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**EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPT IN CONVERSATION: A CASE STUDY OF OSOFISAN'S *TEGONNI*****Samuel Adebayo Omotunde (Ph.D)**Department of English & Literary Studies,  
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simplyshaddy@gmail.com**Abstract**

Interactants pass across different messages to each other during social interactions – some of which may be intentional while some may be inadvertent. However, when interlocutors of different cultural background, different social status and unequal power relations are conversing especially with a sort of veiled hostility between them, then, it is not unlikely that they will show contempt for each other using both verbal and non-verbal means of communication. It is on the basis of the above assertion that the paper examines various ways through which characters express contempt for each other when interacting using Osofisan's play – *Tegonni* as the source of our data. The paper makes use of insight from Conversation Analysis in analyzing the data. Among others, the authors discovered that interactants can exhibit contempt for each other in discourse through deliberate using of inappropriate lexical items to refer to each other; refusal to answer questions at the first instance, refusal to apologize for something being accused of and through non-verbal means which have been explained in the work.

**Keywords:** *Tegonni*, Contempt, Osofisan, Conversation, Conversation Analysis.**1. Introduction**

Conversation is a non-negotiable aspect of human interaction, relation, civilization and communication. It is a natural means of maintaining contacts among human beings which normal children of whatever race, religion and culture are exposed to at a very early stage of life. However, it is important to note that conversation can be carried out through the vocal organs or sign language or through other non-linguistic means. Conversation has been variously defined and viewed in the literature. Brennan (2010) is of the opinion that conversation is an activity that involves two interlocutors who make use of both verbal and non-verbal forms to interact. He further writes that face-to-face conversation is global in that all human beings in all cultures make

use of it and it is the means by which all children learn their native languages. Schegloff (1993) declares that one essential thing which human beings grow up with is an ordinary interaction with family members, peer groups and other people in the community and that the most recognized method of interaction is conversation in whatever form it is practised or carried out in those settings. Goodwin (1981:2) writes that conversation involves both non-linguistic as well as linguistic behaviour. Kamalu and Osisanwo (2015:182) are of the view that “conversation takes place when at least, two speakers are talking. In such a situation, both speakers are expected to contribute, either by talking and responding or listening”. Sartor (2007:19) using insights from “the formal grammatical theory of conversationalism”

(Sartor, 2007:18) says that “conversation is a succession (not an interaction) of verbal exchanges in which the rule of conversational courtesy has a constitutive position, which allows the interlocutors to give and take turns in their verbal exchanges at appropriate times, and in which the referential and informational communicative functions have an occasional place”. While this definition sees conversation as a socially rule-governed activity, it, however, limits conversation to only the linguistic or verbal form. Another significant thing in Sartor's definition is that conversation does not always perform “referential and informational communicative functions”. The above views and definitions of conversation have given insight into the scope, nature and function of conversation. In normal conversational situation, people engage in conversations to pass across different messages, meanings and emotions. However, it is significant to note that while some of these messages, meanings and emotions may be advertent, some may be inadvertent. The situation becomes more complex when conversation takes place between two people of different social status and power relation, that is, a situation where one is +High and the other is –High. In this situation of unequal power relation, depending on the context, different meanings and messages can be interpreted through their verbal and non-verbal actions. It is on this basis that this paper identifies various ways through which interlocutors show or exhibit contempt for each other in discourse.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 9th Edition* “contempt” means “the feeling that somebody is without value and deserves no respect at all”. The researchers believe that this work will greatly contribute to scholarship in that the work, either in scope or content, is not related to any existing work on *Tegonni*. As a matter of fact, *Tegonni* has been approached by scholars mainly from the angle of literature. The only work, to the best of our knowledge, that focuses on language aspect in *Tegonni* is that of

Akinwotu (2009). The work entitled “language use in Osofisan's *Tegonni* centres on the use of proverbs, imagery and symbols in the play viz-à-viz their relevance in driving home the preoccupations of the author of the play. He concludes by writing that “language plays a significant role in the play of Osofisan and is also an important aspect of his dramaturgy. His language is simple and his style is not difficult” (pg. 330).

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This work makes use of insight from conversation analysis (henceforth, CA). What is today known as CA is traceable to the work of Harvey Sacks in the 1960s. According to Richard Nordquist, CA is also known as talk-in-interaction and ethnomethodology. CA is defined as the study of talk produced in the course of ordinary human interaction (). In other words, CA is the study of naturally occurring conversation in any particular setting or context. It studies the underlying principles, rules and procedures which make conversation to flow smoothly. Hutchby and Woffitt (1998) put it clearly by writing that “the objective of CA is to uncover the often tacit reasoning procedures and sociolinguistic competencies underlying the production and interpretation of talk in organized sequences of interaction. However, nowadays, the study of CA is not limited to only naturally occurring speeches, but also to other specialized forms of communication which include interactions in educational setting, political setting, medical setting etc. The focus and objectives of CA are provided by Nordquist when he writes that CA was developed specifically to deal with four issues which are:

- (i) Human actions are meaningful and involve meaning-making.
- (ii) Actions are meaningful and make meaning through a combination of their content and context.
- (iii) To be socially meaningful, the meaning of actions must be shared (or intersubjective). This sharing may not be perfect but it is normally good enough for the participants to keep going.
- (iv). Meanings are unique and singular.

Actions function in particular ways to create meanings that are also particular

([www.eresourceresearch.org](http://www.eresourceresearch.org)> Heritage\_FullChapter)

CA is apt to analyse this work for the following reasons:

- i. CA deals with naturally occurring conversation; drama, which is our source of data, is close to naturally occurring conversation.
- ii. The four issues covered by CA as revealed above centre around meaning: and since investigating how one character shows contempt for the other during interaction, CA is therefore appropriate for the work.
- iii. “Human actions” as written in the first point identified by Nordquist above may be spoken or non-verbal. This means that CA encompasses how different meanings are interpreted through verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication.
- iv. The emphasis placed on context as revealed in the second point mentioned by Nordquist makes CA appealing to this work.

The paper is termed “exhibition of contempt” rather than “exhibition of impoliteness” or face threatening acts because the researchers believe that it is possible to show contempt for somebody without any overt linguistic indication. In other words, contempt may be expressed linguistically in a way that may not be so glaring to the interlocutor except the interlocutor is attentive and responsive to every nuance of linguistic and non-linguistic usages. Furthermore, we refrain from using impoliteness because the substantial part of the data analysis covers interaction between Tegonni (a typical Yoruba girl and Governor (a highly placed colonial officer). This means that they are from two entirely different cultural backgrounds with different conceptions of what politeness or impoliteness entails. To Tegonni, the **Gov** is a total stranger with whom she has no cultural affinity. More

importantly, Tegonni sees the **Gov** as somebody who has come to oppress the villagers, trample on their culture and tradition, as well as disturb their way of life, hence, the issue of politeness or impoliteness in addressing such a person is totally ruled out more so that it is the **Gov** who orders that Tegonni's brother who dies in the battle engineered by the **Gov** himself should not be buried. The **Gov** on the other hand wants Tegonni to know that she is just a primitive girl who must be made to know her place and that he (**Gov**) does not recognise her or give her any regard unlike Allan (D.O.) who is interested in marrying her. To show the **Gov's** contempt for Tegonni, he tells Allan in one of their interactions that “... you Allan, whom I brought here, and adopted as my son! Marriage! How can you even think of marrying one of them! (p92). On another occasion, he (**Gov**) informs Allan that he opposes the marriage because Tegonni is “a nigger woman” and marrying her will “undermine our authority”. The above is an indication that the data is better analysed by investigating how the characters involved exhibit contempt for each other rather than investigating politeness or impoliteness/face threatening acts.

### 3. Data for the Study

The data for this work are extracted from Femi Osofisan's *Tegonni* (2007), a drama text. The choice of the text is motivated by the fact that the text contains instances of where two interlocutors from different cultural and social background exhibit contempt for each other verbally and non-verbally. The researcher is interested in this phenomenon because the object of research is something that can happen in real life social interaction. Hence, it is important to know how interactants can pass across messages or meanings that border on contempt for each other in a social situation. This knowledge is very essential in order to determine the next step to take when one discovers that one's interactant is passing across messages either verbally or non-verbally which can be interpreted as contempt. One major advantage of using drama text for this research is that the data obtained are close to naturally – occurring speeches which are

highly acknowledged as good sources of data for analysis in Conversation Analysis and other disciplines.

The setting of the play is Oke-Osun, a typical Yoruba town in the colonial period. The plot centres around Allan (District Officer) and Tegonni, a princess of Oke-Osun. Allan, who is the District Officer, wants to marry Tegonni despite being a primitive girl. However, the British Governor of the Colony-Carter Ross opposes the marriage because according to him Tegonni is a nigger woman and marrying her will undermine British authority. The major conflict in the play is caused by the **Gov** who orders that Tegonni's brother who dies in battle should not be buried. This is a great abomination in Oke-Osun and the greatest indignity that the dead could be subjected to. Tegonni, knowing the adverse cultural consequence of not burying the dead defies the **Gov's** order upon which the **Gov** decrees that death is the penalty. However, Allan, the District Officer, is able to prove that the relationship between races should not always be in terms “of war and conflict” and “of order and command” thereby justifying his relationship between him and Tegonni.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The paper identifies different ways of expressing contempt in discourse. Each one identified is followed by a short explanation where necessary in order to clarify the point. This is followed by relevant excerpts from the text. The excerpts, when necessary, is followed by a brief explanation of the social context of their occurrence. It is important to note that the nature of the interaction is such that one excerpt can be used to explain more than one instance of exhibition of contempt in the text. This is because the main face-to-face interaction between the two principal characters that illustrate the subject matter of this research is basically restricted to Tableau 13 which covers pages 58-60.

### 5. Different Ways of Expressing Contempt in our Data

#### A. Deliberate Using of Inappropriate Lexical Items

This refers to a situation whereby a character uses a word that is intentionally meant to demean his/her interactant in the social situation. The utterer may be + High or – High in social status or power relation. The following excerpts from our data illustrates this point.

- a. *(The D.O. shouts with shock and disbelief)*  
 Jones: Tegonni! What the - !  
 What happenedə  
 Gov: This is your womanə  
 Jones: Yes, sir! That's my wife  
 Gov: W h a t h a p p e n e d ,  
 Sergeantə (page 47)

In the above, Jones, a subordinate white man to **Gov** (a senior colonial officer) wishes to marry Tegonni, a primitive girl from Oke-Osun, a typical village in Yorubaland in the Southwestern part of Nigeria. However, **Gov** believes that it is not proper for a white man to marry an ordinary black girl. In the morning of the wedding day, before the commencement of the event, something happened which led to the above dialogue. Given the above context, the use of “woman” by the **Gov** in “This is your womanə” is to show contempt for Tegonni – meaning that he (**Gov**) does not recognise her as Jones's wife. Jones, who realises the contempt in the **Gov's** use of “woman”, replies that “Yes, sir! That's my wife”, thereby using the proper word – “wife”. In other words, **Gov** uses “woman” to show disrespect to Tegonni

- b. Gov. Tegonni ...that's your name, isn't itə  
*(She remains silent, staring at him in defiance)*  
 You won't answerə  
 Tegonni: I've no time for you, white man.  
 Gov: In your situation, I'd be far more polite (page 58)

In the dialogue above, Tegonni uses “white man” to show contempt for her interlocutor. In the context of the play, her interactant is either known as “**Gov**” or “General”. The

above shows that participants in social interaction can exhibit contempt for each other through the lexical items they select to refer to each other. In our opinion, the meaning of “white man” as used in the context above is to indirectly tell **Gov** that he is a total stranger – an unwanted one for that matter. This is a message that is passed across linguistically in a covert manner.

**B. Refusal to Answer Questions at the First Instance**

By this, we mean a situation whereby a person that is –High intentionally refuses to answer questions asked by +High co-interactant the first time it is asked. Below are instances in the text.

a. Gov: (*To Tegonni*) Is it true, what he's reportedə  
 Tegonni (*looking at Jones*) The soldiers, Allan, they shot at us and it hit Faderera.  
 Gov: Answer me!

b. Gov: Tegonni... that's your name isn't itə  
 (*She remains silent, staring at him in defiance*)  
 You won't answerə  
 Tegonni: I've no time for you, white man (page 58)

In the two situations above, Tegonni refuses to answer questions posed to her by the **Gov**, **Gov** asks the questions the second time before being answered rudely by Tegonni. This is a clear exhibition of contempt for **Gov**.

**C. Refusal to Apologise for Something Being Accused of but instead Attempt to Explain it away or Justify the Accusation.**

The data below illustrates the point.

Gov: (*To Tegonni*) Is it true what he's reportedə  
 Tegonni (*looking at Jones*) The soldiers, Allen, they shot at us...  
 Gov: Answer me!  
 Tegonni: Yes, I buried him. He was my brother

Gov: You know of my instructionsə  
 And the penalty for breaking

themə

Tegonni: He was may brother Governor

Gov: You dared, you! You shouted my ordersə

Tegonni: He was my brother, white man (pg. 48)

In the text, **Gov** gives an order that Tegonni's brother who dies in battle should not be buried because he does not support the colonial administration. However, when his corpse is brought to the village, Tegonni acts contrary to the Gov's order and buries her brother.

In the excerpt above, **Gov** accuses Tegonni of having buried her brother against his order. At this stage, it is expected that Tegonni will publicly and respectfully apologise to **Gov**, but she instead defends and justifies her action. In fact, the last turn of Tegonni above which is “He was my brother, white man” addressed to “**Gov**” is a clear case of exhibition of contempt for the white man. She stubbornly and unrepentantly gives the same answer three times. Tegonni believes that a stranger who comes to their village and gives an order which runs contrary to their culture and tradition should be treated with contempt.

**D. Using Various Non-Verbal Means to indicate Contempt for One's Interlocutor**

Another important way of showing contempt in our data is through non-verbal means – contempt expressed through non-spoken words. In our data, the non-verbal contempt takes different forms which are discussed below.

(i) Staring with defiance at one's interactant. This is illustrated with the excerpt below:

Gov: Tegonni ... that's your name, isn't itə  
 (*She remains silent, staring at him with defiance*)  
 You won't answerə  
 Tegonni: I've no time for you, white man (pg. 58)

(ii) Spitting on account of what one's interactant says.

The excerpt below sheds light on the above point

Gov: Enough! Sergeant, take her away and lock her up! With her companions! All those involved.

Tegonni: No! not them too, Gomina! They are innocent, it was me alone who buried the body! They were only leading me to my husband's house, please...!

Gov: Your husband! (*spits*) We'll see above that! Take them out of my sight (pg. 48).

In the above encounter, the **Gov** passes the message of contempt by spitting when Tegonni says "... they were leading me to my husband's house..." in which "my husband" refers to Allan or Jones, a white man. The **Gov** spits because he does not want Jones to marry a primitive African girl. In fact, he believes that it is a disgrace to the British Empire. Hence, he cannot control his disgust and contempt at the mention of "my husband" by Tegonni with reference to Allan. This is why he says "we'll see about that" meaning that Tegonni is only suffering from illusion. In short, the **Gov** "spits" to exhibit contempt for Tegonni for her tall dream of marrying a white man.

### (iii) Ignoring a Handshake

A handshake with somebody, to a reasonable extent, is a universally acknowledged demonstration of warmth and goodwill (though in our own opinion not necessarily a demonstration of intimacy and friendship) between two people. Hence, when somebody offers to shake hands with an interlocutor and he rebuffs or ignores the handshake without any previous history of antagonism or hostility between them, it is meant to show contempt for the person who offers to shake hands. The excerpt below illustrates the point.

Gov: Good! You should see them in battle, my boy! All we do is just sit in the bloody hammocks and drink whiskey! Which reminds me, is there no decent drink here or what?

Jones: Oh pardon me! I'll get something right away! (*calls*) Bayo! Bayo!

Bayo: (*coming in*) Yes! Oh, good

morning, General.

Gov: (*nodding, ignoring his hand*) Morning.

Jones: Bayo – I mean Reverend Campbell – is the Baptist Priest here.

Gov: I remember him, of course. Escaped from slavery in Georgia, didn't he, and came here to start the church... Now they believe they know better than us how to run the place! (pg. 44).

In the above extract, Jones calls Bayo with the intention of telling him to bring something for **Gov** to drink. Bayo, on seeing **Gov**/General greets him and probably offers his hands for a handshake with the **Gov** as evident from the response of **Gov** in the stage direction – he ignores Bayo's hand. Jones, interpreting the action of **Gov** as a demonstration of contempt for Bayo, takes the pains by properly introducing Bayo to **Gov**. The aim of this formal introduction is to tell **Gov** indirectly that Bayo too is a dignitary whose offer of a handshake is not supposed to be ignored. The response of **Gov** to this introduction further shows that he intentionally ignores Bayo's offer of a handshake to show his contempt for him and also to spite him.

(iv) Interrupting one's interlocutor intentionally and repeatedly. This is another non-verbal means used to indicate contempt for one's interlocutor during interaction. In any normal social interaction that involves two interlocutors of unequal social status and power relation, the character of lower status is not expected to intentionally and repeatedly interrupt a character of higher status. Anything contrary to this is an intentional and open exhibition of contempt for the character of higher status. The following excerpts are examples from our data.

a. Gov: In your situation, I'd be for more polite.

Tegonni: Then let's change positions and see.

Gov: You are arrogant and rude, I've been told. But let me warn

you. I'm not at all like the D.O,  
in case you think –

Tegonni: No one will ever make  
the mistake of  
confusing you with  
him, General

Gov: Good! So let's keep a  
proper tongue in –

Tegonni: Or what would  
happenə Can you do  
more than take my  
life, which you are  
already going to doə  
(Pg. 58).

b. Tegonni: Thank you, Mr.  
Governor, but we don't  
need it.

Gov: You don't need your lifeə

Tegonni: I mean, I don't trust you.

Gov: Too bad then. I thought  
you were intelligent –

Tegonni: What Governor. How  
can I be black and be  
intelligentə You are  
slipping.

Gov: But damn it, you  
impudent bitch –

Tegonni: Yes, that's more like it  
(pg. 59).

In the above excerpts, Tegonni, a primitive village girl interrupts **Gov** intentionally and severally in order to demonstrate her contempt for him. We believe that the above case of repeated and intentional interruption from a character of lower status when interacting with a character of higher status occurs when there is a conflict between the two of them and the –High character (Tegonni, in this case) believes that he/she is ready for the worst from the character of +High status. In essence, intentional and repeated case of interruption against a character of +High status in an exhibition of contempt for him/her.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The paper has analyzed various ways through which interlocutors intentionally express contempt for each other during

interaction especially when both of them believe that there is something at stake or that there is certain interest to be protected. **Gov** exhibits contempt for Tegonni by using an inappropriate lexical item (“woman” instead of “wife”) to describe her and also “spits” when she calls Jones her husband. These are ways of pragmatically informing her that she is not welcomed into the white society as a wife to one of them. **Gov** also shows contempt for Bayo non-verbally by refusing to have a handshake with him which may also be a way of telling Bayo (a Baptist Priest) that he is an ordinary colonial subject and that it is beneath his (**Gov**) dignity to shake hands with him (Bayo). Tegonni, on the other hand, severally expresses contempt for **Gov** both verbally and non-verbally. First, instead of referring to him (**Gov**) by one of his titles – **Gov** or General, she calls him “white man” which in that context is not appropriate. Among others, Tegonni equally uses what scholars have termed intrusive interruption to show her contempt for **Gov**. Goldberg (1990) believes that intrusive interruption is a threat to the current speaker's territory by disrupting the process and or content of the ongoing conversation. In other words, there is no single instance of cooperative interruption at all the points in which Tegonni interrupts **Gov**. Murata (1994) avers that cooperative interruptions help the current speaker by coordinating on the process and or content of the ongoing conversation. Cooperative interruption, according to scholars, may normally take the form of agreement, assistance and clarification.

In our data, Tegonni equally treats the **Gov** with contempt by refusing to apologise to him when it is clear that she has expressly disobeyed the Gov's order and the **Gov** is expecting apology. Another notable way through which Tegonni contemptuously treats the **Gov** is through what Chilton (n.d. 180) has described as “evasive responses in question – answer pairs”. This comes under point “B” in our data analysis above. In the play *Tegonni*, one spiteful comment leads to another one in that both interactants are fully aware of the intention of the language (verbal and non-verbal) of the other. This agrees with

the view of Wharton (2009:155) that “utterances do not encode the messages they convey; rather, they are used to provide evidence of the speaker's intentions, which hearers must infer.”

In conclusion, in any social interaction, the aim should be promotion of understanding, harmony, friendliness and intimacy rather than erection of barriers through offensive, contemptuous and malicious comments or contributions during interaction. The best way to achieve this is for interlocutors to carefully weigh their utterances and comments viz-a-viz their position in relation to that of their interactants as well as the context of interaction.

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