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Addressivity in a Drama Text: An Appraisal of Ola Rotimi*'s Our Husband has Gone Mad Again*

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Abstract
Addressivity is the orientation of an utterance towards a listener and the way a speaker shapes communication based on the person being addressed as well as the context of interaction. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of addressivity was used to examine addressivity in Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Four key concepts were identified: dialogism, intertextuality, superaddressee and polyphony. Through selected conversations among the characters, the paper shows how their utterances are shaped by previous discourses, cultural beliefs and social expectations. Dialogism is seen in the exchange of different perspectives, while intertextuality connects character's speech with wider cultural, political and social experiences. The concept of the superaddressee is reflected in instances where characters appear to address an imagined listener beyond their immediate interlocutors. Polyphony is evident in the coexistence of different voices and viewpoints represented by characters such as Lejoka-Brown, Mama Rashida, Sikira and Liza. The study concludes that addressivity is central to the understanding of dramatic dialogue as it shows how meaning is produced through interaction between speakers, listeners and the wider social context.

Keywords: addressitivity, dialogism, discourses, polyphony, superaddressee

Introduction

Addressivity simply means that whenever human beings speak or write, we are talking to someone whether directly or indirectly. It is the way we shape our words based on who we are speaking to, how we expect them to respond and the context of the conversation. Addressivity is a term coined by the Russian scholar, Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), as part of his critique of traditional linguistics. He posits that an essential feature of language is that it is always oriented to a listener. This implies that language is never used in isolation: it is always directed toward someone whether explicitly or implicitly. Addressivity is what turns a sentence, a mere potential utterance, into an actual utterance. Listeners do not just respond to an utterance after it is made; they also shape it while it is being made. This means that a sentence becomes meaningfully communicated when it is directed toward a listener. Language is not just about forming words, it is shaped by the speaker's awareness of their audience and their response. For example, in a

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classroom, a teacher explaining a topic to students does not just recite information mechanically instead, the teacher adjusts his or her explanation based on certain factors that relate to the socio-millieu of the learners.

Addressivity also includes an utterance's implicit dialogue with earlier utterances on the same topic. In addition, every utterance is influenced by previous discussion on a particular topic. The implication is that words carry historical and contextual significances. For example, in the political context, when a President delivers a speech, he does not just state facts but adjusts his tone, choice of words and emphasis based on how they anticipate the reaction(s) of the public and media. Addressivity also includes the utterance's orientation to a 'superaddressee': an imagined perfect listener who has a perfect understanding of the intents. This means that when people communicate, they do not only consider their immediate audience but also an ideal, imagined listener who fully understands the speaker's intent even when the immediate (original) listeners may misinterpret the message (Bakhtin, 1986).

Relevance of Addressivity in Drama

Addressivity is crucial in drama because dramatic texts are fundamentally dialogic in nature relying on interactions between characters to develop meaning, relationships and conflicts. Bakhtin (1986) highlights that every utterance is directed towards a listener; and in drama, these listeners are not only the characters but also the audience who interpret the layers of meaning embedded in speech. Through addressivity, dramatists establish authority, resistance, intimacy, mockery or exclusion reflecting broader societal structures. The way characters in a play engage in verbal exchanges whether through direct commands, sarcasm, polite speech or interruptions determines the nature of relationships and underlying tensions in the narrative (Mick, 1996).

The text, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again,* by Ola Rotimi is a comedic play that explores political ambition, gender dynamics and cultural expectations in post-independence Nigeria. The play focuses on Major Rahman Taslim Lejoka-Brown, a former soldier turned politician, whose outdated views on leadership and marriage create tension with his three wives – Mama Rashida (his oldest as well as late brother's wife), Sikira (his politically strategic wife), and Liza (his educated, modern wife) reveal how addressivity shapes power struggles, resistance and societal critique.

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Application of Bakhtin's Theory of Addressivity to Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*

defines politeness as a method of
interpersonal relationships intended to make the interaction easy via
reducing the potential for divergence and argument innate in all human
beings' exchange (Lakoff, 1975: 13-14).
Lakoff utilized politeness to refer to

Mikhail Bakhtin's Theory of Addressivity (1986) emphasises that every utterance is directed towards a listener and shaped by the speaker's awareness of their audience. Addressivity is what transforms language from a neutral structure into meaningful communication, as speakers anticipate responses and tailor their words accordingly. Bakhtin (1986) also highlights that utterances are influenced by past discourses (intertextuality) and oriented toward an implied or ideal listener (the superaddressee), who fully understands the speaker's intent.

Key concepts of Addressivity:

1. Dialogism: refers to the way different voices interact in a text. Dialogism, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin refers to how different voices, perspectives, and social contexts interact within a conversation. It emphasises that speech is always shaped by previous utterances and anticipates future responses.

   One key way dialogism, in the work, is exhibited is through the differing perspectives of Major Lejoka-Brown and Okonkwo regarding politics – especially on page 4.

   OKONKWO: Major Rahman Lejoka-Brown! [*Slaps him robustly on the back.*] Yarn me boh! Ehen, so you're now in full time politics!

   LEJOKA-BROWN: Are you there…? Politics is the thing now in Nigeria, mate. You want to be famous? Politics. You want to chop life? – No, no – you want to chop a big slice of the National cake? – Na Politics.

   Here, dialogism is shown as Lejoka-Brown's response builds upon Okonkwo's statement about his political involvement. His reply is not isolated. Instead, it expands on the topic drawing on shared cultural knowledge. This also shows how Lejoka-Brown's words are shaped by societal narratives on corruption and governance, reflecting broader political discourses in post-colonial Nigeria.

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Dialogism is also evident in how characters' speech reflects power structures and societal expectations. For example: Lejoka-Brown mocks Okonkwo's softened demeanor after spending years in England (on page 5).

OKONKWO: Enough, Major, look – your wife is laughing at you! Pg. 5

LEJOKA-BROWN: "… six years in England – h\ep … has made you – hep … soft like a … hep – woman! (page5)

This example carries multiple voices, the voice of Lejoka-Brown, the societal expectation of masculinity, and the critique of Western influence showing how speech is never neutral but layered with ideological undertones.

Another way dialogism manifests is through the way characters shape their responses based on what they anticipate from their listeners.

Example: Sikira initially hesitant in conversation strategically shifts the topic to flatter Okonkwo's military background when confronted by Lejoka-Brown.

SIKIRA: Ooh no, my Lord, I wasn't thinking so – (page5)

LEJOKA-BROWN: Y-e-s, go ahead: think – think whatever you want to think. [*Hoists* **OKONKWO'S** *arm up*.] This man here is that same brave soldier, Gideon Abednego Okonkwo, who fought shoulder to shoulder with me in the Congo against those long-nosed Belgians during…

SIKIRA: [*impressed*]. Ohoo! (page5)

This response is premeditated showing that Sikira is aware of Lejoka-Brown's values and tailors speech accordingly. This adaptation of speech based on audience and context highlights the interactive nature of communication in the play.

2. **Intertextuality:** According to Mikhail Bakhtin, intertextuality is often understood through his concept of heteroglossia which signifies that every text is a dialogue with other texts, and meaning is created through the interaction and transformation of voices and contexts, rather than being solely generated by a single, independent text. The term was developed by Julia Kristeva, building on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. It also means words carry historical and social meanings from previous contexts, influencing how they are understood in new situations.

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In the examples below, intertextuality is exemplified through different layers of reference and response, highlighting how each of the characters engages with past traditions and societal expectations from page 15 of the text.

MAMA RASHIDA: It is not for my wedding, nor for the memorial ceremonies of the Departed Spirits of my forebears that I am killing myself to get this house clean.

Here, she evokes ancestral traditions implying that house-cleaning is not merely for personal or practical purposes but is tied to cultural rituals.

Another instance of intertextuality is found in the reference to Alhaji Mustafa's house being demolished:

SIKIRA. [*peeping out*]. Mama Rashida, come look, come look!

SIKIRA. It's Alhaji Mustafa's house they're breaking down this time!

[*Offstage – continuous heckling and catcalls punctuated by the ghoulish pounding of a demolition crane*.]

SIKIRA. Policemen with gun … all over the place … Oh, come see, quick … they're fighting the people.

The dialogue here involves political realities, particularly the history of forced evictions in African nations where governments displace citizens under the pretext of urban development. Such demolitions are not merely personal losses; they are political acts tied to government power, corruption and instability. By addressing this reference, the play addresses a larger historical and political discourse, making its dialogue intertextual. Mustafa's house is not just a house, but part of a recurring pattern of oppression and displacement in post-colonial societies.

Another instance is shown in the interaction between Mama Rashida and Sikira, who both highlight intertextuality by addressing the conflict between traditional African values and evolving modern perspectives. For example, Mama Rashida insists:

MAMA RASHIDA. It is your duty, just as it is my duty, to make sure that when the woman steps into this house, she has no doubt that it is real human beings who live in it, and not bush pigs!

SIKIRA. I don't care what she thinks.

MAMA RASHIDA. Unless you have no shame, you ought to care!

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This conversation between the two characters echoes traditional patriarchal beliefs that a woman's primary role is to maintain home in a way that reflects respect and dignity. Sikira, however expresses a more individualistic perspective refusing to be confined by such expectations. The tension between tradition and modernity is a key element of intertextuality as it brings different historical and cultural discourses into conversation within the same play.

3. **Superaddresee:** This is an imagined ideal listener who fully grasps the speaker's intent even when real listeners misunderstand. Bakhtin (1986) described superaddressee as an ideal listener in the mind of the speaker : one who hears from a position above self and other, and who listens sympathetically and understands justly.

   In the play particularly in Scene V, Mama Rashida and Liza are deep in conversation and it goes thus:

   MAMA RASHIDA. Oh, but it is true. You are the only woman that the master really cares for. (page 32)

   LIZA. For Heaven's sake – stop defending the devil! (page 32)

   Here, Mama Rashida's defends depicts that she is not just speaking to Liza but also justifying her position to an unseen, authoritative listener - the societal norms that allow polygamy for political gain. The phrase 'For Heaven's sake' implies that she is appealing to a higher moral authority, as if an ideal listener beyond the conversation should recognise the injustice she perceives.

   Another instance of superaddressee in the play is evident in Mama Rashida's complaint about trade.

   MAMA RASHIDA. Time was, Sister, when chicken was "nice trade". But now! Every lizard of a pretty-trader has climbed up to sell chickens. So what happens? Chickens price climbs up. Nobody buys. (page 33)

   LIZA. [*hurrying to window*]. You leave us alone awhile, will you? (page 33)

   The dialogue here is an indication that Mama Rashida's lament is not only addressing Liza but also appealing to a larger audience – perhaps an unseen authority who can recognise the injustices of the changing economy. This unseen listener functions as a

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superaddressee as Mama Rashida seeks validation from someone who would understand her plight beyond the immediate conversation.

In the excerpt below, in a conversation between Major Lejoka-Brown and Liza superaddressee is portrayed.

LIZA. You are Mr. Lejoka-Brown, aren't you?

LEJOKA-BROWN [*non-committally*]. By the Grace of God.

Here, instead of simply affirming his identity, Lejoka-Brown shifts responsibility to divine authority. This superaddresee implies religious morality showing that his identity and authority are tied to a higher power rather than just personal assertion

4. **Polyphony:** This refers to the presence of multiple independent and equally valid voices within a text, especially in novels. Instead of just following the author's viewpoint, each character speaks as an independent person with their own thoughts and opinions.

From the excerpt in the play, polyphony manifest through the varied ideological positions of the characters, reflecting their unique experiences, beliefs and cultural contexts. Such examples are found on pages 47 and 48:

LIZA. Your next problem will be to create the *Demand.* And the best way to do this is …

MAMA RASHIDA. *Demand* is what again now? People who *sell*?

LIZA. No, no… that's *Supply*.

SIKIRA. Demand means people who go to market.

MAMA RASHIDA. Ah yes …

This exchange demonstrates how Mama Rashida initially conflates demand with supply, showcasing her informal understanding of trade. Liza's role as a bridge between formal economic principles and local trade practices, highlights how multiple perspectives on business co-exist within the text.

Another instance of polyphony is exemplified through Sikira's remarks on African women on page 48

SIKIRA. Well … they say when our African women go to England, or to America, or so-so-and-so, they come back wanting to be Headmasters and kicking everybody round and round.

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Here, Sikira expresses a communal skepticism towards western educated African women, implying that it creates authoritarian and detached elite. Her perspective represents a critical voice within the polyphonic structure, challenging Liza's character who embodies western exposure.

Conclusion

Addressivity in a drama text as examined within the framework of discourse analysis highlights the interactive and responsive nature of communication in dramatic dialogue. The key concepts of addressivity as mentioned in the paper enrich dramatic discourse making it a dynamic exchange that extends beyond the immediate speakers to engage audiences and broader social contexts. Ultimately, addressivity reinforces the depth and complexity of meaning in drama, emphasising its role as a site of active communication and interpretation.

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