



EXPLORING THE DEPICTIONS OF CONVERSATION DOMINANCE IN ADONG'S *SILENT VOICES*

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Abstract

This paper investigates depictions of conversation dominance in selected conversations of the literary text- Silent Voices to underscore female dominance as evidenced in the use of commands, declaratives, and interrogatives. It is a qualitative study that employs Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) tools to analyse how the choices made in language reveal roles assumed by speakers in a conversation. Specifically, the mood system is explored to uncover dominance in mixed-gender conversations from the text. A purposive sampling technique is adopted to extract relevant excerpts from the study. The analysis reveals that females tend to use imperatives and declaratives more than their male counterparts. On the other hand, the males use more interrogatives (open interrogatives) demanding large chunks of information which typically signal dependence on the females for information thereby tagging the males as the controlled and the females as the controllers during the conversation. Even in their use of interrogatives, the females used more polar questions that tended to demand short answers, again portraying them as the controllers in the conversations. The study concludes that females too dominate males in conversations contrary to the popular stance by previous scholars that males are the controllers in mixed-gender conversations.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics, interrogative mood, imperative mood.

Introduction

Conversation dominance refers to the ability of a speaker to control the flow, topic, and structure of a conversation, often exerting power through language. This concept is deeply rooted in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, where language is studied as a tool for establishing power dynamics and social hierarchies (Tannen, 1993). Scholars argue that conversational dominance often manifests through strategies such as turn-taking, interruptions, and the imposition of topics, revealing underlying power relations (Fairclough, 1989).

Drama, as a literary genre, provides a rich platform for exploring conversational dominance, as its dialogue-driven structure mirrors real-life interactions. The use of language in drama not only advances the plot but also reflects social and interpersonal dynamics, including power struggles (Culpeper, 2001). In this context, Adong's *Silent Voices* is a compelling text, offering nuanced insights into power relations within a post-conflict society. Set against the backdrop of the Ugandan civil war, the play delves into themes of trauma, gender, and justice, where conversational exchanges often highlight imbalances of power between characters.

Previous studies on *Silent Voices* have largely focused on its thematic exploration of gender and war, but limited attention has been given to its linguistic elements, particularly how conversational dominance shapes character relationships and reflects societal hierarchies



(Adong, 2012). This gap underscores the importance of analyzing dialogue in the play, as it provides a lens through which power dynamics are articulated and contested.

Drawing on frameworks of discourse analysis, this study seeks to examine how conversational dominance is depicted in *Silent Voices*. By exploring the interplay between language, power, and social context, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of how linguistic choices in drama reflect and reinforce societal structures (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). The work shows the role of language in establishing, creating, and sustaining dominance in conversation within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) narrowing down to the metafunction referred to as interpersonal function, specifically the mood system. The mood system is explored because it offers tools that can be used to analyze how the choices made in language reveal roles assumed by speakers in a conversation. The approach shows how interactants can develop personal interest through language and how a specific speaker shows dominance through the grammatical choices they make.

Theoretical Consideration – The Mood System

The mood system is defined as “choices between different roles which a speaker can select for himself and his hearer” (Berry, 1975, p.166). This establishes that the speaker who starts a conversation can think in advance what role he/she will take in the communication process. Thus, mood choices can only be selected in linguistic exchanges. The mood system has been divided into two possible choices to be made: communicating either in an *indicative mood* or in an *imperative mood*. Matthiessen and Halliday (1997, p. 5) state that “the choice in the MOOD system between ‘indicative’ and ‘imperative’ is realised structurally: only indicative clauses normally have a Subject”. The most used type of mood is the indicative mood. Regarding this, Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 114) stated that this is “the grammatical category that is characteristically used to exchange information”. Generally, when somebody selects to speak in an indicative mood making statements or talking about any topic, he/she is not always expecting an answer from the people around. Nevertheless, there are cases when that speaker expects something from the hearers. When this happens what he/she expects is just a verbal response.

Indicative mood is subdivided into two available terms: *declarative* and *interrogative*. Aijmer (2016, p. 5) states that “in a declarative clause the speaker is giving some information to the hearer. In an interrogative clause the speaker assumes the role of asking for information”. These represent the two more common patterns of starting a conversation between two people or more. A speaker can select if he/she wants to communicate the message with a declaration or through a question in advance. Both declarative and interrogative sentences have different syntactic patterns. Through saying a statement people could agree or disagree with what was said and start the exchange of utterances even when the speaker does not expect a response from the hearer (Berry, 1975). The speaker just wants other people to listen to what he/she is saying. In advance, he/she takes on the role of informant while for the person who hears the message the role of the informed.

On the other hand, through asking a question, a probable exchange of utterances could start. A question generates any type of conversation. In advance, he/she takes the role of informed, and for the person who hears the question the role of the informant. It is the opposite of the declarative mood stated above, yet it continues to be an indicative mood. When a speaker



starts a conversation through a question, he “is expecting a verbal response from his hearer” (Berry, 1975, p.167). The more questions the questioner asks, the larger the process of communication will be.

Likewise, the interrogative mood is a system on its own. Among this, other choices can further be asked: *closed* and *open* interrogative. Closed interrogative sentences are used when the speaker wants to get a very short answer, actually he/she expects either a yes or a no as an answer. They are also called polar questions. When a speaker selects to make this type of question, he/she is acting as the controller of the conversation. Nonetheless, open interrogative sentences are used when the speaker wants to get a larger answer, he/she has expectations about the hearer’s response. They are also called content questions. When a speaker selects to make this type of question, the hearer is acting as the controller of the conversation.

With regard to the imperative mood, León (2004) claims that this “is the most obvious manifestation of the interpersonal instrumental function – that of influencing other people’s behaviour” (p. 65). Through commands, a speaker can persuade other people to do what he/she wants them to do. Due to this fact, Matthiessen, Teruya, and Lam, (2010) mention that “this mood allows people to exchange goods and services” (p. 146). Language is a connection between our desires and how through it a speaker can generate a specific behavior in other people or how it can make them do specific acts in specific contexts.

Mehwish, Moazzam, Fakharh, and Bahram (2016) establish that this mood “expresses authority... and describes the status and/or power relations of the participants involved in the discourse” (p. 7). Usually, a speaker who gives commands to other people has a strong capacity to be obeyed by them. This speaker controls the social exchange and expects some form of action from the hearers who are controlled.

Moreover, imperative mood is a system on its own. Among these, other choices can further be made: *exclusive* and *inclusive* imperative. When a speaker says an exclusive imperative sentence he/she does not become a doer of the action. He/she expects other people to make what he/she stated and follow his/her commands without refuting. Meanwhile, when a speaker says an inclusive imperative sentence, he/she becomes a doer of the actions. It is recommended to focus on the type of clause that is being analyzed and its function in the language to make its interpretation more accurate.

Previous Study

Recent studies have explored the concept of conversational dominance in literary and linguistic contexts, providing insights into its depiction in drama. Bayat and Yüksel (2018) analyzed how gender influences conversational dominance in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Their study revealed that male participants often dominate conversations through interruptions and control of topics. This framework can be applied to *Silent Voices* to examine gendered power dynamics among characters. Similarly, King (2011) studied turn-taking in Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* demonstrating how interruptions and overlaps signal power struggles between characters. These findings provide a methodology for analyzing similar linguistic strategies in *Silent Voices*.



Similarly, Al-Shalawi (2023) explored the role of conversational implicatures in revealing power dynamics in English drama. The study highlights how indirect communication can be a tool for asserting dominance, an approach that can be extended to *Silent Voices*. Chang, Chen, and Bamman (2023) presented a dataset for studying conversation disentanglement in movies and TV series. Their work provides tools to analyze overlapping dialogues and identify dominant speakers, applicable to the multi-party interactions in *Silent Voices*.

Likewise, Sanford (2024) investigated overtalking as a mechanism for conversational dominance in social interactions. The study provides a lens to analyze verbosity and its role in establishing authority among characters in *Silent Voices*. Also, Tannen (2020) revisited gendered conversational styles, emphasizing interruptions and topic control as key indicators of dominance. These sociolinguistic patterns align with the strategies used by characters in *Silent Voices* to navigate power relations. This review underscores how linguistic strategies such as interruptions, overtalking, and implicatures contribute to conversational dominance in drama, with specific relevance to Adong's *Silent Voices*.

The current study, however, notes that research is scarce in the aspect of carrying out an investigation on Adong's *Silent Voices* using Halliday's metafunction of mood as an analytical tool. The study is therefore set to investigate this lacuna in order to underscore that declaratives, interrogatives, and imperatives are linguistic choices that can be used by speakers to portray dominance in mixed-gender conversations.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected from mixed-gender conversations in the play *Silent Voices* and thereafter conversations that depict the notion of dominance especially by the female characters over the males are randomly selected. In line with the qualitative analysis procedure, the data were identified, classified, and interpreted in a form of discussion to underscore that females too dominate males in conversation. SFL is used as a tool for analysis because it explains very well the linguistic phenomena that occur in communicative settings through its detailed textual and contextual components. The study therefore presents and analyses the three mood structures (declarative, interrogative, imperative) in tables using simple percentages. Thereafter, a discussion ensues portraying mood systems as linguistic resources for displaying conversation control or dominance between the characters in the play.

Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

In this section, the findings from the study are hereby presented and thereafter a discussion follows. Table 1 below demonstrates that a total number of 108 clauses are found in Mother's utterances from her conversation with her son Omony, out of which 10 are imperatives, 21 are interrogatives and 39 are declaratives. Omony has a total of 179 clauses from the conversation with his mother and Margaret his lover, out of which 02 are imperatives, 51 interrogatives, and 63 declaratives. Margaret has a total of 118 comprising- 34 interrogatives and 21 declaratives no imperatives. Also, the Husband registered 02 imperatives, 10 interrogatives, and 13 declaratives from the conversation between him and his wife. While his Wife had a total of 49 clauses out of which 02 are imperatives, 15 interrogatives, and 32



declaratives. Finally, Bishop has a total of 11 clauses comprising declaratives, there are no imperatives and interrogatives. This is summarily captured in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Types of mood and percentage of analysed data in the text

Types of Clause	Mother		Omony		Husband		Wife		Margaret	
	Number of clauses	%	Number of clauses	%	Number of clauses	%	Number of clauses	%	Number of clauses	%
Imperatives	10	9.3	02	1.11	02	4.6	04	8.6	06	4.8
Interrogatives	20	18.5	51	28.5	15	34.9	10	21.8	34	27.5
Declaratives	78	72.2	126	70.4	26	60.5	32	69.6	84	67.7
Total	108	100	179	100	43	100	46	100	124	100

Interrogative Mood

Asking and giving information is a pattern that cannot be separated from good communication. Also, if any question occurs, there must be an answer to complete the pattern. However, in the conversation between Mother and Omony, we find evidence of an asymmetrical relationship because Omony is Mother's son. It is suggested that Mother takes the role of the informed and Omony (her son) whom the question is directed at takes the role of the informant. Mother starts the conversation by answering greetings from Omony and Margaret. However, as soon as Mother gets a complete identity of the 'visitor' the whole tone of the conversation changes. We see her bombarding Omony with questions. The type of questions asked are referred to as open interrogatives normally used when a speaker wants an elaborate answer. When a speaker chooses to use this type of question, he/she is acting as the controller of the conversation. This is seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1

Mother:(To Omony, wary.) What is she doing here?

Omony: Mother! She is a good friend.

Mother: That's not what I asked you.

Silent Voices in AWPN p.148

However, there are instances whereby Omony uses open interrogatives in sourcing information from his mother and Margaret his lover. In such instances, he takes the role of the inquirer while his mother and Margaret take on the role of informants. He then becomes the controlled while the latter is the controller in the conversation that ensues between them. Such open interrogatives require a large chunk of responses, unlike the closed interrogatives. Examples include the excerpts below:

Excerpt2 (Mother versus Omony)

Omony: Whose granddaughter and why can't I marry her? Mother, is there something you're not telling me?



Mother: They messed up everything. And yet they were rewarded with big cars and big houses!
Blood cars!

Omony: Who? Margaret's grandfather?

Mother: No, all of them. Those so-called liberators!

Omony: And what has that got to do with Margaret?

Mother: Just listen to your mother, Son.

Omony: Why are you so bitter, Mother?

Mother: You don't know what you are talking about.

Silent Voices in AWPN p.149

It is obvious from the excerpt above that *Mother* is in control of the conversation. Even though *Omony* is the one sourcing for information to find out why she is not willing to accept Margaret his girlfriend, yet she chooses the amount of information she releases. From the kind of interrogatives used by *Omony*-WH-questions, one would expect long responses from *Mother*. However, she decides using declaratives what to tell him making him more confused than he was at the beginning of their conversation.

Likewise, in the conversation between *Omony* and *Margaret*, we see instances whereby *Margaret* takes the position of the hearer thereby acting as the controller of the conversation. *Omony* is seen again to use open interrogative sentences which demand elaborate answers as against the polar type of interrogatives as demonstrated by the excerpt below:

Excerpt 3 (Omony versus Margaret)

(*Omony* enters with a five-liter jerry- can of kerosene. *Margaret* approaches him, anxiously.)

Margaret: You can't stay here.

Omony: Why?

Margaret: You will be killed! They are all very furious. If they come back and find you here, they will kill you. You must run for your life. Run!

Omony: What are you talking about? You are not making any sense, *Margaret*.

Margaret: They say your mother has killed *Fiona*. They wanted to kill her but the police rescued her. If they come back and find you here, it will end badly. You must get out of here.

Silent Voices in AWPN p.165

Likewise, a similar scenario plays out in the conversation between *Husband* and *Wife* in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 4

Husband: What do you mean, so? Even if I wanted to move, there is the issue of job transfer.

Wife: Then ask for one.

Husband: What? I only recently asked for one. They could misunderstand me and just dismiss me. Listen honey, we can't just move like that without any plans! Without any where to go!

Wife: I don't care where we go as long as we leave this cursed place! Even if it means giving the street children some company!

Silent Voices in AWPN p. 162



All the interrogatives examined above play vital functions in the unfolding of events in the play *Silent Voices*. This is because as a result of the responses to the questions, the communication keeps enlarging among the interactants. Also, from the way the interrogatives are used, one is left with no doubt that the interactants have choices either to use open-ended or closed-ended interrogatives. Closed interrogative sentences are used when the speaker wants to get a very short answer, actually he/she expects either a yes or a no as an answer. They are also called polar questions. When a speaker asks to make these types of questions, he/she is acting as the controller of the conversation. Nonetheless, open interrogative sentences are used when the speaker wants to get an elaborate answer, he/she has expectations about the hearer's response. They are also called content questions. When a speaker selects to make this type of question, the hearer is acting as the controller of the conversation. The analysis so far is a demonstration that females dominated or controlled the males in the conversations because they acted as the controllers by asking polar questions or acting as respondents to open interrogatives requiring large chunks of information thereby controlling which information to release and which to withhold. Overall, Omony asked 51 questions as against 20 and 34 by his Mother and Margaret respectively. Similarly, Husband used 15 interrogatives as against 10 used by his Wife.

Imperative Mood

Aside from the interrogatives, imperatives are used in the conversations between the interactants in the play. With regard to the imperative mood, León (2004, p. 65) claims that this "is the most obvious manifestation of the interpersonal instrumental function – that of influencing other people's behaviour". Likewise, Mehwish, Moazzam, Fakharh and Bahram (2016) posit that this mood (imperative) expresses authority and describes the status and power relations of the interactants. Here the speaker controls the social exchange and expects some form of action from the hearers who are the controlled. This is demonstrated vividly in the text from the excerpts below:

Excerpt 5

(Mother turns sharply to Margaret, horrified by her presence.)

Mother: *I think you should leave...*

Omony: What!

(Margaret is confused.)

Mother: *Just leave young lady and avoid trouble.*

Omony: Mother you can't just . . . /

Margaret: It's okay, Omony. Margaret hands Omony the groceries and exits.

(Omony makes to follow her, calling out after her.)

Mother: *Let her go!*

Omony: Mother, what was that all about?

Mother: *I said let her go!*

(Omony is speechless. Amid the argument, Mother returns unconsciously to her winnowing.)

Silent Voices in AWPN p. 148-149

It is obvious from the excerpt examined above that Mother is the one who wields power and authority among the trio. Because of her status that is, mother to Omony, she orders Margaret out of their house and Omony is helpless to stop it. He watches helplessly as Margaret walks out of the house. Of course, his mother expects him to obey her which he did. Therefore, the



power relationships between Mother and Omony appear to be best expressed in the imperative clause. The kind of imperatives Mother uses here is referred to as *exclusive imperatives* because she does not become the doer of the action but expects others and in this case, Omony /Margaret to obey her command without challenging her authority.

However, we see a different usage of imperatives between Omony and Margaret. Her status is that of a lover, therefore, it is different from that of Omony's mother. The commands she dishes to Omony are spurred on as a result of the love that she has for him and her concern for his safety. When she could not succeed in making Omony do the needful by using exclusive imperatives such as – “Run! Go now! Just go now!” she resorted to the use of the inclusive imperative- “Come with me then” including herself in carrying out the action. This is seen in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 6

Margaret: ...You must run for your life. *Run!*

Omony: What are you talking about? ...

Margaret: They say your mother has killed Fiona...

Omony: (Shocked.) What? That's insane! ...

Margaret: *Go now!*

Omony: I am not going to run away like a criminal for something I am sure my mother didn't do. ..

Margaret: *Just go, now!* (Omony stands still staring at her. The crowd's noise draws closer. Margaret grabs Omony's hand)

Margaret: *Come with me then....*

(Margaret drags Omony out of the room. A crowd floods the house but as they see no- one, they exit yelling Bloody Murder.)

Silent Voices in AWPN p.164-166

Declarative Mood

Aijmer (2016, p. 5) states that “in a declarative clause the speaker is giving some information to the hearer. The preponderant presence of major declaratives is therefore indicative of an information-centered conversation in the conversations analysed in the play. However, what is most interesting about the declarative clauses is that they are not only informative but they express command, demand, and request, demonstrating a relationship of dominance in the conversation of the interactants. An example is the clause used by Mother in the conversation that transpired between her and her son Omony when she refused to accept his girlfriend Margaret. It is a request as well as a command:

Excerpt 7

Omony: Why are you so bitter, Mother?

Mother: *Just listen to your mother, Son.*

Silent Voices in AWPN p.149

Likewise, the conversation between Omony and Margaret is seen to be mostly declarative even though this is considered evidence of conversation dominance whereby the hearer serves as the informant, providing information to the interrogator. In this instance, Margaret is the hearer therefore she is the controller of the conversation between her and Omony. Omony depends on her and she in turn chooses the type of information she releases to him.



Omony: What are you talking about? You are not making any sense, Margaret.

Margaret: They say your mother has killed Fiona. They wanted to kill her but the police rescued her. If they come back and find you here, it will end badly. You must get out of here.

Silent Voices in AWPN p.165

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to explore the notion of dominance in mixed-gender conversations by applying SFL's interpersonal metafunction as a theory narrowing it down to the mood system as the effective analytical tool. Applying the mood system helps the researcher to examine in great detail how the expression of dominance appears at the textual level. Three types of clauses, imperative, interrogative, and declarative are found to be used in signifying conversation dominance in the literary text. The imperative clause is found to be used more by the females in the text than the males. These included both the exclusive and the inclusive imperatives. Also, in the use of interrogatives, the females tend to use polar interrogatives as against the males who used more of the open interrogatives. Declaratives were mainly used in response to the open interrogatives from the males. Here, the females are seen to be the controllers of the conversation because they decide the amount of conversation to be released to the males. Therefore, they (females) use more the declaratives in their interaction with the males because they wield power in terms of the information they have at their disposal while the males depend on them for such information. It can safely be concluded therefore that using the tools in the mood system, the study has demonstrated that females too sometimes dominate males in conversation as against the popular view of previous scholarships.

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