visits pp. 76-77_

Evelyn is also seen to over-accommodates to the extent that she could send her husband (Segun) …“…please get my cookery book inside” and he simply responds "ok" “and goes ahead to act accordingly which is evidenced of the fact that her over-accommodation has had a deteriorating psychological effect on his self – esteem, as a result he ceases to see himself as the head thereby giving in to the wife in what should be a typical patriarchal African setting.

In some instances, she over-accommodates to the extent of abusing her husband as we see in text 1: “you are silly for talking to me that way with your stinking mouth…” which can be interpreted as a form of spousal abuse.
Likewise in the case of Gimbiya and Nura in text 2, her ability to adjust her communicative attitude to match that of a terrorist (Boko Haram) is seen in the way she interrogated Nura – a terrorist, cashing on his supposedly love for her. Nura in turn accommodates her as is portrayed as providing answers to all of her questions, unravelling what he was under oath not to reveal about the terrorist movement. She even has the audacity to order him- “Nura, don’t be so stubborn. Say something... Don’t let him do this to you” (p.25). Gimbiya disrespected his plea as seen in the excerpt: “Gimbiya, at this point, there is no more hope for me. But you can still be saved. Please, take his offer, return home, and start a new life...” (p. 27).

Also, in text 3, Ugochi demonstrates this communication adjustment in a divergent way showing aberrance from the norm by telling Udoka- her brother in-law that he has no business taking decisions for her children in a society and culture where the males are known to be at the forefront especially in issues of marriage. Female supremacy is uncovered here as soon as Ugochi adjusts her communicative attitude to accommodate situations that only the men folk are known to handle in the context of the African culture. Therefore, we see a break in the norm revealing not just female supremacy but subjugation of the male as well. Ugochi clearly demonstrates that she is capable of taking decisions for her children as we see in the excerpt below.

**Excerpt 9**

_Udoka:_ We have agreed that Nkechi should not go to the university but should marry immediately.

_Ugochi:_ Who are the ‘we’?

_Udoka:_ I have decided. My brother is dead so I am Nkechi’s father that we see today.

_Nkechi will get married and her bride price will be kept to train your only son. That is final. No argument._

_Ugochi:_ Whose decision? You cannot decide for me who should marry my daughter and who should not. This is a personal issue.

*Enough is Enough,* pp. 67-68

Similarly, Evelyn in text 1 uses foul language in communicating with her husband which is against the Nigerian culture where women are expected to be respectful to their husbands. It is also an evidence of female *supremacy/subjugation* exhibited by the female in the play as a result of her socio-economic status in the family. There is a reversal of roles where the female
wields power as the breadwinner of the home therefore she adjusts her communicative attitude in order to accommodate her new status. She talks with so much assertiveness and power while her husband also adjusts his communicative behaviour thereby becoming subservient in this context. Consider the excerpt below:

**Excerpt 10**

*Segun:* keep quite woman…

*Evelyn:* you are silly for talking to me that way with your stinking mouth (Segun furiously raises his hand to slap her but controls himself). Go on, slap me if you can.

But whether or not, I can assure you, without a slur in my words that, you, Mr. Segun Richards, have met your waterloo.

“The Visits” p.99

There are instances where Evelyn adjusts her communicative attitude, taking the position of the male and therefore has the audacity to assign chores that are traditionally meant for the females to her husband and he obliges her by succumbing to her as it is demonstrated in the excerpt below:

**Excerpt 11**

*Evelyn:* I don’t want to know, just take this ₦20 (she gives him with her left hand) and go to the mechanic right now. I want my car brought to my office in less than two hours. (Makes to go). Meanwhile, have you fetched the water?

*Segun:* Yes…. The Visits pp. 88-89

So far from the analysis conducted, female supremacy is uncovered through the use of conversational controlling acts such as- SCAs, PCAs and QCA which include conversation features such as interruptions, silence, topic change, questioning, requests and occupying the floor longer than the males. Also, the females employed a communicative accommodation technique in order to adjust their attitudes leading to assertiveness in place of subservience in a typical Nigerian setting. Factors that account for the use of over-accommodation by the females include: the Socio-economic status of the female typified by Segun and Evelyn, love
relationship between Nura and Gimbiya and response to ill-treatments from in-laws typified by the conversation between Ugochi and Udoka

**Conclusion**

Following the results obtained from the analysis it is possible to derive a conclusion that claims that yes, females too dominate males in conversations in the texts. In a bid to adjust their communicative attitudes, females in the drama texts used the over-accommodation strategy portraying them not only as assertive but also as insulting/abusive leading to the loss of self-esteem of the males which is contrary to the typical culture in Nigeria that is patriarchal. What we see in the texts is a clear break in the norm portraying the women as uncultured, disrespectful to the male counterparts as against subservience. The texts portrayed females in a way that shows that our culture is getting eroded because here are women that whatever reasons, through their language use are depicted beyond just being assertive but as well tilting towards abuse of the male.
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