

## Discourse Manifestations of Power in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*

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**Abstract:** This research examines the concept of power in discourse and its manifestations in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time*, engaging Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework. The research findings reveal that power in discourse in the novel is manifested linguistically as grammatical, syntactical, and lexical properties such as metaphor, repetitions, rhetorical questions, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs that indicate attitude in asymmetric relationships. Hence, these linguistic markers of power reflect the sub-themes of power as manipulation, imposition, exploitation, impoliteness, and the derogatory labeling of disabled characters by the able-bodied ones. The study demonstrates that pragmatic concepts are pivotal in the literary explorations of prose works and contribute meaningfully to a story's plot, characterization, and thematic analysis of a text.

**Keywords:** Discourse, Power Relations, Measuring Time, Critical Discourse Analysis.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critical Discourse Analysis, (henceforth, CDA) is a multi-disciplinary approach, which appraises multifarious manifestations of unequal power relations, power abuse, manipulation, and control in political, social, cultural, legal, and other varied discourse contexts of interactions. Wodak & Meyer (2001, p.16); Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999, p.17) note that CDA should not be viewed as a single method but as an approach that utilizes various methodologies at different levels. The modern evolution of CDA, as we know it today, stems from a small symposium of notable scholars, Teun Van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo Van Leeuwen, and Ruth Wodak at Amsterdam, in 1991. Before this time, CDA was otherwise known as Critical Linguistics (CL) and had existed but was revisited by a broader representation of scholars (Wodak & Meyer 2001, p. 6; Blommaert & Bulcaen 2000, p.447). Linguistic scholars have delved into the multifaceted angles of CDA. For instance, Reisigl & Wodak (2017), explore the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to CDA, they reveal that language is an instrument of gaining and retaining power. They view power as directly linked to the asymmetric association that exists among people of varied social strata and social groups (Reisigl & Wodak 2017, p.89). On the other hand, Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), focus on the dimension of CDA that examines the multimodal and visual properties of discourse. Fairclough (1989;1992a) analyses CDA using text

description, discursive practice and social analysis, which shall be used in this research.

Furthermore, CDA has largely been utilized in the analysis of both spoken and written discourse and covers broad areas of human interaction. A handful of scholars have deployed CDA in doing literary analysis. Take for instance, Yeibo and Alabrabra (2011); Kiren and Awan (2017); Akpome (2018); Awolaja (2019); Ardiyansyah, *et al.*, (2020); Ebim (2021). Kiren and Awan (2017); Ardiyansyah *et al.*, (2020) focus on the critical analysis of gender discourse in novels. Kiren and Awan (2017) examine feminism in the prose, *Pride and Prejudice*, discussing female education and the position of women in British society as explored in the novel. They reveal that women are treated as demigods and that this view about women is perhaps, a reflection of the author, Jane Austen's support of feminism, free will, and independence for women. On the other hand, Ardiyansyah, *et al.*, (2020) appraise the representation of men and fathers in the novel, *Bersama Bapak* (Saturday Together with Father) by Adhitaya Mulya. The study finds that the image of a father figure serves to regulate the protection of a family and thus, there is an echo of patriarchal ideology, which portrays men as power wielders, while representing women and children as the controlled.

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Other studies have emphasized the semantic and stylistic features of selected African prose. Ebim (2021) examines aspects of narrative processes through linguistic networks in the novel, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, applying Ruth Wodak's CDA and considering that linguistic processes may be manifested through semantic, referential, ideational, and contextual structures. The study argues that shades of meaning are communicated via the perspective of African narration and further play the roles of clarifying, exemplifying, underscoring, and influencing communication. Ebim believes that the stories integrated into Achebe's novel enhanced the retelling of the African story from a historical linguistic focal point.

More related studies have delved into the area of characterization in the novel, *Measuring Time*. Akpome (2018) analyses child and youth protagonists, focusing on ways in which the character development in the story reflects contemporary socio-political changes in Nigeria. Awolaja (2019) did a pragma-stylistics analysis of the novel, *Measuring Time* by Helon Habilla, concentrating on the foregrounding of lexical and pragmatic aspects, such as repetition and parallelism in fifteen selected utterances, which aided in situating characters, their actions and their psychological state.

The present study is different from the extant studies thus reviewed as it focuses on the concept of power in Habila's *Measuring Time*. The objectives of the study are to:

- a) Identify the grammatical, lexical, syntactical or generally, the linguistic elements of power relations in the novel;
- b) Account for how they are thematically manifested in the text;
- c) Establish that pragmatic concepts, such as the analysis of power in discourse are germane to the plot development, characterization and the themes of the novel.

## 2. Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis of Norman while, Fairclough (1989; 1992a; 1995; 2001 and 2013) examines the relationship between language use and power manifestations in discourse as forms of ideology. It further considers how meaning is communicated and ideology is birthed through language use. Fairclough (1989, p. 36) notes that there are two main aspects of power in discourse: 'power in discourse' and 'power behind discourse'. While power in discourse derives largely from discourse as a means of enacting power and the exercise of power, power behind discourse dwells on how orders of discourse as aspects of the social order of diverse social institutions inform and shape power relations. Fairclough clarifies that one common feature of the two domains of power in discourse is that it is never held by a person or group, since power can be won and administered through social struggles. Therefore, one of the concerns of Fairclough's CDA is the power

tussle between the strong and the weak, which he argues that power is not static but may change hands. The present study focuses on Fairclough's aspect of power in discourse, hence the research considers the linguistic manifestations of power in the novel, *Measuring Time*, and how power is enacted and exercised.

## 3. STAGES OF FAIRCLOUGH'S CDA (1989; 1995)

### a. Text Analysis or Description

At the stage of text description, an analyst examines a text's formal properties, such as grammar; vocabulary, syntax, sentence, and meaning in discourse. Fairclough (1992a) explores the implications of doing textual analysis in discourse and proposes that the linguistic appraisal of discourse should incorporate both the form and content of discourse. This implies that aside from the grammatical aspects enumerated above, content analysis beyond the sentential level, such as turn-taking schema, dialogue properties, cohesion and coherence are also examined.

### b. Text Interpretation or Discursive Practice

Text interpretation focuses on the production, distribution, and consumption of text. At this level, the language of the text may reveal power abuse, manipulation and social struggles between the powerful and the oppressed, as well as how the text is distributed in terms of ideology being communicated to the reader or listener.

### c. Text Explanation or Social Analysis

Here, the analysis relates to inter-textual angles to a text and how the occurrences in a text can be linked to social events and happenings in society (1989, pp37-70; 1995, pp40-45).

## 4. METHODS

This research engages qualitative-descriptive research design to investigate the linguistic manifestations of power in the novel, *Measuring Time* written by Helon Habila. Ten extracts from the novel, which demonstrate how power is enacted, manipulated, and exercised between the able-bodied characters and the disabled ones are therefore examined. Norman Fairclough's CDA, (1989; 1995) was deployed to appraise power manifestations in the novels, in terms of grammatical, syntactic, and lexical appraisal of the language use.

## 5. TEXT DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

### A. Power as Manipulation, Imposition, and Exploitation of the Weak

In the novel *Measuring Time* by Helon Habila, the main character, Mamo, and his mother, Tabita are victims of power manipulation, control, and dominance as they are treated unfairly and the able-bodied characters' decisions control their lives to their detriment. Lamang, a handsome, manipulative young man, who wields the power to charm young maidens in

the village and who eventually marries Tabitha, Mamo's mother is described in a popular village ballad as:

**Extract 1.**

*King of Women  
Owner of ten women  
In every village, from Keti to the state capital  
Mother sighing with longing  
Daughter sighing with longing  
Ah, King of women  
Show some mercy (Measuring Time, p. 14).*

The descriptions of Lamang, using the metaphor 'King of Women', and 'Owner of ten women' reflect the manipulative powers, Lamang wields over women in the work. Further, the use of repetitions in the refrain, 'Mother sighing with longing', and 'Daughter sighing with longing' shows Lamang's powerful control over the emotional feelings of the women of Keti. The verbal phrase 'sighing with longing' portrays the helplessness of the young maidens towards their feelings, which Lamang would often turn down. The extract below describes Tabitha's father and his conversation with Lamang over his daughter's marriage.

**Extract 2.**

*Owner of Cattle, had no male child, and Lamang, a shrewd businessman even then had immediately seen the financial benefits of such marriage. He said to the man, 'I love your daughter, I will be happy to marry her, but I am only a poor student, how can I take care of her in the style you've brought her up in?' (Measuring Time, p. 14).*

In Extract 2. above, the nomination strategies used to describe Lamang's character include the adjective, 'shrewd businessman' with the main clause '... had immediately seen the financial benefits of such marriage', which describes Lamang as an opportunist and exploiter. Lamang's selfish nature and manipulative character are further revealed through the first person pronouns, 'I love...', 'I will be happy...', the adjective, 'but I am only a poor student' and the rhetorical question, 'how can I take care of her...?' are manipulative strategies to extort the wealth of Tabitha's father. From the foregoing, it is obvious that Tabitha, who is a sickle cell patient is not allowed to decide if she should marry and whom to marry. Her father dialogues with Lamang and gives her away in marriage because he has no male child.

**Extract 3.**

*First, the man waived the bride-price, which Lamang wasn't in a position to pay anyway, and then he gave him twenty head of cattle as a wedding gift, and promised to make him his heir. A month later the marriage between the beautiful but sickly girl and the village play boy was solemnised in the village church (Measuring Time, p. 14).*

In the extract above, verbs such as 'waived', 'gave', and 'promised' reflect how Lamang manipulatively married Tabitha without paying a dime. Rather, Musa, Tabitha's father is willing to cede his wealth to Lamang. The adjectival descriptions of Tabitha as, 'the beautiful but sickly girl' and Lamang as, 'the village playboy' portray the concept of unequal power relations in the story. Mamo's mother eventually dies while giving birth to Mamo and his twin brother, Lamamo because of her ailment. Moreover, Mamo inherits his mother's sickle cell ailment and battles neglect, hatred, and rejection from his father, who prefers his twin brother Lamamo to him because Lamamo has a sound health and is free from sickle cell anemia. In Mamo's words, he describes his feelings at Dr. Shingle's visit to their home.

**Extract 4.**

*"...sickle cell anemia." The doctor's words carried to me, whispery conspiratorial, grave. I didn't understand what it meant, but I knew it was me they were talking about. My head ached (Measuring Time, p.18).*

Mamo describes his feelings at Dr. Shingle's diagnosis of his ailment, using the Onomatopaeic metaphor, 'whispery conspiratorial grave', which describes his perception of the doctor's discussion with his father about his ailment as life-threatening conspiracy. Further, the ensuing dialogue between Mamo's father and Dr. Shingle buttresses Lamang's apathy towards Mamo's ordeal.

**Extract 5.**

*It is a disease of the blood, hereditary, the doctor went on.  
His mother had it, Lamang said gruffly.  
Not only her. You also must carry a trace of it, that's the way it works.  
His brother is a healthy, strong boy. He takes after me.  
Lamang argued. (Measuring time, p. 18).*

The use of such adverbs of manner like, ‘gruffly’, and ‘argued’ is indicative of Lamang’s indifference towards his son, Mamo’s condition, and further distances Lamang from Mamo in an asymmetric relationship. In addition, Mamo’s exciting admission into the university, which provides him an escape route from his father’s abuse and his self-isolation is further brought to an abrupt end by the actions of other characters he meets at school. Mamo falls ill in his hostel room and refuses to go home to his father, whom he believes does not care about him. He goes to the hospital and meets an elderly doctor.

**Extract 6.**

*Mamo sat in line and when his turn came and he tried to explain to the doctor that his case wasn't malaria but sickle cell anemia, the old doctor, who should have retired ages ago and who still held the job because he was somebody's relation, looked at him crossly and said 'Young man, are you trying to teach me my job?' (Measuring Time, p.65).*

Hence, the doctor uses power as an instrument of imposition, when he looks at Mamo ‘crossly’, an adverb of manner which portrays the old doctor’s angry and impatient attitude. The doctor also uses a rhetorical question as a means of power imposition to silence Mamo from reporting his ailment as a sickle cell patient. He gives him chloroquine and piriton injections meant for malaria treatment. Mamo returns to his room and becomes unconscious, his roommates carry him back home and do not inform the school authority about Mamo’s ordeal nor does his father care to report to the school about the incident. Consequently, the school withdraws Mamo’s admission on account of his long absence and his dream of graduating as a historian is shattered. These instances demonstrate unequal power relations that exist between the able-bodied characters in the novel and the seemingly weak and sick characters who could not defend themselves against such abuses.

**B. Power as Derogatory Labeling and Impoliteness**

On page 57 of *Measuring Time*, when Mamo and Lamamo run away from the village to be recruited in the army and Mamo eventually returns because of his sickness, he falls sick having been beaten by rain, and spends a week trying to regain his strength. His father calls him for a talk and inquires where he ran to, and he replies, “Timbuktu”. Lamang lashes at him pointing at his sickness in a derogatory manner:

**Extract 7.**

*Well, Lamang said finally, attempting a small carefree laugh, but his voice was angry, aimed to hurt, you are lucky you didn't go far with your weak and useless body, otherwise, we should now be telling a different story (Measuring Time, p. 57).*

In Extract 7. Above, power is explored as an instrument of derogatory labeling and impoliteness. The descriptions of Lamang’s laughter as ‘a small carefree laugh’, and his voice as ‘angry, aimed to hurt’ are adjectives describing not just the nouns ‘laughter’ and ‘voice’ but also his impolite attitude towards his son, Mamo. The direct use of harsh, face-threatening adjective-metaphor, ‘your weak and useless body’ falls under the category of Bald on Record Impoliteness (see, Culpeper, 1996), this further buttresses the fact that Lamang’s words are intentionally offensive. Also, Mamo’s uncle, Iliya questions Mamo and refers to his ailment derisively.

**Extract 8.**

*Marina told me that you sit all day in your room, doing nothing but reading and falling ill. Is that all you want to do with your life?' (Measuring Time, p. 71).*

The dependent clause, ‘...doing nothing but reading and falling ill’, which is followed by an unnerving, face-threatening rhetorical question, ‘Is that all you want to do with your life?’ are impoliteness strategies and fall under the category of Positive Impoliteness as enumerated by Culpeper (1996; 2005). The able-bodied characters deploy verbal abuse and impoliteness on Mamo as a way of demonstrating their power. The effect of the verbal abuse is typified by Mamo’s emotional withdrawal from people, self-isolation, and hatred for his father, Lamang.

**Extract 9.**

*He kept to his room after the interview, perfecting his already faultless art of avoiding his father. His illness lingered, but this time it wasn't only sickle cell anemia – there was also a mental torpor that refused to be shaken off (Measuring, Time, p.59).*

Besides Mamo, there are two other victims of power abuse and control, whose disabilities become points of referents by the able-bodied characters, without recourse to the psychological trauma such denigration may bring. Take for instance, Toma or One Leg, Haruna’s military buddy, who loses a leg in the civil war, is addressed by his disability, while Haruna who returns from the same war without any physical injury is called ‘soja’ (soldier). Toma recounts his ordeal.

**Extract 10.**

*I lost my leg on a mission. Three of us were sent to blow up a bridge. We, re, we failed. Our sergeant was shot, the other man, a private like me, was taken prisoner. I was lucky ---I was shot in the leg, but I escaped by lying low for a whole day in a crag in the riverbank (Measuring Time, p.45).*

Considering what Toma went through during the war, he should have attracted more honour for his disability but rather, he is addressed disparagingly after his disability as 'One Leg' (Measuring Time, p. 45). Lamamo also faces similar verbal abuse at the loss of his eyes as a soldier, fighting for a rebel group. Kutubi, his commandant mocks him as 'Mr One-Eye' (Measuring Time, p.65), provoking Lamamo and he kills Kutubi. Such derogatory labels manifest as forms of asymmetric power relations in the novel between the disabled characters and the able-bodied characters.

## 6. TEXT EXPLANATION

### The Thematic Focus of Asymmetric Power in the Text

From the foregoing, it is apparent that Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* thematically portrays the disabled characters as victims of power abuse, and manipulation and the able-bodied characters as power wielders and enactors. In addition, the text presents analogous themes of disability as liability and the disabled characters as being delusional; persons whose dreams, desires, and plans never materialized, even at the point of their breakthrough and visibility. For instance, the disabled protagonists in Habila's novel, Mamo and Lamamo never witnessed the height of their successes but rather faced disappointments. Mamo's article, challenging Rev. Drinkwater's history of the Keti people, which brought him to the limelight, in the end, is not published. Besides, the history of the Waziris of Keti land, which Mamo compiles, ends as a mere manuscript. Mamo does not also get to marry his love Zara, who eventually runs mad. Lamamo on the other hand, dies as a tragic hero with one eye, fighting for the liberation of his people, and is not opportune to see his pregnant wife give birth to their first baby.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The study reveals that power in discourse in Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* manifests linguistically as grammatical, syntactical, and lexical properties such as metaphor, repetitions, rhetorical questions, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs that indicate attitude in asymmetric communication. Hence, these linguistic makers of power are reflected in the sub-themes; power as manipulation, imposition exploitation, impoliteness, and the derogatory labeling of the weak. The study also demonstrates that pragmatic concepts are very pivotal in literary explorations of prose works and contribute to the plot development, characterization and thematic analysis of the text.

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