

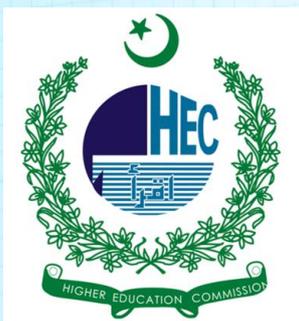
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**Critical Discourse Analysis of Racial Ideology in Wole Soyinka's
*Telephone Conversation***



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Abstract

This study analyzes Wole Soyinka's poem *Telephone Conversation* (1963) to examine how language reveals racial prejudice and power relations in society. The main argument is that the poem exposes racial ideology through a simple conversation between a Black African tenant and a white landlady. The objective of the study is to explore how Soyinka uses language to show discrimination and challenge racial attitudes. The study uses a qualitative textual analysis method and applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework, particularly focusing on how discourse reflects social power and ideology. The analytical tools include the study of lexical choices, syntactic patterns, pragmatics, and conversational structure in the poem. The findings show that Soyinka uses irony, semantic deviation, and narrative framing to criticize racism and reveal the dominance of racial prejudice in everyday communication. This research contributes to literary and linguistic studies by showing how poetic discourse can uncover hidden ideologies in society. The novelty of the study lies in applying CDA to a short poem to explain how language exposes and challenges racial discrimination. Racial discrimination has long been a central theme in postcolonial literature, reflecting the historical and social hierarchies created during colonialism. Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian poet, playwright, and essayist, often critiques these inequalities through his poetry (Soyinka, 1963). *Telephone Conversation* portrays a short yet highly symbolic interaction between an African tenant and a white landlady, highlighting implicit racial prejudices in ordinary situations. Critics such as van Dijk (2008) argue that language is never neutral; it carries ideology and reflects social power. Soyinka's poem exemplifies how everyday communication can reveal deep-seated racial hierarchies. Through humor, irony, and lexical manipulation, the poem exposes how societal racism is normalized and naturalized in seemingly mundane interactions. Lisa Anteby-Yemini and William Berthomiere (2005) discuss the broader context of diasporic and racial discourse, noting that such interactions often reflect systemic inequalities. Similarly, Chih-Yun Chiang (2010) emphasizes that language can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social hierarchies, especially in

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postcolonial contexts. Soyinka's poem provides a microcosm of these dynamics, making it an ideal text for CDA.

Statement of the Problem

While *Telephone Conversation* has been widely recognized as a critique of racism, most literary analyses focus on its humor, irony, or postcolonial themes without a systematic examination of the discourse structures that produce racial ideology. This study aims to fill that gap by applying Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover how linguistic choices reflect and perpetuate racial power imbalances, demonstrating how subtle forms of prejudice operate in everyday interactions. Wole Soyinka's poem *Telephone Conversation* (1963) presents a brief interaction that exposes racial prejudice and discrimination in everyday communication. However, the linguistic strategies through which the poem constructs and challenges racial ideology have not been sufficiently explored. There is a need to examine how lexical choices, syntactic patterns, pragmatics, and conversational structure reveal power relations between the speakers. Therefore, this study applies Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how Soyinka uses language to expose and critique racial discrimination in the poem.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as formulated by van Dijk (2008). CDA posits that language is a form of social practice that both reflects and constructs power relations. Ideologies are embedded in discourse through lexical choices, syntactic structures, pragmatics, and conversational strategies. In racial discourse, CDA examines how language can marginalize certain groups and legitimize dominance by others.

Additionally, the study draws on postcolonial theory, particularly Soyinka's own insights into cultural oppression and racial prejudice (Soyinka, 1963). The poem demonstrates how everyday communication, even in the form of a telephone conversation, reproduces racial hierarchies while simultaneously providing opportunities for critique through irony and narrative framing.

Methodology

This research uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine *Telephone Conversation*. The poem is treated as a text where social and ideological power relations are encoded in language. The analysis focuses on:

1. Lexical choices: Words and phrases that signal racial prejudice.
2. Syntactic patterns: Sentence structures that highlight dominance or subordination.
3. Pragmatics and speech acts: How politeness, requests, and responses reflect power relations.
4. Narrative and conversational framing: How the poem structures interaction to reveal ideology.

Data is drawn directly from the poem, with interpretations guided by van Dijk's (2008) framework for discourse and power.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Lexical Choices: Words and Phrases that Signal Racial Prejudice

In *Telephone Conversation*, Soyinka carefully selects words and phrases that reveal the racial ideology embedded in everyday interactions. For instance, the landlady's repeated questions, "HOW DARK?" and "ARE YOU LIGHT OR VERY DARK?" foreground the centrality of skin color in her perception of social worth. These lexical choices are not neutral; they reflect historical hierarchies that privilege whiteness and marginalize Africans (van Dijk, 2008). Similarly, the use of metaphorical descriptors such as "plain or milk chocolate" and "West African sepia" illustrates the absurdity of reducing identity to commodified racial categories. By adopting these terms ironically, the speaker exposes the arbitrariness of racial classification while signaling his awareness of societal bias. Words like "rancid breath of public hide-and-speak" further highlight the toxicity of social prejudice, showing how language can implicitly enforce and normalize racial power structures. Overall, Soyinka's lexical choices function both to document discrimination and to critique the ideology that sustains it.

Syntactic Patterns: Sentence Structures that Highlight Dominance or Subordination

Syntactic structures in the poem mirror the social hierarchy between the African speaker and the white landlady. For example, the defensive dash in "I hate a wasted journey I am African" foregrounds the speaker's assertion of identity in response to imposed judgment, emphasizing the tension between self-expression and social pressure. Similarly, the fragmented repetition "Button B, Button A" captures the landlady's mechanistic control, showing how discourse enforces subordination through proceduralized questioning. Parenthetical explanations, such as "Palm of my

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hand, soles of my feet Are a peroxide blond,” disrupt normal sentence flow to foreground irony and resistance, challenging the landlady’s assumptions. Exclamatory structures like “One moment, madam!” and interrogatives such as “Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?” further illustrate how sentence structure can be employed to negotiate power. Through syntactic deviation, Soyinka dramatizes both the imposition of racial authority and the speaker’s subtle assertion of agency, emphasizing the psychological impact of subordination while demonstrating resistance.

Pragmatics and Speech Acts: Politeness, Requests, and Responses Reflect Power Relations

The pragmatic features of *Telephone Conversation* reveal the nuanced negotiation of social power. The speaker’s use of politeness, as in “Madam, I warned, I hate a wasted journey I am African,” simultaneously asserts identity and mitigates confrontation, reflecting the subordinate position imposed by social norms. Requests for clarification, such as “You mean—like plain or milk chocolate?” expose the absurdity and arbitrariness of racial categorization while maintaining a polite tone. By posing rhetorical questions like “Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?” the speaker indirectly challenges the landlady’s authority, highlighting the potential of conversational strategies to resist dominance. Exclamatory markers such as “I pleaded” and descriptive phrases like “Rapidly, wave-length adjusted” indicate the speaker’s adaptation to social pressure, showing how subordinates negotiate recognition in unequal power relations (van Dijk, 2008). These pragmatic choices illustrate that the performance of politeness and compliance can coexist with subtle forms of resistance, revealing the complex interplay of language and ideology in everyday discourse.

Narrative and Conversational Framing: How the Poem Structures Interaction to Reveal Ideology

Soyinka structures the poem’s narrative and conversational framework to expose racial ideology. The first-person perspective, marked by statements like “I am African,” centers the African speaker’s experience, providing readers with intimate access to the social and psychological consequences of prejudice. Direct dialogue, such as the landlady’s interrogation, foregrounds racial judgment as an immediate and lived reality. Parenthetical reflections, for example, “(Friction, caused—foolishly, madam by sitting down...)” introduce irony and commentary, allowing the speaker to critique

the landlady's assumptions. The poem's chronological unfolding of the phone call highlights the progressive accumulation of social tension, while the juxtaposition of speaker and landlady perspectives dramatizes the power imbalance. Internal reflections like "Silence for spectroscopic flight of fancy" reveal the speaker's interpretive process, emphasizing how marginalized individuals navigate systemic bias. Overall, the narrative and conversational framing transforms a brief interaction into a microcosm of broader racial hierarchies, demonstrating how discourse reproduces and contests social ideology (Fairclough, 1992).

Findings

The analysis of *Telephone Conversation* using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis reveals multiple ways in which racial ideology is encoded and contested through language. At the **textual level**, lexical choices such as "HOW DARK?" and "plain or milk chocolate" expose the arbitrary categorization of human identity based on skin color, while syntactic patterns, including fragmented sentences and parenthetical clarifications, foreground the speaker's negotiation of social subordination and resistance. At the **discursive level**, pragmatics and speech acts, such as polite assertions, requests for clarification, and rhetorical questions, reveal the subtle strategies the African speaker employs to assert agency within a dominant social framework. Finally, at the **social practice level**, the narrative and conversational framing shows that even a brief interaction mirrors broader postcolonial hierarchies, highlighting the pervasive nature of racial prejudice and its normalization in everyday life. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Soyinka's poem is not only a critique of overt racism but also an exploration of the nuanced ways power, ideology, and social identity intersect in discourse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* exemplifies how literary texts can serve as powerful sites for critical discourse analysis. The poem reveals how racial ideology operates at multiple levels: through words, sentence structures, pragmatic choices, and narrative framing. By foregrounding the landlady's assumptions and the speaker's responses, Soyinka exposes the arbitrary and systemic nature of racial prejudice while simultaneously giving voice to resistance and critique. The poem demonstrates that language is a tool through which social hierarchies are

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both maintained and challenged. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model enables a deeper understanding of how discourse reproduces social inequality and how marginalized voices negotiate, resist, and subvert dominant ideologies. Ultimately, *Telephone Conversation* remains a compelling reflection on the subtle, everyday workings of racism and the potential of literary discourse to illuminate and critique social power relations.

Wole Soyinka's *Telephone Conversation* illustrates how racial ideology operates in everyday communication. Through careful lexical choices, syntactic patterns, pragmatic strategies, and narrative framing, the poem exposes subtle and explicit forms of racial prejudice. Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that language not only reflects social power but can also serve as a site of critique and resistance. Soyinka's use of irony and first-person perspective allows the speaker to challenge dominant racial ideologies while making readers aware of the absurdity and cruelty of racial discrimination.

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