



Research Article

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Thematic Choices in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Discourse: *We Should All Be Feminists*

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Abstract

This paper is about the analysis of Chimamanda's discourse on feminism. The paper adopts the systemic functional approach to language, notably the textual meaning so as to find out what are the thematic choices made by the author of the discourse and how this contributes in constructing or deconstructing cultural beliefs about women. The linguistics data are analyzed both on the quantitative and qualitative bases, that is, the paper uses the mixed research method. The discourse is therefore split into analyzable units referred to as clauses to which figures and statistics are meticulously ascribed. The results reveal a predominance of Topical Themes followed by textual ones whereas interpersonal elements are rarely thematized in the discourse. Furthermore, the analysis discloses a significant number of marked Themes. It is through such thematic choices that the author highlights and deconstructs discriminating prejudices by emphasizing positive attitudes that might bring about cultural changes in favor of women's empowerment.

Keywords: *feminist discourse, textual meaning, prejudices, women's empowerment*

1. Introduction

Language is a complex semiotic system of communication not of words and sounds but of meanings. The term discourse is also used to refer to language as a means of communicating human experiences, enacting interpersonal relationship and organizing these coherently by means of thematic choices (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). To achieve these functions discourse must be "the level of language beyond the sentence or language in use", to borrow Rodriguez-Vergara's (2018) terms. Actually, people do not use discourse or language unpurposefully. According to Carvalho (2018) discourse plays a fundamental role in the production and transformation of social representation of realities. Political, religious or feminist discourses are not trivial; they are aimed at constructing or deconstructing some actualities or facts. Koussouhon and Dossoumou (2015) emphasize this function and contend that discourse is a network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meanings. These meanings need to be understood by means of appropriate scientific approach, for they can reveal important facts about human experiences and interpersonal attitudes.

This paper adopts the aforementioned approach and states that Chimamanda's discourse is a means to deconstruct some debasing representation of femininity. There is therefore a paramount

compulsion to construct a new image of the Nigerian African women who represent the image of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa owing to discrimination based on prejudices of all kinds (Uzodike & Onapajo, 2013). Thus, the paper analyses Chimamanda's discourse on feminism to decode the implications conveyed in the text, from a systemic functional perspective. The pertinence of this analytical approach has been investigated by many researchers who have come up with thought-provoking findings about the analyzed materials. Amoussou and Djimet (2020) have analyzed Chimamanda and Atta's works point by point and have maintained that the two authors genuinely craft in their literary writings the patriarchal African society which debases the female gender through stifling cultural practices by portraying active, bold, courageous and assertive female characters who defiantly strive to dismantle patriarchal ideas that keep women in inferior positions. Likewise, working on Joe Biden's discourse on the anniversary of the Capitol Attack (January 6th, 2022), Djimet (2022) has concluded that Biden used language to construct a favorable reality for his party.

This work embraces the above analytical principles to decipher Chimamanda's note on Nigerian women's status. The paper focuses on the grammar of textual meaning or Theme to identify the thematic choices made by the author of the essay so as to grasp why such or such meanings are prioritized.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 *The Grammar of Textual Meaning: Theme*

The systemic functional approach to language defines discourse as a representation of human experiences, as interactive exchange involving speaker or writer and audience, and as message having a distinct rank assigned to each part of it (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The theory of textual meaning or Theme is about language as message; it is the enabling metafunction in that "it is the level of organization of the clause which enables the clause to be packaged in ways which make it effective given its purpose and its context" (Egins, 1999: 274). Put another way, in English textual meaning is realized through the ordering of constituents of the clause or the message structure. Thus, the system of Theme is carried out through a configuration in which the message is divided into two parts: Theme (the first part of the message) and Rheme (the last part of the message). Theme is defined by Halliday (1985) as the constituent which officiates as the starting point of the message or what the clause is going to be about; whereas Rheme is the element of the clause in which the Theme is actualized.

Egins (1994) identifies three kinds of Themes in clause as message:

- ✓ A Topical Theme is the constituent of the clause which has a Transitivity function such as actor, behavior, senser, carrier, circumstantial elements (place, time, etc.);
- ✓ An Interpersonal Theme is the component of the message to which a Mood value can be assigned: finite (in interrogative mood) and adjuncts (vocative, mood, comment, polarity);
- ✓ A Textual Theme is the part of the clause which has a cohesive role such as Continuity Adjuncts and Conjunctive Adjuncts.

Furthermore, Egins (1994) adds another level of Theme definition referred to as Theme Markedness and Unmarkedness which must be taken into account in the analysis of discourse as message. An unmarked Theme is defined by Egins (1994) as a "typical" or "usual" Theme while a marked Theme means simply "atypical" or "unusual". An unmarked Theme is a Theme which coincides with the Mood elements such as Subject, Finite, Predicator, WH elements; whereas a marked Theme is a component of the clause which corresponds to any other constituents from the Mood system, the usual type of marked Theme being circumstantial elements.

3. Methods

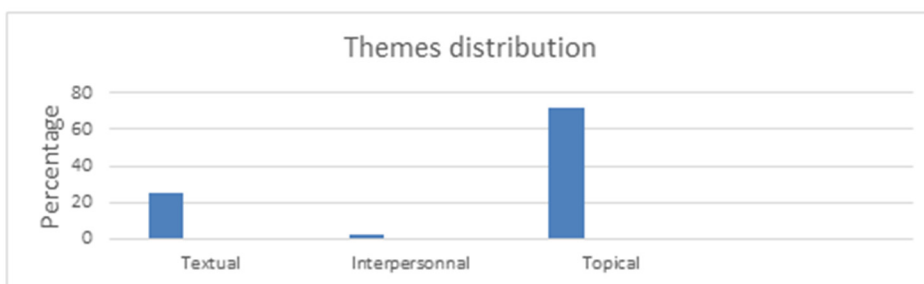
The validity of an analysis of a text or a discourse does not only depend on the applied linguistic theory but also on the methods used for the analysis (Tatyana and Huub, 2014). Those must be intelligible, that is, the process of assembling, investigating and clarifying the data is to be identified. Here, the methods used for the analysis are both deductive and inductive. Deductive because it is based on the quantitative research method, and inductive because it also uses the qualitative research approach. Actually, this paper adopts the mixed research methods advocated by Creswell (2015) and American Psychological Association (2020). The discourse is split into units referred to as clauses to which figures have been meticulously ascribed so as to have the quantitative occurrence of Themes. Then these are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively for the interpretation of the text.

4. Results

Table 1 recapitulates the occurrence of Theme types in the discourse

Table 1: Theme types distribution

Themes	Textual	Interpersonal	Topical
Numbers	3, 9, 14, 24, 25, 26, 32, 33, 40, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 56, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 71, 84, 85, 87, 90, 93, 94, 94, 95, 101, 105, 106, 107, 109, 111, 113, 114, 115, 116, 118, 124, 133, 135, 140, 142, 143, 144, 145, 148, 152, 153, 154, 159, 161, 163, 169, 172, 180, 183, 184, 185, 187, 190, 195, 198, 200, 201, 205, 206, 207, 214, 216, 219, 223, 224, 225, 230, 232, 235, 236, 237, 238, 244, 245, 246, 248, 251, 253, 258, 260, 261, 264, 266, 273, 274, 276, 284, 287, 289, 290, 292, 296, 297, 298, 301, 304, 306, 310, 311, 317, 319, 320, 322, 331, 334, 338, 342, 342, 343, 344, 345, 346, 349, 350, 356, 358, 361, 364, 367, 368, 269, 372, 375, 379, 383, 385, 388, 391, 398, 401, 404, 405, 407, 451, 453, 458, 460, 462, 465, 466, 468, 470, 471, 474, 475, 477, 479, 581, 485, 486, 492, 499, 502,, 503, 504, 507, 509, 512, 514, 515, 518, 522, 526, 527, 529, 530, 531, 532, 533, 536, 540, 541, 551, 553, 554, 557, 561, 566, 567, 570, 577, 582, 584, 585, 591, 592, 593, 594, 596, 597, 602, 603, 604, 607, 608, 620, 622, 625, 626, 633, 634, 637, 639, 640, 641, 643, 644, 645, 646, , 650, 653, 654, 660, 661, 662, 665, 667, 673, 675, 680, 682, 686, 685, 688, 689, 691, 692, 694, 696, 704, 705, 706, 707, 708, 709, 713, 716, 717, 718, 722, 724, 732, 733, 735, 742	17, 70, 92, 127, 162, 203, 204, 239, 288, 312, 342, 355, 357, 376, 478, 480, 505, 522, 562, 636, 672, 642, 647, 720,	1 to 744
Total	260 (25,30%)	25(02,40%)	744(72,30%)



Graph 1: Theme types representation

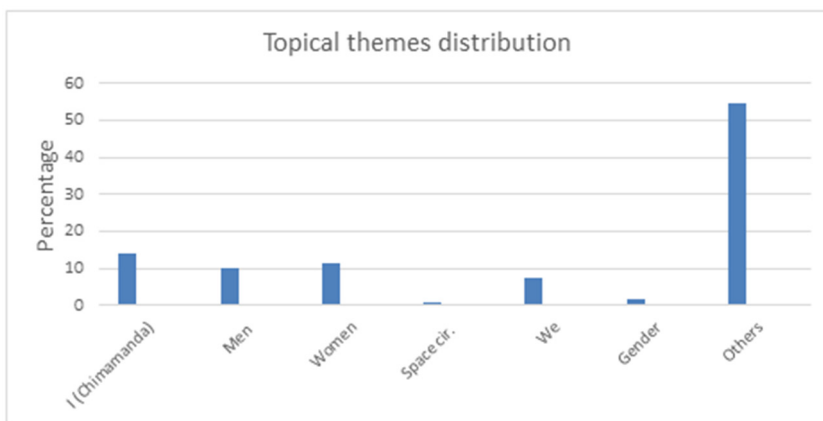
Table 1 and Graph 1 show a predominance of topical Themes, for each clause must have a topical Theme; otherwise it is not an analyzable unit. Topical Themes occur 774 times, corresponding to

72.30% whereas textual ones are used 260 times, representing 25.30%. As for interpersonal Themes, they occur rarely, that is, 25 times (2.40%). This implies that the discourse puts an accent on actors, agents, sayers, tokens, behaviors, sensers, carriers, etc. whose actions, behaviors, attitudes and utterances are determining factors for the understanding of the message of the discourse. The text contains a lot of cohesive elements of enhancement and extension which help construct feminist reasoning based convincing facts.

Table 2 and Graph 2 highlight the distribution of topical Themes among actors or participants.

Table 2: distribution of Themes among participants

Themes	I (Chimamanda)	Men (okoloma, Louis, etc)	Women (Nigerians, Americans, etc)	Space cir. (Nigeria, America, etc.)	we (all people)	Gender	Others
Numbers	3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, 28, 46, 50, 51, 57, 63, 64, 94, 95, 108, 119, 125, 132, 146, 149, 158, 203, 204, 214, 227, 228, 229, 230, 241, 244, 245, 247, 248, 254, 278, 309, 319, 361, 362, 364, 365, 368, 369, 371, 377, 381, 389, 406, 452, 454, 456, 462, 497, 521, 523, 525, 534, 544, 546, 555, 556, 557, 559, 561, 562, 563, 564, 565, 566, 567, 568, 569, 570, 578, 582, 583, 584, 585, 586, 597, 588, 589, 590, 591, 592, 593, 595, 632, 693, 704, 705, 709, 710, 711, 712, 713, 719, 725,	1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 17, 34, 35, 36, 37, 41, 42, 61, 86, 97, 100, 103, 106, 107, 113, 115, 118, 122, 139, 144, 147, 153, 155, 160, 167, 168, 173, 183, 184, 190, 196, 200, 208, 212, 216, 222, 237, 256, 257, 262, 266, 313, 334, 336, 363, 367, 405, 407, 452, 468, 483, 534, 594, 630, 634, 635, 640, 641, 644, 645, 649, 659, 660, 664, 676, 689, 703, 720, 738, 739,	47, 84, 85, 86, 90, 98, 99, 213, 215, 255, 259, 263, 273, 276, 279, 280, 282, 286, 287, 291, 304, 310, 311, 312, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 378, 379, 380, 382, 383, 390, 391, 393, 397, 407, 458, 465, 478, 485, 492, 493, 494, 495, 496, 498, 499, 500, 501, 502, 504, 505, 506, 507, 522, 526, 527, 539, 540, 541, 547, 549, 552, 577, 623, 653, 682, 684, 686, 687, 701, 707, 728, 729, 730, 731, 732, 733, 734, 736	143, 182, 188, 211, 317, 335, 700	13, 111, 123, 164, 165, 180, 187, 197, 299, 302, 303, 324, 325, 326, 328, 329, 331, 332, 338, 343, 346, 349, 350, 351, 352, 376, 399, 400, 403, 451, 459, 461, 464, 466, 467, 470, 472, 473, 474, 482, 487, 490, 512, 533, 573, 574, 602, 655, 657, 715, 718, 737, 742, 743, 744	48, 49, 59, 318, 508, 600 601, 609, 625, 626, 650, 660,	... Any remaining
Total	106(14,20%)	75(10%)	83(11,20%)	7(1%)	55(7,40%)	12(1,60%)	406(54,60%)



Graph 2: Themes representation by participant

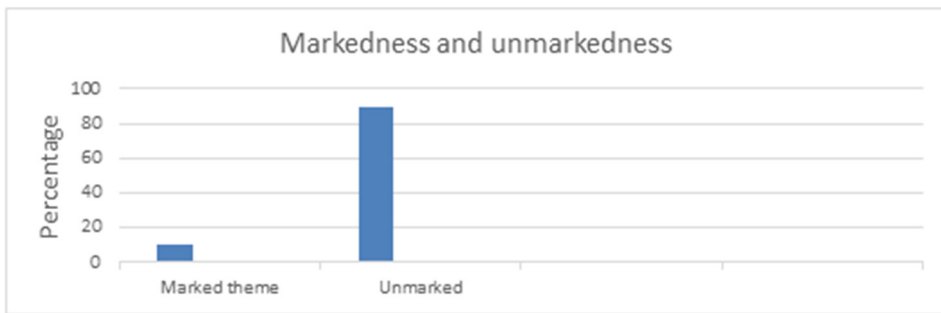
As it is represented through table 2 and Graph 2, *Chimamanda* (thematized 106 times, that is, 14.20%) is more used in topical position than *women* and *men*, which occur 83 times (11.20%) and 75 times

(10%), respectively. *We* (the Nigerian people or Africans) is used 7 times (1%) as topical Theme. This signifies that the message of the discourse is basically built around the experiences and attitudes of women (including Chimamanda the author), men and the Nigerian people or Africans in general. The cultural construction of femininity takes the form of attitudes, beliefs and actions which prevent women from daring to change the accepted debasing norms. Some circumstances of place and time are also emphasized in clauses (143, 182, 188, 211, 317, 335, 700). These are important elements that clarify the message by situating it in a particular context.

Table 3 and Graph 3 summarize the distribution of marked and unmarked Themes in the discourse under consideration.

Table 3: marked and unmarked Themes occurrence

Topical theme	Marked	Unmarked
Numbers	7, 9, 14, 20, 23, 27, 29, 30, 56, 67, 81, 82, 96, 104, 114, 130, 134, 137, 140, 143, 145, 174, 176, 178, 182, 185, 188, 192, 199, 211, 217, 226, 232, 265, 277, 281, 288, 295, 307, 317, 327, 335, 339, 340, 341, 342, 344, 345, 358, 359, 360, 386, 394, 404, 453, 455, 460, 462, 476, 510, 517, 528, 530, 532, 558, 560, 575, 628, 648, 667, 669, 670, 677, 696, 700	Any numbers remaining
Total	75(10,10%)	669(89,90%)



Graph 3: marked and unmarked Themes representation

Table 3 and Graph 3 reveal that a significant number of circumstances are topicalized rather than the usual topical elements which are actors, agents, finites, sensors, behavers, carriers, etc. This means two things. First, the message is written for a particular audience with a lot of preparedness and style; second, the highlighted circumstances are aimed at elucidating the circumstances of time and place at which the experiences and attitudes are described and explained. The message is therefore about things that happen in Nigeria and America at a given period, now or in times past, as it will be explicated in the section devoted to the interpretation of the findings.

5. Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings

The process of interpretation must be preceded by a thorough description of linguistic items. This has shown the quantitative occurrence of each Theme type (Topical Themes, interpersonal Themes, and textual Themes). Indeed, the analysis reveals an abundant use of topical Themes in the discourse under consideration, that is, Chimamanda’s discourse on feminism. Seventy two point thirty percent (72.30%) of the Themes are topical, meaning that some actions, feelings, attitudes, behaviors and utterances are ascribed to people (women, men and society). These have enabled the author to emphasize her own experiences as a woman, a school girl or a daughter in patriarchal Igbo society in

Nigeria, in such clauses as *so I decided to call myself a happy feminist; anyway, since feminism was unaffrican; the monitor had to be a boy; she assumed it was obvious; she believed that whatever money I had ultimately came from Loui because Louis is a man* (46, 59, 97, 99, 160, 161, 162, 163). These are actually some of the beliefs or prejudices that prevent women from fulfilling themselves. These happenings are not only developed and perpetuated in Africa, but they are also part of the realities undergone by American women who are supposed to be in a country of freedom and democracy. This means that feminism is somehow a universal struggle against injustice based on gender. Moreover, the distribution of topical Themes discloses that the main actors or agents of the inequality are *men* which occur 75 times (10%) in thematic position followed by women (Nigerian or American women) who are basically victims of discrimination and sometimes participants to that discrimination. *Chimamanda* is thematized 106 times (14.20%), implying that she is at the center of a message aimed at deconstructing the prejudices experienced by women: *and I got the highest score on the test; I decided to give him a tip; and I gave it to the man; I want to tell them that I am just as human as a man, just as worthy of acknowledgement; because I believe deeply in the ability of human being to remake themselves for the better* (95, 149, 152, 229, 230, 245).

The topicalized circumstances (marked Themes) have contributed in elucidating the context of the message in terms of time and place in such clauses as: *in 2003, I wrote a novel called Purple Hibiscus...; Now here's a story from my childhood; In the recent US election...; Not long ago, I worked...;* (30, 81, 178, 199). Time and place are therefore important factors that need to be taken into account in the struggle against women's discrimination. As the contexts change, Africans need to adapt their cultural beliefs; for example nowadays the most important thing is not physical capacity but intellectual abilities.

Textual elements of enhancement and extension have ensured a coherent development of facts or happenings that cause women to be considered as inferior than men in clauses such as: *if we do something over and over again, it becomes normal; if we see the same thing over and over again, it becomes normal; if only boys are made class monitors...the monitor has to be a boy; if we keep seeing only men as heads of corporation, it starts to seem natural...; if* (111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 190, 198, 335, 357). Finally, Interpersonal Themes, used 25 times, representing 2.40%, have highlighted the attitudinal connotation of the discourse. Actually, these have insisted on specific judgements as regards probability and various other assessments through terms such as *ultimately, sometimes, perhaps, actually* in clauses (162, 232, 505, 522).

6. Conclusion

The analysis of Chimamanda's discourse on feminism has been carried out from a systemic functional perspective, notably on the basis of the grammar of textual meaning: Theme. The task has consisted in identifying the various Themes used by the Nigerian female writer, so as to find out the feminist preoccupations around which the message is built. The analysis uncovers an important occurrence of topical Themes followed by textual and interpersonal ones. The use of topical Themes have centered the author's thoughts about actors, sensors, agents, carriers, sayers, and behaviors whose actions, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, utterances impact women's experiences as the group which faces discrimination of all kinds. Put another way, it is the society which constructs habits that become culture. *Chimamanda* appears in thematic position in order to deconstruct the prejudices that are perpetuated in the Nigerian or the Igbo society. As regards textual Themes, they express enhancement and extension which participate in this coherent construction of a new and different way of rethinking women's role or image. The text also conveys clear judgements about what should or should not be through interpersonal Themes whereas Theme markedness situates the discourse in its right context, taking into account the changing circumstances that must determine feminist actions and ideas. These actions and ideas aimed at constructing a fairer society in terms of women's right or empowerment must be the concern of the whole society. Thus, everybody must be feminist if women's empowerment is to become a reality

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