AWKA JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERARY STUDIES (AJELLS)

Volume 11 Number 1
July, 2024

Investigating Interruption as a Stimulant to Family Conflict: A Study of an Edition of Wale Adenuga's 'Super Story'

Ajemba, Oziomachukwu Akunna
Department of English Language and Literature
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
oa.ajemba@unizik.edu.ng

&

Ibe, Chioma Nkechika
Directorate of General Studies
Federal University of Technology, Owerri
chyex2000@gmail.com

Abstract

Conversational conventions vary among cultures and languages. One conversational convention may be acceptable in one culture but may be termed unacceptable in another culture. Among Nigerian users/speakers of English, interruption is one of the controversial conversational strategies in conversation which may or may not be acceptable to participants. Interruption can also trigger conflict in a situation that is not acceptable. In family discourse, it could serve as a yardstick to measure power relations among members. This study, therefore, investigates the use of interruption in family conversations. It also examines whether interruption stimulates family conflict. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson's conversational analysis (CA) serve as the theoretical framework. The data used for this research was collected from an edition of Wale Adenuga's *Super Story: Because You Loved Me*. The data was obtained by reproducing and recording the audio aspect of the drama. This was then transcribed based on the transcript convention of conversational analysis. The data was analyzed using qualitative means. The patterns observable were then related to the context. The findings show that interruption,

even though could be a strategy in conversation, brings about conflict among participants in family discourse.
Keywords: conversational analysis, interaction, participants, power relations, politeness

Introduction

Family Conflict

Conflict is a fact of life and it comes and goes as life moves on. It is a common feature of human society. Gulliver (1963) and Nanda (1994) agree with the view that conflict is a part of social life and society is impossible without it. Also, Marxians view conflict not only as it is built into the social system but also as the primary stimulus for social change (Seymour-Smith, 1986). Also, conflict, according to T. Johnson (Personal Communication, February 08, 2022) is an "opposition to something such as disagreement between two people, genders, culture, nations, etc., a mental struggle resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, wishes or external demands". Abdulla et al (2016), claim that "the term conflict is so ambiguous and can be defined based on the approach of each researcher and the field that concerns the researcher most. They report that conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two independent parties, two or more social entities or parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving goals; it involves perceived divergence of interests or belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously". The Netherlands Organization for Social Research (NOSR, 2007), observe that conflict is a process that starts with an individual or group, the parties perceiving differences and opposition between oneself and another individual, group or parties, about interests and resources, beliefs, values or practices that matter to them. Conflict refers to an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other (Fisher cited in Fisher, 2000). Two things could be deduced from the above simple

definitions/explanations of conflict: the first is that conflict emanates from relationships (social) and second, the conflicting groups, parties, and individuals must reside close, whether physically or psychologically.

Family communication is of great interest to researchers, counsellors, and laypeople alike for at least three reasons. It is the context in which adults and children experience a great part of their most important and most intimate interpersonal relationships. According to Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006), family communication involves all verbal and nonverbal behaviours by which family members affect one another and enact their interpersonal relationships with each other.

On the other hand, conflicts can happen when family members have different views or beliefs that clash. Sometimes conflicts can occur when people misunderstand each other and jump to the wrong conclusion. Issues of conflict that are not resolved peacefully can lead to arguments and resentment. It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time. One of the causes of conflict is related to face threats. Arguably enough, behind the guise of face threat is an underlying zeal for power control.
One major linguistic element common in family discourse is the use of interruption. This study is interested in interruption. This study focuses on interruption, aiming to investigate its use in family conversations.

Interruption in Conversation

Following Sacks et al (1974), Zimmerman and West (1975) assert that interruption violates the turn-taking rules because its involvement in a TCU shows the transition from one speaker to another, which is supposed to occur at TRP was not applied. However, there have been cases of evidence provided by researchers where the occurrence of interruption in a TCU goes beyond the violation of turn-taking rules. (Roger, Bull, and Smith,

1988; Tannen, 1984, 1993). For instance, Yemenici (2001) identifies seven roles that interruption can perform in a conversation, including: disagreeing with a co-participant's opinion, terminating a dispute, escalating disagreements, asking ironic questions, taking the floor, and projecting hypothetical statements. Further, Tannen (1993) posits that interruption could be seen as a linguistic strategy that is linked to power and solidarity. In her argument, Tannen opines that interruption is better purpose or function. Similarly, Zimmerman and West (1975) believe interruptions are power displays and a strategy to show control over the floor between participants in a conversation. Goldberg (1990) shows in his analysis that when an interruption is linked to power, there is a clear indication that the interruption is intended with the sole motive of the next speaker taking control of the process or content of the conversation.

Theoretical Framework: Conversational Analysis

Conversation Analysis (henceforth, CA) is used as the framework of this research. CA is an approach to discourse analysis used to study language use in conversation. It involves the systematic analysis of verbal and nonverbal behaviours in conversation to understand how people interact with each other. It explores the structure and organization of spoken and written communication.

CA originated with ethno-methodologists in the field of sociology. It emanated from Harold Garfinkel's *Breaching Experiment* in which he studied order in behaviour during interaction (cf Ibe and Odebunmi, 2019). It was later applied to the conversation by scholars; most notably by Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson in their paper 'A Simplest Systemics for the Organization of Turn-Taking in Conversation,' published in 'Language' in 1974. According to Ibe and Odebunmi (2019), 'CA differs from other branches of sociology. Rather than analysing social order, it seeks to discover the methods by which members of a society use natural language in conversation to provide order and

management of the social setting in which the conversations take place.' Therefore, CA is more concerned with sociolinguistic matters than just sociological matters.

CA seeks to examine recurrent patterns, distributions, and forms of organization in large amounts of talk, and how participants in conversation structure systematic and orderly solutions to recurrent organizational problems. These problems include opening and closing talk, turn-taking, repair, topic management, information receipt, and showing agreement and disagreement (cf Ibe and Odebunmi, 2019)

One area of CA is turn-taking in conversation. Turn-taking refers to the practice by which the speakers take turns to speak in conversation. In other words, turn-taking is a practice where one speaks and the other listens in conversation. As the conversation progresses, the roles of the listener and speaker shift from one participant to the next. In turn-taking analysis, scholars study how people manage and coordinate speaking roles and how they follow conversational conventions to ensure the flow of conversation.
In turn–taking, the turn is constructed out of a Turn Constructional Unit (TCU), which can vary in size, number of words, and linguistic texture. A TCU involves the strand of speech or information in a conversation. It can be described as a segment of conversation within an allocated turn. The completion of each TCU consists of a Transition Relevant Place (TRP) where the initial speaker gives up their turn for another turn to begin by the next speaker. Hence, the initial turn is transferred to another turn. At this point, Zimmerman (1975:108) states that conversational organization must involve both active speakership and active listenership. The listener must observe the location of the TRP to avoid overlapping or interruption.

Methodology, Design, and Data Collection

This study is based on a descriptive-qualitative design. The data used for this research were collected from an excerpt in Wale

Adenuga's Super Story: 'Because You Loved Me.' The data collection was guided by Foster's (1998) idea that carefully chosen films can serve as excellent material for language study. The data were then recorded on a CD-ROM, reproduced, and transcribed. The transcription was based on the transcription conventions for CA proposed in Langford's (1994) 'Analysing Talk: Investigating Verbal Interaction in English'. The data were recorded at the Phonetics Laboratory of the Department of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Ibadan. This implies that the data were obtained under reliable conditions. Therefore, the instrumentation used in data collection included reproducibility, recording, transcription, laboratory conditions, and observation.

Synopsis

Lara is a single mother of an eight-year-old Jimi when she meets Mr. Osas who proposes to marry her. He refuses to accept Jimi as a member of his household. So, Lara has no option but to leave Jimi with his grandmother. Jimi grows up into a notorious and confused school dropout. He has a group of gangs whom he hangs out with. Even Mama cannot control him. Mama dies leaving Lara to her fate. Lara persuades her husband to accept Jimi. Though it is difficult, Osas eventually accepts Jimi, warning him that he behaves well. Jimi, however, becomes intolerable in Osas's house.

Presentation of Participants and Events

The participants are members of the Osahen family and they include

Mr Osahen- father
Mrs Lara Osahen- mother
Jimi- Step son to Mr Osahen

Presentation of Data

413. Lara: what's going on here (.) a *gap of approximately one-tenth of a second*
414. Osas: ASK YOUR U: SELESS, GOOD FOR NOTHING

INCORRIGIBLE SON. He wants to turn my house into a hotel (.) and I will not HAVE it (.)

415. Lara: what! Jimi! what am I hearing?

416. Osas: YOU SEE THE BAD EXAMPLE HE'S SETTING FOR THE CHILDREN, I TO::LD YOU NOTHING GOOD CAN COME OF THIS BOY. nothing (1.1)

417. Lara: Jimi? I think you owe your stepfather an explanation for this kind of thing.

418. Jimi:I OWE: (.)NO ONE, NO EXPLANATION FOR NOTHING (2.2)

419. Osas: do you hear him? (0.6)

420. Jimi: hmmm

421. Osas: CAN YOU HEAR HIM

422. Lara: Jimi (.) ple::ase ≠

423. Jimi: ≠ 'don't care worth any of this, mum. I'm not a child. ◦look◦ (.) I don't deserve to be treated this way

424. Osas: well (.) you dese::rve as a useless person to be treated the way I just TREATED YOU. look at you. in:stead of you to go to school, and make something good out of your life, you're here ra::nting rubbish about how to fall in with useless girls =

425. Lara: = honey take it easy easy =

426. Osas: = look at you (.) your m:ates have lo::ng graduated from the university. Even your younger brother .that's fa::r junior to you (.) is now in the university, studying medicine.

427. Jimi: but I don't care≠

428. Osas: ≠ and you're here talking rubbish ≠

429. Jimi: ≠ I DON'T CARE ABOUT THAT (1.0) I don't care (1.5)

430. Osas: OF COURSE YOU WON'T CAR::E (.) because you're jealous of Philip =

431. Lara: = Ah no no no no Osas please don't go there ≠

432. Osas: ≠ but of course (.) if he's not jealous, why did he not

come, or show up for his matriculation?

433. Lara: Osas, please. Please ≠

434. Jimi: ≠ Jealous, we: ll, look I don't have to go to school to make it in life for ≠

435. Osas: ≠ YOU HEAR THE FOO:::L? YOU HEAR THE FOO:::L? it's only an empty band like you, that makes this kind of ≠ noise

436. Jimi: ≠ THE ONLY THING THAT I NEED TO PROVE TO ANYONE, IS TO MAKE IT IN LIFE. when you see money, when YOU see money, you (.) you, all of you you'll go down before me =

437. Lara: = JIMI SHUT UP YOUR MOUTH =

438. Osas: = Over my dead bo ≠ dy

439. Jimi: ≠ I LO VE MY BROTHER MUM! (0.2) I love him. I'm pro::ud of him. (looks at Osas) Then if that is too difficult for you to understand then I guess you know who the myopic one ≠

440. Osas: ≠ are you insulting me, eh? Are you (gesture) ah (.)eh eh eh

441. Lara: please please, please

442. Jimi: I'm only respecting you because you married my mother, right

443. Osas: GET OUT OF MY HOUSE

444. Jimi: I'm long gone ≠

445. Osas: ≠ get o ≠ ut

446. Jimi: ≠ I'M LONG GONE U (XXXX) ! =

447. Lara: = JIMI

448. Jimi: MUM I DO NOT DESERVE THIS ANY MORE. I don't have to,
Common, give me a break (leaves)

449. Lara: Jimi w:ait Jimi w ait

450. Osas: let him go. LE::T HI: M GO. I do:n't ever want to see that boy in this house again. do you hear me I've had enough? I'VE HEARD ENOUGH.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This is a longer conversation between Osas, Jimi, and Lara. In the data we observestruggle for power taking place between Osas and Jimi. Jimi is the biological son of Lara. Before the death of his grandmother, Mama, the life of Jimi would be described as very rough and difficult. When Mama dies, Osas, his stepfather reluctantly accepts him to stay with them after much persuasion from Lara. In this excerpt, given the strained relationship between them prior to the conversation, it is not surprising that they would have a heated argument.

Moreover, there exists a conflict of interests between the two participants. Osas is not comfortable with Jimi's lifestyle which he considers useless. Jimi thinks his lifestyle is a brim of his success in life. Osas wants him to go to school and Jimi thinks it is pointless to enroll in school. Osas is not comfortable with Jimi's gang of friends, Jimi thinks Osas should have no business in who he keeps as friends.

Here, we could agree with the notion that power is dynamic as posited by Khan (2016). Society's contribution to power construct and family role automatically qualifies Osas as a powerful participant in the discourse. However, Jimi comes from a different place where he has assumed the same role. That may be why he finds it difficult to subject himself to Osas. Osas has to create strategies to maintain control of his territory.

We identify power contestation in the data. Osas has employed the same strategies of turn-holding, conversational interruption, and prosodic marker in his bid to maintain control but it seems not to work this time around. He needs to exploit other strategies to maintain control of his territory.

According to Ahlstrand (2018), when it comes to contestation in power relations (that is struggle for power between two

participants in a discourse), the dominant strategies such as: personification, constructing threat, and constructing victims are employed. These were all identified in the data. Personification involves the individualized representation of an authoritative figure at the helm of an institution or a group, acting with overt authority relative to other subordinate participants in the texts while constructing threats contributes to maintaining the perception of the leaders' steady relationship with power through the portrayal of a pervasive threat that impacts on his subjects.

Also, we observe Osas exhibiting this trait. The underlying implication of his utterances and moves was to tell his fellow participant, Jimi that he is the one in control, meanwhile, Jimi's speech behaviour and actions suggest his refusal to subject himself to Osas's authority. Meanwhile, Osas constructs conversational threats of evicting Jimi from his house.

Another strategy observed is constructing a worthy victim(s). Reyes (2011) argues that power could be reproduced when constructing a threat generates an emotional response from a participant. The participants become worthy victims. According to Ahlstrand (2018), 'a worthy victim is usually involved reference to the social category of youth (rebels) and they were usually vulnerable to the actions of the threat.' Osas created worthy victim out of Jimi. He can achieve such by inviting Lara to the conversation.

There exists a close link between the power struggle and the Face-Threatening Act. When a participant feels his authoritative role is slipping away, he feels his face is threatened. In this case, the inability of the speakers to accept each other's expectations makes the negotiated frame problematic. This results in inflexibility in the negotiation. Hence the conversation remains strained. We observe that Osas's choice of high pitch creates pressure on Jimi who simultaneously reacts by echoing his choice of high pitch. In this

case, the Jimi feels his face is threatened by Osas's abuse of power.

Comparing the strings of exchange with data, it is observed that the sole feature of this conversation lies in how discourse is managed outside the conventions surrounding the conversational norms of the interactional situation. This could be credited to the process of negotiating an interpretive frame. Hence, Jimi avoids his choice to use power; rather he allows Philip (his younger brother) to control the conversation. This action expresses rarely illustrated power asymmetry. This unique strategy is called negotiation of power. The strategy bends the traditional convention of hierarchy of power and encourages the speaker to negotiate his expectation and assumption with his co-participant. When speakers have similar expectations, it enhances elasticity in negotiation and, of course, flow in conversation. The negotiation illustrates the concept of saving face.
Similarly, Wodak, Kwon, and Clarke (2011) assert that for this strategy to manifest, the powerful participants relax power thereby providing the opportunity for inclusiveness. In this case, this strategy constructed a sense of intimacy among participants**.**

Conclusion

Family discourse, as represented in the data, serves as a microcosm of broader hierarchical power structures inherent in society. These power arrangements are perpetuated through established social constructs and practices. The father, as the recognized leader within the family unit, embodies this hierarchy and exercises control over his subordinates, often through conversational dominance strategies such as interruption.

The study reveals that interruption, while a common conversational strategy, can have significant implications for family dynamics. It often functions as a tool for asserting dominance and maintaining control, reflecting the father's position

at the helm of the family discourse. This use of interruption underscores the power dynamics within the family, where the father's authority is both recognized and reinforced through conversational practices.

In this context, interruption is not merely a benign conversational tactic but can be perceived as abusive, especially when it undermines the contributions of other family members. This highlights the potential for conflict arising from such interactions, as interruptions can disrupt the flow of conversation and impede open, egalitarian communication.

The findings of this study suggest that interruption, as a manifestation of conversational dominance, is indicative of the hierarchical nature of family discourse. It underscores the need to consider the impact of such conversational strategies on family relationships and the importance of fostering communication practices that promote mutual respect and understanding.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how power relations are enacted and maintained through everyday interactions within the family, providing insights into the dynamics that shape family discourse and the potential for conflict that arises from these power struggles.

Family discourse as it is being represented in the data is emblematic of hierarchical power arrangements. This arrangement is reproduced by social constructs and practices. The reproductive construct of society automatically recognizes fathers as the identifiable agents at the helm of any family discourse. The father who is the leader of the family must maintain and control his subordinates by employing conversational dominance strategies of which one of them is interruption. Interruption in this case could be abusive**.**

References

Ahlstrand, J. L. (2018) A Critical Discourse Analysis of Women, Power, and Social-Political Change in the Indonesian Online News Media

Dehchnashki, A. (2016). The Role of Critical Discourse in the Reproduction of Social and Political Power. Journal of Social Science Studies, Vol. 3, No. 1 pp 23-30 http://jsss.macrothink.org

Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and Power. 2nd ed. Harlow: Longman

Goodwin, S. A. (1993) Impression formation in asymmetrical power relationships: does power corrupt absolutely? https://scholarworks.umass.edu/theses/2235

Gulliver, P.H. (1963). *Social control in African Society: A study of the Arusha Agricultural Masai of Northern Tanganyika. London*: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Ibe, C.N and Odebunmi, S.A. (2019). Conversational Analysis of Mixed Gendered Interaction in an Edition of Wale Adenuga's *Super Story. International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR) Vol. 14 No. 1 pp 209- 219*

Itakura, H. (2001) Describing conversational dominance. '*Journal of pragmatics 33: 12: 1859-1880.*

Johnson, Rebekah (2007). The Co-Construction of Roles and Patterns of Interaction in Family Discourse. *Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics, 2007, Vol. 7, No. 2*

Khan, R.N. (2016). A Critical Study of Discursive Power in the Selected Passages of Khaled Hosseini's A Thousand Splendid Suns. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry Vol 14, I pp 88- 121*

Kings, R (2011) Power, struggle and control: An Analysis of turn-taking in Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? *Innervate leading undergraduate work in English Studies, Volume 3*

Koilybayeva, R., Zhunis, M., Kusmanova, K., Mirov, M and

Missyachenko, S. (2023). Patterns of Interaction in Family Discourse: A Resilience Theory Perspective. *International Journal of Society, Culture & Language, 11(1), pp 177-189*

Langford, D (1994) *Analyzing talk investigating verbal interaction in English*. London The Macmillian Press.

Nanda, S. (1994). *Cultural Anthropology*. California: Wades Worth Publishing Company.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation. *Language, 50(4), 696–735*. https://doi.org/10.2307/412243

Seymour, S. (1986). *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Thornborrow, J. (2002). Power talk: Language and interaction in institutional discourse. *Harlow*, UK: Pearson Education.

Van Dijk, T. A., (2001). Critical Discourse Analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin& H. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of Discourse Analysis pp. 352-372.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Watts, R. (1991). *Power in family discourse*. Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.

Film

Adenuga, W. (Producer) and Laniyan A. (Director) (2008) *Super Story*. [Because you loved me] Nigeria: WAP