

## LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE DYNAMISM: A STUDY OF ADENIKE AKINJOBI'S *FAMILY SECRETS*

A. ADESIDA

---

Department Of English, Federal College Of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria

---

### ABSTRACT

The study explores the dynamism of language and discourse. It posits that language dynamism can be perceived from the purposes and functions that a language performs. It also states that discourse dynamism depends on its features in a particular context of situational use. It uses Akinjobi's *Family Secrets* to demonstrate the dynamism of language and discourse. It uses various linguistic approaches in its investigations. It finds that in *Family Secrets*, the language dynamism dwells in the fact that the language performs emotive, conative, phatic, poetic, and metalinguistic functions in the discourse. It also finds that the dynamism of the discourse is portrayed with the features of the discourse and the presentation of various contexts in the play. In addition, it discovers that the discourse has a texture that reflects the unity of the discourse. It concludes on the ground that language and discourse dynamism varies in contexts and the context of situational usage greatly determines the functions, purposes and features of a discourse.

**Key words:** Language, discourse, language functions, context, linguistic approaches, texture.

### INTRODUCTION

Language as a social tool is crucial in every human society. It is the spine of any form of human communication. It enhances bilateral interpretation of any piece of discourse as message from the speaker (encoder) to the listener (decoder or reader). Discourse refers to the systematic interaction between two or more speakers in order to communicate and reach a logical understanding of the intended meaning the speakers wish to communicate with language.

Oyeshile (2000) describes language as an instrument for the communication of thought and thought consists of a succession of ideas in consciousness. The Webster Dictionary (1991) describes language

as "a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures or marks having understood meanings." This signifies that language is a complete system of its own, which can be used for the transmission of meaning. Lamidi (2000) says language is a patterned behaviour. The dynamism of language is in the nature of its qualities such as its universality and adaptability to change. The uniqueness of language is also perceived from the purposes of language, which include: interactional purposes, expressive purposes, identification purposes and ideational purposes etc.

The study of discourse, otherwise called discourse analysis is a vast subject area

within linguistics. It encompasses the analysis of spoken and written texts. McCarthy (1991) expresses that discourse analysts are interested in the implications of different structural options for the creation of texts and the examination of natural data give patterns of use. Discourse dynamism then refers to the assessment of the extent to which each element contributes to the development of communication. When speakers and writers are producing discourse, they are monitoring their choices and the development of larger discourses as they are constructing clauses.

Langford (1994) states that whether written or spoken, the language people use is produced and adjusted in various ways according to what specific purposes they have; what particular people they are attempting to communicate with; in what capacity they see themselves as communicating; and what particular circumstances seem relevant at the time; and in the situation the attempted communication is taking place. This is buttressed by Adegbite (2000) the participants in any piece of discourse are expected to have a combination of the knowledge of language system, the knowledge of the world, the knowledge of culture and conventions of people, and knowledge of the factors of situations in

which the communication is taking place. This means that the people in a discourse ought to be aware of the context of situation that the discourse is taking place and the interpretation of the intended meaning will be based on the purpose(s) of language; context of utterances; thematic structure of utterances and cohesive relations that abound in the discourse.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Having selected the drama text, *Family Secrets* by Akinjobi for the study, the linguistic approach of discourse analysis is employed for the investigation. The functions of language are demonstrated with instances of language from the text in relation to the various contexts of usage. Also, literary approach is employed in order to explicate the plot and themes in the text. Finally, the analysis of the thematic structure of some sentences is given in order to enhance reader's understanding of the drama text as a discourse. Hence, our investigation of language and discourse dynamism in Akinjobi's *Family Secrets* goes thus:

(A hostel, Mrs. Feyisetan is seen as a beautiful young lady. She's lying on a bed while her roommate is sitting on the same bed reading a magazine)

	Turns
Titi (Mrs. Feyisetan): Toyin, I need to talk to you about something that has been bothering my mind.	1
Toyin: (Dropping the magazine) Titi, what is it? I have noticed you've been restless of late.	2
Titi: I'm pregnant.	3
Toyin: I didn't want to be too nosey, but I knew all along. That's no big deal. You're finishing this year and we are already in the second semester so.....	4
Titi: Uh, Toyin, there is a problem.	5
Toyin: What's it? Bayo has a good job, so what is the hindrance?	6
Titi: I'm not quite sure it's for Bayo, that's the problem.	7
Toyin: Ah, ah. How careless you are, Titi. Don't tell me you've not been using protective measures all along.	8
Titi: It was that last time. You remember Larry, the guy Susan introduced to me about two months ago? The one that just came from America?	9
Toyin: Ah! Titi, Larry is just a fun lover he won't marry you.	10
Titi: (Bitterly) But he promised. And since that day, I'd never set my eyes on him again. He promised to see me the following evening and has since disappeared into thin air.	11
Toyin: (Worried) This problem is serious. (Thinking) What can we do now?	12
Titi: (solemnly) I don't know.	13
Toyin: (Suddenly) I have an idea. Tell Bayo he is responsible. He loves you and I'm sure he'll believe you.	14
Titi: But he's not ...	15
Toyin: Forget it, men don't know things like that. He will believe you.	16
Titi: Are you sure?	17
Toyin: (Smiling) Very sure.	18
Titi: Ah Toyin, I feel really relieved. Thank you very much.	19
Toyin: What are friends for?	20

ACT VI SCENE III, P.75 - 77.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Turn-taking as demonstrated above occurs successively without overlap or gaps between them. It also gives room for speaker's change when necessary. The dynamism of language in the discourse above can be perceived from the functions that language perform in the play. These include the emotive, conative, phatic, poetic and the metalinguistic functions.

The emotive function implies that language performs the function of expressing motions and attitude of the speaker(s). For instance, at *turn one*, Titi expresses her intention to inform Toyin of her problem. In the subsequent turns Toyin listens and contributes by giving Titi some pieces of advice. This is called the expressive function of language.

Conative function refers to the function that language performs when it is used to instruct or command the listener to do the bidding of the speaker. At *turn fifteen*, Toyin instructs Titi to “*tell Bayo he is responsible*”. At *turn seventeen*, Toyin commands Titi “*forget it*”. This shows that language performs the function of giving instructions and commands usually referred to as cognitive function.

The phatic function is the function performed by language for the purpose of socialization. It enhances smooth opening of the channel of communication. It also ensures the bridging of communication gap. Examples are the use of expressions like – hello, good morning, goodbye, welcome, thank you, are you with me? Are you listening? Etc.

The poetic function addresses the form adopted for the presentation of the message. The form of the above extract is that of an informal everyday conversation. The poetic function of language includes the use of figurative or idiomatic expressions and stylistic usage of words for the purpose of aesthetics.

The metalinguistic function emphasizes the structure of the language and the function the language performs in the linguistic context for instance:

Toyin, /I/ need to talk to you/ about something that has been bothering my mind.

The above is a declarative sentence with a complex sentence structure.

‘I’ – is a pronoun that functions as the subject

‘need to talk to you’ --- is a verb phrase that functions as the predicate of the sentence ‘about something that has been

*bothering my mind*’ is an adverbial clause of reason that functions as the object of the verb phrase. This is an embedded clause that has been reduced to function as a part of speech. ‘Toyin’ is a vocative that is performing phatic function in that context. It is used to attract the attention of the addressee or listener who is called Toyin. The metalinguistic function of language helps in the comprehension of the sentence structure.

The functions of language, which each discourse manifests, make the discourse dynamic. The dynamism of the discourse can also be realized with an investigation of the context(s) of the discourse.

Context of Utterance in the Play: There are two types of contexts that are emphasized in the study of language. These are verbal context and situational context.

#### ***Verbal Contexts in Family Secrets***

The verbal context is the relationship which a word or group of words have with others. The careful examination of verbal contexts of utterances enhances the clarity of meaning of words and it reduces ambiguity of thoughts, unlike when word(s) are used in isolation. For example: -

At turn thirteen; “*This problem is serious*,” said by Toyin. If this utterance is considered in isolation, it will give interpretation difficulty because the hearers or listeners need to know the antecedent referent for “*this problem*”. But the verbal context of the utterance brings about the lucidity that the referent for “*this problem*” is Titi’s pregnancy. Likewise, at seventeen, “*things like that*”, if considered out of the verbal context could mean several concepts, but the verbal context of the utterance reveals that it refers to the idea that Titi should

claim falsely that Bayo is responsible for the pregnancy.

### *Situational Context in Family Secrets*

Situational context can also be divided into two: the context of culture and the immediate situational context. The context of culture states the conventional or socio-cultural rules of behavior which participants must share before they can communicate successfully with each other. The above extract demonstrates that the two participants are of the same peer group and colleagues. This means that they relate with each other freely and cordially without any secret or reservation.

### *The Immediate Situational Context*

The immediate situational context discloses the specific circumstances in which communication takes place. For instance, the extract above intimates the readers with the:

**Setting and scene:** The setting of the conversation in the extract is Titi's room in a hostel as an undergraduate. The scene indicates that the speakers were still young at the time of the utterance. This means that the speakers were in higher institution of learning.

**Participants:** The participants in the conversation are Titi and her friend, her roommate, Toyin.

**End(s):** This refers to the intended result (s) of the speech. Here, the end of the utterances is to find solution to the problem on ground.

**Key:** This appraises the manner in which a textual message is conveyed. In the extract, the key can be said to be a solemn discussion.

**Instrumentalities:** These refer to the channel(s) employed in the communication and

form of speech. Here, the participants employ the instrument of face to-face interaction.

**Norms:** These refer to the conventions or rules of social and speech behaviour. These rules could be linguistic, paralinguistic and non-linguistic. The above extract shows that the speakers observe linguistic and non-linguistic conventions of discussion that are universal.

**Genre:** The participants use the genre of drama through dialogue.

Thus, an understanding of the purposes and functions of language enhances the dynamism of the discourse in the given context.

**Tactics:** Adebite (2000) explains that tactics enable participants in a discourse to consider the linguistic context of discourse. In addition, it also enhances the social and situational contexts in order to achieve the required result of matching linguistic items with appropriate functions while speaking or interpreting. At turn five, Titi gives information with a declarative sentence "*there is a problem*", but she delays as a form of tactics in stating the nature of the problem. This is in order to give suspense, and to enable the speaker get attention of the other participant in the discourse. Also, at turn eight, Toyin uses a declarative sentence to elicit information from Titi. "*Don't tell me you've not been using protective measures all along*". This statement is used as a tactics of finding out the truth of the utterance.

The rising action of the plot reveals that Kanmi, the son of a famous politician intends to marry Tayo, the niece of Mr. Feyisetan who lives with the Feyisetan's

family. Mrs. Feyisetan hates Tayo because she is more brilliant than her son, Gbenga. She over-pampers her son at the detriment of Tayo. Gbenga turns out to be a corrupt irresponsible delinquent. Gbenga rapes Tayo, the plot gets complicated when Gbenga impregnates Tayo and the well-kept secrets now become a source of feud and conflict. The play gets to the climax with the unveiling of the secrets in the Feyisetan's family, which is that Tayo is the daughter of Mr. Feyisetan not his niece as he claimed.

Also, Gbenga's ghastly accident reveals that he is not Mr. Feyisetan's son. Having unraveled the riddles at the climax of the play, the drama ends with Tayo's marriage to Kanmi her true love.

Generally, the author uses the technique of flashback to vividly portray the themes of dishonesty, misplaced values and wrong virtues as demonstrated in the discourse above. In the above extract, the theme of dishonesty is perceived from the discussion of Titi and Toyin. Toyin advises Titi to tell a lie about the issue of the ownership of the pregnancy, which Titi does. This dishonesty sets the pace for the secrets in the family. Also, the theme of dishonesty is reinforced in Act IV, scene IV, in a flashback where Mr. Feyisetan promises to marry Abeke when he gets to Lagos. But he later denies it when he discovers that Abeke (Tayo's mother) is pregnant. The theme of misplaced value is portrayed in Act five, scene seven thus:

Eesinkin: Bayo, don't play with fire. You impregnated her, didn't you?  
(Abeke starts to cry)

Mr Feyisetan: Baba, I can't marry her. I have a wife here already and I was only waiting for a suitable time to bring her home.

Please take her back to the village. If there is anything she needs, I'll send to her. (P.65).

This shows that Bayo has a preference for a city lady as a wife. He has a misplaced value for the 'golden jewel' found in the city, forgetting the adage that all that glitters is not gold. He abandons Abeke and her pregnancy in the village and marries Titi. The theme of misplaced value is also demonstrated at turn nine in the above extract. Titi gives in to Larry because he is from America.

This shows that young girls have a notion that men from America are wealthy and would marry and take them to America to alleviate their 'suffering' in Nigeria.

Titi's misplaced value makes her a prey for Larry. Likewise, Abeke's (Tayo's mother) has misplaced value for "the city man", Mr. Bayo Feyisetan, instead of her to believe in herself and concentrate on her studies. This lands her in the pregnancy problem that resulted in the birth of Tayo.

Finally, the theme of misplaced virtue is also echoed in the discourse. The play reveals that virtues have changed from what it was in the past. Act two, scene one, demonstrates that politicians are not voted for on the basis of merit and what they have to offer, rather it is the amount of money spent on bribing the citizens that determines the winners at the polls. This aggravates the level of corruption in the country. The theme of misplaced virtue is also demonstrated by Gbenga in Act three, scene one, where Gbenga rubbishes his

family ties with Tayo by punishing her with a rape. He feels fulfilled with his outrageous act because he does not possess any good virtue himself.

I  
Theme | ' m pregnant.  
rheme

I  
Theme | *didn't want to be nose, but I knew all along.*  
rheme

**Thematic Structure**

In addition, the analysis of the thematic structure is important as Brown and Yule (1983) reveal that thematic organization is exploited by speakers and writers to provide structural framework for their discourse, which relates their main intention. Halliday (1985) states that the theme is the point of departure of the message. This means that the theme is the concern of the clause and it is usually the first element in the clause. Instances of the thematic structure of the discourse above can be demonstrated thus:

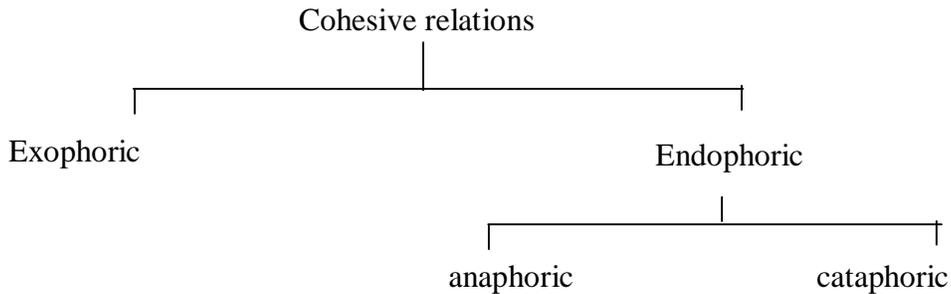
The instances where proper nouns are used above, demonstrate marked theme. In the above context, the marked themes are used for emphasis and to call the attention of the participant in the discourse. The other instance of thematic structure demonstrates the use of unmarked theme in form of first person pronoun. This signifies that the messages of the discourse are from the personal point of view and private opinions of the speakers.

Toyin, | *I need to talk to you about some thing that has been bothering my mind.*  
Theme | rheme

Finally, the texture of the discourse is another feature of its dynamism. The texture of a discourse is provided by its cohesive relation, which reflects the relationship between words. This can be attained with cohesion in the discourse or text through the use of reference, substitution, ellipsis etc. Halliday and Hassan (1976) present a chart of cohesive relation thus:

Titi, | *what is it?*  
Theme | rheme

I | *have noticed you have been restless of late.*  
Theme | rheme



Cf: Cohesion in English (1976)

The above cohesive relation can be portrayed thus:

	Turns
Titi (Mrs. Feyisetan): Toyin, I need to talk to you about <i>something that has been bothering my mind</i> .	1
Toyin: (Dropping the magazine) Titi, what is <i>it</i> ? I have noticed you've been restless of late.	2
Titi: I'm pregnant.	3
Toyin: I didn't want to be too nosey, but I knew all along. <i>That's</i> no big deal. You're finishing this year and we are already in the second semester ...	4

“something that has been bothering my mind”, is an instance of exophoric reference. At that point in time in the discourse, the listener (Toyin) cannot find the referent for it within the discourse. “*It*” at turn two, is a pronominal substitution for *something that has been bothering my mind*. It is an anaphoric reference, which performs the function of endophoric cohesive relation in the discourse. “*That*” at turn four refers to being pregnant. It is also an anaphoric reference that is endophoric and recoverable from the discourse.

### CONCLUSION

The study has explored the dynamism of language and discourse. It posits that language dynamism can be perceived from the purposes and functions that a language performs. It also states that discourse dynamism depends on its features in a particular context of situational use. The study has used Akinjobi's *Family Secrets* to demonstrate the dynamism of language and discourse. It has used various linguistic approaches in its investigations. It finds that in *Family Secrets*, the language dynamism dwells in the fact that the language performs emotive, conative, phatic, poetic, and metalinguistic functions in the dis-

course. It also finds that the dynamism of the discourse is portrayed with the features of the discourse and the presentation of various contexts in the play. In addition, it discovers that the discourse has a texture that reflects the unity of the discourse.

In conclusion, it states that language and discourse dynamism vary in contexts. The context of situational usage greatly determines the functions, purposes and features of a discourse. However, language should reflect positive values and virtues by its users, through the functions that it is made to perform, and discourses should be employed for purposes that would enhance national unity and development. The development crisis in Nigeria could be solved if language is propelled as a pedagogic tool for values and virtues.

### REFERENCES

- Adegbite, W.** 2000. “Pragmatics: Some Basic Principles and Procedures” in A.O. Babajide edited *Studies in English Language*. Ibadan: Enicrownfit publishers.
- Akinjobi, A.** 2004. *Family Secrets* Ibadan: Heinemann Publishers.

- Brown, G., Yule, G.** 1983. *Discourse Analysis* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Coulthard, D.** 1994. *Analysing Talk*. London : MacMillan.
- Halliday, M.A.K.** 1985. *Functional Grammar: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Halliday, M.A.K., Hassan, R.** 1976. *Cohesion in English*. London :Routledge.
- Lamidi, T.** 2000. *Language: Varieties and Context* in A.O. Babajide edited *Studies in English Language*. Ibadan : Enicrownfit publishers.
- Langford, D.** 1977. *Analysing Talk*. London: MacMillan
- McCarthy, M.** 1991. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Mish, F.C.** 1991. edited Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Ontario: Merriam Webster Inc.
- Oyeshile, O.A.** 2000. *Philosophy and Language: The Nature of the Philosopher's Interest in Language* in A.O. Babajide edited *Studies in English Language*. Ibadan : Enicrownfit Publishers
- Van Dijk, T.A.** 1996. *Discourse, Power and Access* in Caldas-Coulthard, C.R. and Coulthard, M. edited *Texts and Practices: Reading in Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge.