

# A Discourse Analysis of Language use in Femi Osofisan's *The Midnight Blackout*

Adebileje Adebola Omolara<sup>1</sup>, Atunde Oluwatoyosi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and Professional Communication, College of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Km 46, Lagos-Ibadan Express Way, Redemption City, Ogun State, Nigeria.

[bolaomolara@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:bolaomolara@yahoo.co.uk); [adebilejea@run.edu.ng](mailto:adebilejea@run.edu.ng)

<sup>2</sup>Department of English and Professional Communication, College of Humanities, Redeemer's University, Km 46, Lagos-Ibadan Express Way, Redemption City, Ogun State, Nigeria.

[toyosiatunde08@yahoo.com](mailto:toyosiatunde08@yahoo.com)

**Abstract-** *This study critically examines the language use of Femi Osofisan's characters/casts as portrayed in The Midnight Blackout and how such usage is affected and determined by situations and contexts. Analysis of discourse in the play is premised on a model adaptation of Discourse Analysis presented in Hyme's (1962) *Ethnography of Communication* and Grice's *Conversational Maxim*. The study employs Hyme's *Ethnography of Communication* model which is encapsulated in the *SPEAKING* acronym, and *Conversational Maxims* by Grice which engages the maxim of quantity, quality, relation and manner. This critical analysis reveals language as an indispensable and instinctive medium in human communication. Analysis also reveals the linguistic and social surrounding or environment of Femi Osofisan's The Midnight Blackout and foregrounds language as the spectrum through which the society can be appreciated.*

**Keywords-** *Ethnography of Communication; Conversational Maxim; Discourse Analysis*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language is generally known as the medium of communication, but it goes beyond that extent; it is a reflection of culture and society. Femi Osofisan's *The Midnight Blackout* is a conventional play that centres on the issue of morals, politics, educational status and business. The play is in narrative form, containing songs and poems that criticize societal ills. It deals with the issue of marriage and matters of trust and deceit. It is also satirical and hilarious and serves as a reaction to a political phase in the history of Nigeria during the regime of Babangida. It exposes the ills of the Structural Adjustment Programme (S.A.P), one of the gimmicks of the corrupt government of Nigeria.

The play begins with an argument between Juokwu and his wife, Obioma. Obioma is convinced that her husband is involved in an extra-marital affair and Juokwu who is a respected Professor of Medicine tries to explain things to her, and we are immediately taken to the picture of Obioma's ex-husband on the wall of the house. It is brought to our notice that Obioma's ex-husband was involved in extra-marital affairs, a condition which makes her spy on Juokwu at every slightest opportunity. Juokwu claims that he is a faithful man and will never cheat on his wife but in the course of the play we soon see Juokwu's trick of getting out of the house to meet his mistress, Akunbundu's wife for as long as he wants by putting his wife to sleep. This trick is a scientific discovery that is made by Professor Juokwu and this is what Osofisan

names "the Midnight Blackout." Iberibe is a friend to Obioma's ex-husband and he flies from Rio into the country, pretending to have come to sympathize with Obioma for the death of her ex-husband and he is welcomed by Juokwu who refuses to let him go back to Rio. Iberibe finally decides to stay and he consistently makes advances at Obioma who bluntly refuses the offer. In the course of the play, Juokwu tells Iberibe about his scientific discovery of getting his wife to sleep; he then performs his trick on Obioma in order to accomplish his adulterous mission with his mistress. While he is gone, Iberibe sneaks into the house through the window and he tries waking Obioma by the same process in order to seduce her. Obioma eventually wakes up and while still wondering how she sleeps off and also trying to avoid Iberibe, Juokwu's voice is heard and Iberibe finds it difficult to get Obioma back to sleep so he begs her to pretend to be asleep until Juokwu comes to wake her up and she obeys. Juokwu rushes into the house with his mistress's husband who happens to be Akunbundu, a politician and business man. He confronts Juokwu and so the secret of his scientific trick coupled with his marital unfaithfulness is revealed unknown to his wife until now. Although, many studies have been carried out on Femi Osofisan's *The Midnight Blackout* both literarily and linguistically, but none to the best of our knowledge has carried out any discursive analysis on the play text using the *Ethnography of Communication* and the *Conversational Maxims*.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The discourse analysis in this paper is premised on Hymes' Ethnography of Communication (1962) and Grice's Conversational Maxim (1975). It also examines the discourse features embedded in the text. The two theories are merged for analysis because they both deal with utterances made in conversations between two or more people. They deal basically with the naturalist creativity in every human conversation. They are not concerned with the correctness of language, but how language flows in human communication.

### 2.1 Hymes' Ethnography Of Communication

In 1974 Hymes fashions an acronym for identifying the different aspects of a discourse and this acronym is **SPEAKING**. This acronym also serves as the list of contextual features as follows:

**S** – Setting/Scene: Stands for setting or scenes. This context includes the physical setting and the scene. The physical setting is where the communication takes place, and the scene is the participant or partaker's knowledge of what is going on in the communication.

**P** – Participant: This denotes participants that is, individuals involved in a particular communication or event. The participants are the people involved in the encoding and decoding process, or the sender and receiver of a message.

**E** – Ends: This indicates ends. Ends are concerned majorly on the aim of a participant of a particular communication or speaking and the end result of that communication.

**A** – Acts: Carbaugh (2008) says that 'Act' is "part of a social event" It is a speech event that has numerous speech acts performed one of which are the requests, commands, apology, information etc.

**K** – Key: This stands for 'keys'. It has to do with the level of emotions, or the tone and manner with which the communication is surrounded. According to Lillis (2006) the tone and manner may be "serious or playful" and it may be vocal or non-vocal.

**I** – Instrumentalities: This represents what is called 'instrumentality'. The instrumentality means the mode or the medium of communication used by the participant, spoken, written or gestured.

**N** – Norms: These are the norms of communication. This has to do with the rules of communication or speaking. The norms of interaction involve the rules surrounding how interactions are made in a particular communication, and the norms of interpretation are concerned with meaning given to a speech or an utterance made.

**G** – Genres: This stands for genres. Genres are concerned with the language that is adopted for usage.

### 2.2 Grice's Conversational Maxims

Grice propounds the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims. He opines that the talk exchange occurs as a result of mutual cooperation towards "a common purpose or set of purposes." For this purpose, he propounds a principle that should be observed or adhered

to by all discourse participants in talk exchanges. Grice points out four different types of conversational maxims which are: maxim of quantity, relevance, quality and manner. Archer (2012) postulates that these maxims are not given by Grice in order to control or dictate our behaviour as interlocutors, rather to create an awareness that "conversation is governed by certain conventions; hearers tend to assume speakers are conforming to these conventions and if speakers are not conforming, they have good reasons not to." The maxims are described individually as follows:

### 2.3 Maxim of Relevance

Grice's maxim of relevance states simply that be relevant or make your contributions relevant enough in any conversation or talk exchange. The interlocutors must thereby have a mutual agreement towards a particular area of topic. In some cases, the maxim or relevance is violated by the interlocutors for one reason or the other. This violation is termed flouting of relevance.

### 2.4 Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity states that; make your contribution as informative as is required and do not make your contribution less informative than is required.

### 2.5 Maxim of Quality

Maxim of quality principle states that; do not say that which you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. Yule (1996) says the quality maxim is concerned with the way interactions start and it involves expressions as: "As far as I know, now, correct me if I'm wrong, but..., I am absolutely sure but..." Aside that, maxim of quality is the maxim that enables discourse participants to say the fact and also have evidence to this fact.

### 2.6 Maxim of manner

Maxim of Manner principle states the following:

- Avoid obscurity of expression
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief
- Be orderly.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The discourse analyses with Ethnography of Communication and Conversational Maxims of ten (10) selected texts (five texts for each of the models) in Femi Osofisan's *The Midnight Blackout* are presented here.

### 3.1 Ethnographic Analysis of selected text extracts

#### 3.1.1 Text one

**CHINWE:** *You and your mouth Okoro! I am telling you this is not the moment for all this! The prof. and his wife will soon be finishing their lunch in the dining room there, and they may come here and catch us! So come on, be going! (The Midnight Blackout, p.4)*

In this extract, Okoro comes to visit his girlfriend, Chinwe, he tries to kiss her one more time and Chinwe is scared that they will be caught in the act. The Setting of the

discourse above is located in a part in Juokwu's house beside the window. The Participants involved are Chinwe and Okoro. The End indicates that Chinwe wants to dismiss Okoro in order to avoid Juokwu and his wife seeing them. The Act of the discourse is "warning" as signaled by the sentence "they may come here and catch us". The Key is agitation as Chinwe is scared about being caught by Juokwu. The Instrumentality reveals that it is verbally communicated by Chinwe to Okoro. The Norm of the discourse is for Okoro to yield to Chinwe's warning, by leaving immediately. The Genre is dramatic.

### 3.1.2 Text two

**CHINWE:** *Yes, as usual, I'll leave it open again tonight. Why are you grumbling? You know, no one is ever here after supper. Just wait till the lights are off. Then jump in, unlock that door there, and come to my room and...sh, Go now, I hear them coming! (She shuts the window hastily, and climbs down to the band.) (The Midnight Blackout, p. 5).*

Earlier in this extract, Chinwe tries to make Okoro leave so that they would not be caught by their bosses. After much persuasion, Okoro reluctantly agrees to leave, only to come back later in the night. The Setting of this extract is in Juokwu's house. The discourse Participant is Chinwe and she addresses Okoro. The End is that Okoro should come back to the house in the night and Chinwe gives direction for his entry. The Act is informing and directing. The Key is agitation. The Instrumentality is orally communicated. The Norm is that Okoro is expected to leave and come back in the night as directed by Chinwe. The Genre of this discourse is a dialogue.

### 3.1.3 Text Three

**JUOKWU:** *I don't care! It's you who should be ashamed! I mean what kind of madness came over you today? Did you think of what you were doing at all? You a respectable woman, rushing in like that, to come and disrupt our board meeting! what excuse can you have for such a shameful behaviour?*

*(The Midnight Blackout, p.7)*

Juokwu and Obioma are involved in an argument pertaining to the act of Obioma badging into a board meeting in which Juokwu was a member. The Setting is in Juokwu's house. The participant is Juokwu and he addresses his wife, Obioma. The End of this discourse is that Juokwu criticizes Obioma for barging into a board meeting in a bad manner. The Act is questioning and complaining. The Key is an angry tone. The instrumentality is communicated vocally. The Norm is that after Juokwu criticizes Obioma's action, Obioma is to realize her mistake and be sorry for her action. The Genre is dramatic.

### 3.1.4 Text Four

**JUOKWU:** *Him! Johnson? Are we to go into all that again? Are we never to forget that you had another husband before me? Or was it my fault that he was unfaithful to you?*

*(The Midnight Blackout, p.10)*

Earlier in the extract, the argument between Juokwu and Obioma leads to the picture of Obioma's ex-husband, Johnson on the wall. Obioma nags at Johnson's picture and insults him for being unfaithful to her. The Setting of the utterance is in the sitting room of Juokwu's house. The participant is Juokwu addressing Obioma. The End is that Juokwu is tired of the discussion on Obioma's ex-husband so he tries to discourage her from talking about him, especially in his presence. The Act is questioning by the use of the question mark. The Key is boredom as signalled by the sentence "are we to go into all that again?" The Instrumentality is communicated by words of the mouth. The Norm is that Juokwu expects that the questions asked will discourage Obioma from going on talking about Johnson, However; the genre is drama.

### 3.1.5 Text Five

**OBIOMA:** *My dear friend! So many, many years ago. ! Whatever happened to you?*

*(The Midnight Blackout, p. 26)*

Obioma suddenly sees Iberibe in her house and she is happy to see him after many years of departure. The Setting of the play is in Juokwu's house. The Participant is Obioma addressing Iberibe. The End is that Obioma wants Iberibe to know that he is welcomed and that she is happy to see him after many years. The extract is a questioning and informative Act. Informative in the sense that she informs us that Iberibe has been gone for many years. The Key is an excitement tone identified with the exclamatory mark. The Instrumentality is the oral communication. The Norm is for Iberibe to give an answer to Obioma's question and also show excitement that he is back. The Genre is drama.

## 3.1 A Statistical Analysis and Data Interpretation

The statistical analysis and interpretation of the analysis is given below, after each table, graph, bar chart and pie chart. The employment of the data analysis and interpretations creates an understanding in the operation of the SPEAKING acronym in the text, and also elevates our knowledge of its usage.

**TABLE 1: An illustrating the number of occurrence of each Act studied in the text**

Acts	Frequency
Questioning	3
Informing	2
Commanding	0
Warning	1
Complaining	1
Directing	1

The table above contains the list of act studied for analysis and its frequency. The questioning act has the highest frequency of **three**, followed by the informing act, the commanding act was not frequent, but warning act, complaining act and the directing act has the frequency of **one** each.

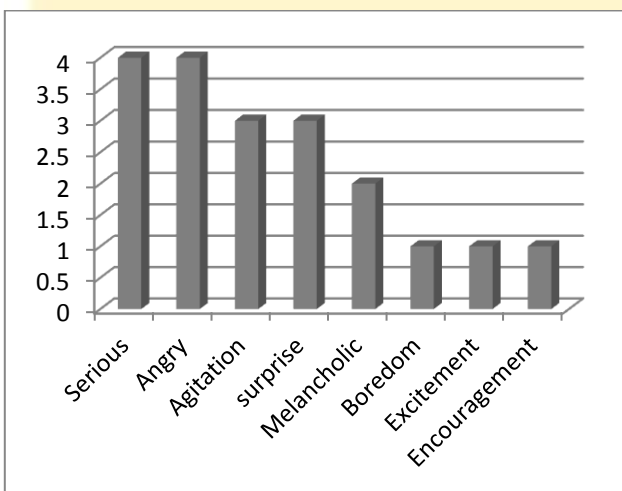
Femi Osofisan's treats serious issues in the play *The Midnight Blackout*; in that the characters are questioning, giving information, warning, complaining or directing.



These five acts signify the seriousness around the context of the play. Femi Osofisan uses the questioning act to keep the story moving and to give information about the events in the play and the reason why they occur. This is done to keep readers posted and to understand how one event leads to another. Osofisan successfully uses the character to employ this technique. In other words, readers' understanding of the play and his intentions in the play is most important to Osofisan.

The next is the informing act. The characters give information to one another, and it seems that Osofisan has carefully drawn the story. The information given by the characters reveals more about the audience to know more about the characters and the events in the play. Therefore, creating an understanding of the play. The information act also links the events to one another. For example; in page 26 of the text studied, Obioma informs us that Iberibe has been gone for many years, and introduces him as "my dear friend"

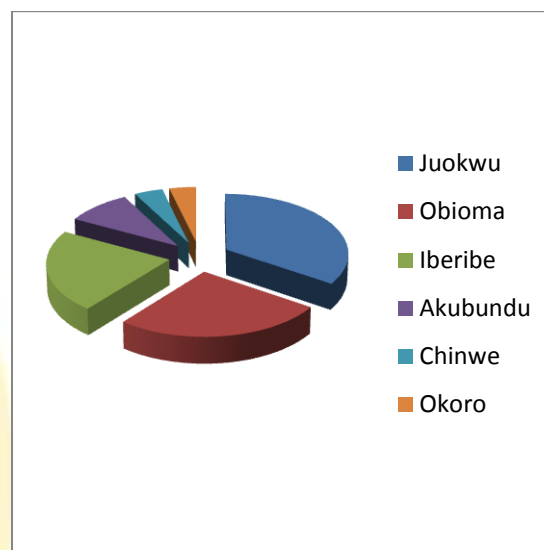
The commanding act comes after informing, and it is used to indicate the seriousness of a situation in the text. The characters involved in this act in the text studied are Obioma and Iberibe as seen in pages 49, 52, 83. The warning and complaining act comes after the commanding act, next to the directing act, which is the least occurrence.



**Fig 2: Bar Chart representing the number of Keys studied**

The keys displayed in the bar chart above indicate the condition of the mind of the discourse participants in the text. The serious and angry key has the highest occurrence because the play centres on a lot of complications and trouble which leads to the participants' **anger** and a need for a **serious** talk. The excitement and encouragement key has the same and the lowest occurrence in the play because the characters and the state of their life is full of complains and problems, and no one is ready to encourage the others believes, intentions and opinions. A serious tone can mean the person is angry or depressed. This anger can lead to **agitation** of any kind. Therefore, an angry person can be sad, bored or less excited. In other words, the keys are closely linked because it deals with the conditions or state

of the mind and how human state of mind gradually drops due to events.



**Fig 3: Pie Chart representing participant's occurrence in the play.**

The total number of characters in the play is six. The main characters are Juokwu, Obioma, Iberibe and Akubundu. As displayed in the pie chart, Juokwu has the largest number of occurrence in the play. This is because he is the main character in the play, even the title of the play *The Midnight Blackout* centres around him. He is the character who plays the role that defines Osofisan's title of the book. In that case, Juokwu is the character that represents the intention of the author.

Obioma's number of participation in the play is also high; after Juokwu's and this is because she is the wife of the main character in the play on which Juokwu's scientific discovery is performed. She is also the character that passes through marital problems with her ex-husband and Juokwu, and she is also sexually harassed by Iberibe. Therefore, the story also centres on her. She is used by Osofisan to represent women's plight in marriage. Iberibe and Akunbundu are also characters that help to keep the play going. The inclusion of a character like Akunbundu helps to elevate the play to being hilarious. Chinwe, the house maid and Okoro have the least occurrence or participation in the play.

### 3.2 Conversational Maxims Analysis of randomly selected text extracts

#### 3.2.1 Text Six

**JUOKWU:** So, my dear, you no longer trust even me-

**OBIOMA:** (Sarcastic) Oh yes I do! Of course I do! You are a professor of medicine, dealing with commercial services!

(*The Midnight Blackout*, p.8)

In the extract above, Juokwu and Obioma are having a **conversation**, in which Juokwu is the **current speaker** and Obioma takes the turn to speak, after him. A **discourse interruption** also occurs in the conversation. Juokwu is

yet to complete his statement when Obioma takes the turn from him thereby causing a discourse interruption. Obioma flouts the maxim of quality because she lies about trusting Juokwu and she does this openly in form of sarcasm. This is identified with the statement “oh yes I do! Of course I do!” There is obscurity of expression in Obioma’s utterance. She makes a statement that becomes difficult to understand because there is a contradiction between “a professor of medicine” dealing with “commercial services”; therefore she violates and flouts the maxim of manner. Even though she says “yes I do” her statement implies “no”. Though she violates the maxim of quality and manner, Obioma still adheres to the maxim of relation and quantity. That is, her discourse attends to or discusses the same issue with the first speaker and her contribution is informative as required.

### 3.2.2 Text Seven

**Juokwu:** *Him! Johnson? Are we to go into all that again? Are we never to forget that you had another husband before me? Or was it my fault that he was unfaithful to you?*

**Obioma:** *Oh it was my fault of course! And don’t I know it! I was an idiot of a wife, that’s all! All trusting and docile and what not! If I had been just a little less blind! But there I was, loving him totally, and –the fool! The cheat! The criminal! To think that he was deceiving me like that, all of his life! And I never even once suspected!... yes, just look at him! See how he is looking at me there, the lout! Villain! You don’t think that is enough, eh? You haven’t mocked me enough? (The Midnight Blackout, p.10)*

In the above extract, there is a discourse **exchange** between Juokwu and Obioma. Juokwu is the first speaker and Obioma is involved in **turn taking**. The main focus of the above extract is Obioma’s use of discourse. She violates and adheres to some maxims. Obioma violates the maxim of manner which says be brief, prevent ambiguity and be orderly. Her utterances are ambiguous and unordered. She includes unnecessary statement in her utterance such as “if I had been just a little less blind, the cheat! the criminal! the fool!, see how he is looking at me there, you don’t think that is enough eh?, you haven’t mocked me enough?” This makes the utterance scattered and not precise. Though she violates the maxim of manner, she does not divert from the topic of discourse, which is about Johnson and she says the truth which is backed up with evidence. Therefore, she adheres to the maxim of relation and maxim of quality. Obioma flouts the maxim of quantity in that, she produces less information than is required by Juokwu.

### 3.2.3 Text Eight

**Obioma:** *Don’t say you are jealous of a dead man now!*

**Juokwu:** *Why not throw the thing away? (The Midnight Blackout, p.10)*

The **conversation** above is between Obioma and Juokwu. Obioma is the **talk initiator** and the **current speaker**, while Juokwu takes the turn as the **next speaker**. The

statement made by Obioma is expected to drive Juokwu into defending himself or accepting he is jealous, but rather he switches to his own area of interest, which is, her throwing the picture of her ex-husband away. For this reason, we can say that Juokwu has flouted the maxim of relation. Obioma and Juokwu adhere to the maxim of manner which says: be precise, be brief, prevent obscurity of expression and be orderly. None is giving or passing across any message in this conversation; therefore they neither adhere to the maxim of quantity nor flout it. The same condition implies to the maxim of quality. The truth is not said and a lie is not told, it is just a mere exchange of utterance. Therefore, they neither adhere to the maxim of quality nor violate it.

### 3.2.3 Text Nine

**Juokwu:** *(Alone). But it’s unreasonable!... I mean, it’s not all husbands who...Ah, and to think that I married her because I wanted a docile and trusting Wife! You! (Pointing at the picture)- You imbecile! You see what you have done? It was you always boasting- My wife’s a wonderful woman! She never asks where you’re going or where you’ve been! Idiot! Historian! Diarist! Book-keeper! Archivist! Librarian! I wonder who asked you to go and be writing diaries! Bloody gossip, can’t keep secrets! You have to go and put everything down in your nasty book, for her to read! And now, see the kind of situation you have put me in! just now that am starting a beautiful affair with... shiii! She’s coming back! Er... (He begins to sing the national Anthem, to cover up his confusion.)*

*(The Midnight Blackout, p.15)*

In the extract above, Juokwu as a character speaks to himself, giving information about how nasty it is for Johnson to have written a book on his techniques for cheating on his wife, rather than keeping it a secret. This information is not brief, precise and orderly, so it makes the expression one that is difficult to understand. In this case, Juokwu violates the maxim of manner. Also, the utterance flouts the maxim of relation. Each statement is not related to the other and it is not relevant thereby causing a **discourse interruption** and **speech errors**. The speech errors are self-initiated and self-repaired. That is, they are errors made by the speaker and also corrected by the same speaker through **speech mechanism**. Though Juokwu violates the maxim of manner and relation, he adheres to the maxim of quality in that all the information he gives about Johnson is true and he makes us know that he has an affair outside his marriage, which is also a fact with an evidence “just now that am starting a beautiful affair with...”. He adheres to the maxim of quantity.

### 3.2.3 Text Ten

**Obioma:** *Why are you singing the national anthem?*

**Juokwu:** *Because...well, its election period again, isn’t it? I am feeling patriotic! You aren’t going to tell me that the national anthem is down too as another secret code, in your diary of aeroplanes!*

*(The Midnight Blackout, p.16)*

Obioma is the **talk initiator** in the conversation above. She initiates the conversation by asking Juokwu a question. Juokwu adheres to the maxim of quantity that says "make your contribution as informative as required". The information he gives is informative enough for Obioma to understand. Juokwu also adheres to the maxim of relevance because his answer or contribution is in relation to the question he is asked. Juokwu in other words, violates the maxim of quality. He is not singing the national anthem because he is feeling patriotic as he claimed, but because he is confused at Obioma's arrival. This is seen in text 5, page 15 above "he begins to sing the national anthem to cover up his confusion". He also violates the maxim of manner which says "Be brief". A **speech error** is committed by Juokwu. This is seen in the utterance "Because...Well" and this speech error is immediately corrected by **speech mechanism**.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Femi Osofisan employs the use of Conversational Maxims extensively in the play to elicit originality in man's daily conversations or utterances. The discourse elements used in the text are adjacency pairs, turn and turn taking, exchange, discourse interruption, talk initiation, repair mechanism, current speaker and next speaker. Conversational Maxims and Ethnography of Communication can be deduced from speakers' utterances, that is, both can be interpreted based on presupposition or inference. Ethnography of communication relates ethnography, the description and structural-functional analysis of society and culture, with the 'language' – a cultural behaviour that navigates and helps characters a cultural behaviour that navigates and helps to share knowledge, arts, morals, beliefs and everything acquired by man as a member of society. Ethnography of communication is an approach to understand society and culture and its reconstruction of an ethnic group in particular and nation in general.

Conclusively, the context used by Femi Osofisan in the text is a physical context, and this context affects the language of the characters in the play in that all the events are performed in Juokwu's house, in his sitting room. Therefore, while Conversational Maxim is at the deep level of analysis, Ethnography of Communication is at the

surface level of analysis. It deals with the obvious interpretation or meaning and not the importance or characteristics of the participants' discourse. Ethnography of Communication is a little more societal and cultural determined, while conversational maxims is inclined towards pragmatics because in the society, we are dealing with the people, the way they talk.

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#### Authors' Biography

**Adebola Adebileje** is an Associate Professor of English and her areas of interest include Sociolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Onomastics and English Grammar. She currently lectures at the Department of English and Professional Communication, Redeemer's University, Nigeria.

**Atunde, Oluwatoyosi** is a Graduate Student of the Department of English and Professional Communication, Redeemer's University, Nigeria. Her area of interest is Discourse Analysis.