THE IMPACT OF WOMEN’S CONVERSATIONAL STYLE ON IDEOLOGICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL STABILITY IN TONI MORRISON’S SULA

BY

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled "The impact of women's conversational style on ideological and socio-cultural stability in Toni Morrison's Sula" examines how women's talk-style influences both ideological and socio-cultural stability in the text. The difference approach to language and gender studies which proposes that women's language is polite, cooperative and supportive of their interlocutors as well as socially functional in maintaining unity and solidarity amongst women as a social group is used as a major theoretical framework for the study while conversational analysis is used as analytical tool to examine women's talk-style in order to determine whether these propositions abound or not and their implications on socio-cultural feminist ideological preoccupation and stability. The paper reveals that each woman has her individual talk-style which translates to her individual feminist ideology and which has either a positive or a negative impact on feminist ideological and socio-cultural stability amongst women groups. The paper further reveals that women's talk-styles that maintain socio-cultural feminist ideology are considered as having positive impacts on socio-cultural stability and are therefore celebrated while those that disrupt socio-cultural stability are considered as having negative impacts and are therefore rejected. The paper concludes that Toni Morrison in Sula has been able to use the black female voice to stabilize socio-culturally approved ways for women in African-American society while at the same time being intolerant to deviant feminist ideologies that might disrupt their own feminist socio-cultural stability.

INTRODUCTION

Studies in gender issues has firmly established the fundamental role of linguistic processes and strategies in the creation, negotiation and establishment of gendered lives and identities but has not shown specifically how language translates to gender ideology. This paper is interested in examining how language in social context realized through conversations express ideology particularly how the conversational style of women in Sula marks and maintains socio-cultural feminist
ideology and stability.

The difference approach to language and gender proposes that all female talk-style is cooperative, thereby aiding good social relationship and stability (Coates, 1993, p. 2). This approach as a sociolinguistic approach allows researchers to show the strengths of linguistic strategies characteristic of women and to celebrate women's ways of talking (Coates, 1998, p. 413). The difference approach is sometimes called the two-culture model or the sub-cultural approach since it sees the differences between women's and men's linguistic usages as arising from the different sub-cultures into which women and men are socialized, implying that women are taught to use language in a different way from men.

West and Zimmerman (1977, p. 522) state that from birth, boys and girls are treated differently, talked to differently and talk differently as a result. Tannen (1998, p. 12) also states that "boys and girls grow up in different communicative worlds even if they grow up in the same house." Troemel-Ploetz (1998, p. 447) maintains that the majority of relationships between men and women in society are fundamentally asymmetrical to the advantage of men, thereby exposing conversational politics versus power politics of male-female relationships, as "men talk and women listen." Tannen (1990) in her You just don't understand: women and men in conversation supports the difference theory as opposed to the dominance theory of linguistic variability.

As a result, women's language is termed "powerless language." The difference approach acknowledges women's language in the very way the stereotypes suggest, but reinterprets it in a more positive light as an authentic manifestation of a female culture (Cameron, 1990, p. 41). The difference approach sees women's prime pattern of interaction as cooperative rather than competitive. It sees women's language as a powerful sign for mutual support, solidarity, unity and stability. Hence, women stress the value to society of stereotyped female qualities such as gentleness, caring for others etc. as sensitivity and not subservience which has in turn led to a re-evaluation of stereotyped male qualities such as aggression, competitiveness etc as not always socially functional.

Consequently, powerless language approaches the ideal form of cooperative approaches, appraises the relative merits of cooperation as opposed to competition in conversation. The difference approach proposes that women in conversation with other women typically adopt a cooperative mode: they add to rather than demolish other speakers' contributions, they are supportive of other people's ideas and tend not to interrupt one another. This cooperative style in women's conversation has been recognized as a valuable conversational strategy in promoting wide ranging
discussion and ideologies and in maintaining good social relationships and negotiating conflict. But the question remains: why is there still linguistic variability amongst women and what is the implication of this on the difference approach?

**DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF WOMEN’S CONVERSATIONAL STYLE IN SULA**

Conversational analysis is used here to analyze women's talk-style in the text to explore if there is linguistic variability amongst the female characters and the implications.

**Conversation 1**

Eva: "When you gone to get married you need to have some babies. It will settle you." [A]
Sula: "I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself".
[B]
Eva: "Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floating around without no man".
Sula: "You did"
Eva: "Not by choice"
Sula: "Mamma did"
Eva: "Not by choice, I said. It ain't right (Sula, p. 92)

The conversation above is between two female interlocutors (a grandmother, Eva and her daughter, Sula). Both take their turns at a Transition Relevant Place (TRP). The first pair [A, B] is a question and answer response devoid of insertion sequence and is regarded as a preferred option on the scale of preference. Eva initiates the conversation with a question by desiring to know when Sula would get married. Sula’s response to the question is a dispreferred option since it is a negative and unexpected response to the idea discussed. Her talk-style therefore disconnects her from other women in the society as they conceive of her talk-style as being strange and non-cooperative. The field of discourse between the two interlocutors is vital to every woman in the text, yet Sula’s talk-style does not support their views. She employs face threatening acts as she refuses to agree with and accept socio-cultural values for women in her society. Thus, she disintegrates from the socio-cultural group both physically and ideologically. The omniscient narrator’s comments reveal that Sula becomes pariah and is considered by other women as “the devil in their midst” (p. 118). There is therefore both linguistic and ideological variability between Sula and other women which amounts to socio-cultural instability. Consequently,
this conversation shows that the women in the text are not cooperative and supportive of other interlocutors as proposed by the difference approach, that there are miscommunications amongst women due to other sociological factors like level of education and exposure, age, social class etc. Elizabeth Aries (1997, p. 92) out rightly rejects the tendency to attribute a person’s behaviour to some aspects of that person (e.g. gender) without considering the social context. She calls this tendency Fundamental Attribution Error.

**Conversation 2**

Nel:  "I always understood how you could take a man. Now I, understand why you can't keep none."
Sula:  "Is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?"
Nel:  "They worth keeping, Sula."
Sula:  "They ain't worth more than me. And besides, I never loved any man because he was worth it. Worth didn't have nothing to do with it."
Nel:  "What did?"
Sula:  "My mind did. That's all." (Sula, p.145)

Conversation 2 is between two women who grew up together from childhood to adulthood. They take their different turns at TRP. The conversation implies that Nel accepts marriage and motherhood while Sula rejects this socio-cultural role for women. Nel loves men and cohabits with them while Sula does not. Sula who does not believe that men are worth keeping separates other women's marriages by sleeping with the men, to mock their wives.

The authorial comment says, "the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Sula was trying them out, and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow" (Sula, p 115). Here, Sula’s talk-style is a dispreferred option since it is devoid of politeness, cooperation and does not support other female interlocutors’ ideas and feelings. This conversational difference between the two women from the same socio-cultural background entails ideological and socio-cultural instability in terms of feminist preoccupation.

**Conversation 3**

Nel:  "I work."
Sula:  "Yes of course you do."
Work's good for you, Nellie. It don't do nothing for me."
(Sula, p. 142)

Conversation 3 expresses variant views of two women concerning career and economic empowerment. Nel's view is a preferred option as she works to earn a living while Sula's view is a dispreferred option as she does not see the essence of working to earn a living. There is therefore, no cooperation between the two speakers on the subject discussed. This confirms Aries claim that, "people of the same-sex have a range of values, attributes and styles, not one style. The variability that exists within members of the same-sex gets overshadowed by a focus on group difference." This paper therefore opines that the variability that exists amongst individual women of the same-sex invariably leads to diversity and instability in socio-cultural feminist ideology

Conversation 4

Nel:  "We were friends."
Sula:  "Oh, yes. Good friends" [Sula said]
Nel:  "And you didn't love me enough to leave him alone.
      To let him love me. You had to take him away."
Sula:  "What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him
      If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it."

Sula's response is a dispreferred option and a negative face presentation. It signifies the absence of sisterhood, friendship, politeness, and cooperation in the speaker as she displays lack of empathy for her fellow woman who suffers emotionally and psychologically due to abandonment by her husband which was caused by a supposed friend. There is therefore lack of unity and solidarity between the interlocutors as they fail to support each other's feelings. This leads to differences and miscommunication in talk-style and socio-cultural ideology. This paper therefore supports Coates (1993, p. 196) assertion that, "there is more variation between individual women than between women as a group and men as a group." This variability amongst women as a social group has also made feminist ideology what Chesler calls isolationist or multiculturalists theory and not a Universalist theory (2006, p. 3).
Conversation 5

Sula: "How you know?" Sula asked
Nel: "Know what?"
    [Nel still wouldn't look at her]
Sula: "About who was good. How you know it was you?"
Nel: "What you mean?"
Sula: "I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (Sula, p. 146)

Here, Sula's blunt and impolite question, line 1, portrays a negative face presentation and a dispreferred option which is not in line with the difference approach proposition that all women's talk-style is polite, cooperative and supportive of their interlocutors but is a direct opposite of what the theory proposes. Line 3 is a side sequence which is also called authorial comment and shows a strain in relationship between the interlocutors. Lines 2,3,4 and 5 are insertion sequences which delay the expected answer to the question in line 1. However, at the end of the discussion the expected answer is denied since there is no unity and solidarity between the interlocutors.

Conversation 6

Nel: "You mean you didn't even love him?
   It wasn't even loving him?"
   ". . .but what about me? What about me?
   Why didn't you think about me?
   Didn't I count? I never hurt you.
   What did you take him for if you didn't love him
   and why didn't you think about me? And then I was good to you,
   Sula why don't that matter?"
Sula: "It matters, Nel, but only to you. Not to anybody else.
   Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody Risky.
   You don't get nothing for it" (Sula, p. 145)

Sula's interactional style portrays her as a self-centred and an unloving individual. Her individuality separates her from other women in her society and even from Nel, her childhood friend. Sula complains, "...now Nel was one of them Now Nel belonged to the town and all it ways" (p. 120). Thus, Sula is different from other women due to her impolite and non-cooperative talk-style which separates her from them. This paper therefore supports Aries conclusions that linguistic
variability abounds in same-sex talk-style due to other social factors. This paper therefore asserts that this linguistic variability amongst women groups also leads to diversity in world-wide feminist ideology.

**LANGUAGE USE AND NARRATIVE STYLE**

The author’s use of language is bifurcated. Toni Morrison employs both the Standard English and Ebonics the African-American Vernacular English in the text. The Standard English is used by the omniscient narrator while Ebonics is spoken by the female characters, not just for character delineation but also symbolic for the purpose of social integration and solidarity for socio-cultural promotion, preservation and stability. Ebonics as a language is used for cultural distinction and identity as it distinguishes the blacks from the whites (Ushie, 2009, p. 189). As a result, the writer’s use of the language is highly symbolic as she uses the Black American language to communicate Black feminist ideology. Ebonics as a language is distinctive as it is different from the Standard English on most levels of linguistic analysis. Its peculiarities abound phonologically, morphologically, syntactically as a resistance against white linguistic domination.

Phonologically, there is reduction of the initial, medial and final word consonants which leads to loss of sounds. This is intended to capture the orality of the speakerly text or spoken soul (Other names for Ebonics) as if the speakers were physically speaking to the reader. Hence, there is the preponderant use of contractions which affects the pronunciation of words. The word *floating* in conversation 1 line 5 is an example of a word with final consonant reduction. Words with this form of reductions are called Apocope. Words with medial consonant reductions are called syncope, examples are found in conversation 1 lines 5 and 10, ain’t; conversation 2 line 3, I’m. Words with initial consonant reductions which are called Apheresis were not found in the data collected.

Syntactically, one of the peculiarities of Ebonics is in the use of double negatives. Few examples are present in the data collected. They are; *Ain’t no woman* conversation 1 line 5; *without no man* conversation 1 line 6; *worth didn’t have nothing to do with it* conversation 2 line 7 and 8; *Why you can’t keep non* conversation 2 line 2; *it don’t do nothing for me* conversation 3 line 3; *you don’t get nothing for it* conversation 6 line 11. There is also the absence of certain auxiliary verbs like to be, to do and to have verbs. Examples are given below:

*How you know?* Conversation 5 line 1  
*What you mean?* Conversation 5 line 5  
*How you know it was you?* Conversation 5 line 4
They worth keeping, Sula Conversation 2 line 5
What you mean hike him away? Conversation 4 line 5

The lack of concord in tense and aspect; person and number is also characteristic of Ebonics as a language. Few examples are identified in the data. They include:

Sula, why don't that matter Conversation 6 line 8
It don't do,, Conversation 3 line 3

There is also the preponderant use of ain't as a verb with third person pronouns Examples: They ain't Conversation 2 line 6; It ain't Conversation 1 line 10.

The above features identified in the conversations and more are the peculiarities of Ebonics as the language of Black American writers in America. Ebonics is regarded as a language despite its lack of orthography and inconsistencies in phonological habits and syntactic structures: Ebonics has been given different derogatory names like Mutant English, Fractured English, Broken English. Slanguage Ghettoese and Mumbo-jumbo (Rickford & Rickford, 2000, p. 195).

However, Ebonics is not inferior to any other variety of the English language since it is grammatically acceptable and intelligible in its socio-cultural environment. Thus, Toni Morrison in Sula makes use of Ebonics to portray her linguistic identity as well as her socio-cultural feminist ideology.

The author's narrative style is also bifurcated. Morrison presents two ideologically and fundamentally opposed heroines. Morrison makes use of binary oppositions to develop the story line. There are various levels of opposition that run through the entire text. Namely:

1. Textual - Protagonist (Nel) Vs Antagonist (Sula)
2. Ideological - Traditionalism Vs Modernism
3. Racial - Black Vs White
4. Social-cultural - Communalism Vs Individualism

The narrative style portrays a rejection of white feminist ideology and acceptance of black feminist ideology as the major thematic focus of the text. Nel as the protagonist accepts the traditionalisms of her black society whereas Sula the antagonist is considered Strange white and modern. The maintenance of black feminist socio-cultural values enhances socio-cultural stability of the community while a rejection of them disrupts that stability. However, the communality of other women in the community supersedes Sula's individuality; she becomes pariah, falls sick, and is
CONCLUSION

The conversational analysis in the text *Sula* shows that the interlocutors displayed knowledge of the systems involved in conversation in the use of turns, turn-taking, side sequence, insertion sequence and adjacency pair. The conversational analysis of all-female language shows that each individual woman has a variety of styles that are not similar which confutes the difference approach proposition that women’s conversational style is always polite, cooperative and supportive of their interlocutors. The study therefore concludes that linguistic variability abounds in all-women’s talk-style and directly translates to diverse feminist ideologies; that gender, alongside other sociological factors such as culture, religion, level of education and exposure, age, sexual orientation on linguistic behaviour influence gender identity and ideology. The paper therefore recommends a discursive approach to gender issues due to the consideration that language as an embodiment of ideology is not merely a quality of individuals but entails social and communal expectation that defines the meaning of gender ideology that are systematically taught to individuals in their communities. Hence, no individual woman’s language or talk-style can supersede that of the community or social group, consequently cultural relativism becomes paramount in the determination of gender ideology.
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