



Cohesion and Coherence in Literary Discourse: A Stylistic Reappraisal of *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka

Gabriel Kwame Ankrah, PhD,

University of Mines and Technology, Department of Technical Communication, Tarkwa, Ghana.

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KEYWORDS: cohesion, coherence, stylistics, African poetry, postcolonial discourse, satire; discourse analysis, racial representation.

ABSTRACT: This study offers an expanded stylistic and postcolonial analysis of *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka, foregrounding the interplay between cohesion, coherence, and ideology. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), text linguistics (Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981), and African literary criticism, the paper demonstrates that Soyinka's linguistic strategies—particularly lexical repetition, referential cohesion, and structural parallelism—are central to the poem's satirical force. Engaging critically with scholars such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Abiola Irele, and Biodun Jeyifo, the study situates the poem within broader debates on language, identity, and postcolonial resistance. It argues that cohesion and coherence function not merely as textual properties but as ideological mechanisms that expose and subvert racial discourse. By integrating close textual analysis with African literary theory, the paper contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship on stylistics and postcolonial poetics. It argues that cohesion and coherence function not merely as textual properties but as ideological mechanisms that expose and subvert racial discourse.

Corresponding Author

Gabriel Kwame Ankrah

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1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and ideology remains central to African literary studies. As Chinua Achebe (1975) asserts, language in African literature is not merely a medium but a tool for negotiating cultural identity and historical experience. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) frames language as a site of ideological struggle in postcolonial contexts.

Within this critical landscape, *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka emerges as a paradigmatic text in which linguistic form and ideological critique converge. While the poem is often read as a satire of racial prejudice, this study contends that its effectiveness derives from its cohesive and coherent structure. As Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue, cohesion creates textual unity, while coherence ensures interpretive continuity.

This paper extends previous scholarship by integrating stylistic analysis with African literary criticism, demonstrating that Soyinka's manipulation of linguistic resources constitutes a form of postcolonial resistance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cohesion and Coherence in Linguistic Studies

Halliday and Hasan (1976) provide the foundational model for cohesion, identifying key devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) extend this by emphasizing coherence as a cognitive process shaped by reader interpretation.

Scholars like Simpson (1992), Widdowson (1975), and Toolan (2009) further demonstrate that cohesive structures contribute to literary meaning, linking linguistic patterns with narrative and thematic development.

2.2 Cohesion in African Literary Texts

Studies on African prose texts show that cohesion enhances thematic clarity and reader engagement. Analyses of works by Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa reveal that lexical repetition and narrative continuity function as stylistic strategies for meaning-making. Similarly, research on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's fiction demonstrates how cohesive devices reflect historical and ideological contexts. These studies indicate that cohesion in African literature is deeply intertwined with socio-political themes.

2.3 Language and Ideology in African Criticism

African literary criticism has long emphasized the politics of language. Chinua Achebe (1975) supports the adaptation of English, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) advocates linguistic decolonization.

Between these positions, Abiola Irele (2001) highlights linguistic hybridity, and Biodun Jeyifo (2004) emphasizes Soyinka's ironic and dramatic style. Isidore Okpewho (1992) further underscores the influence of oral traditions, particularly repetition and performance.

2.4 Interdisciplinary Stylistics

Recent scholarship advocates integrating stylistics with discourse analysis and literary criticism. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic features encode meaning. Despite this, African literary studies have often prioritized thematic analysis over linguistic detail, creating a gap that this study seeks to address.

2.5 Research Gap

While cohesion and coherence have been widely studied, their application to African poetry—especially Soyinka's work—remains limited. This study fills that gap by combining stylistic analysis with postcolonial literary criticism.

3. THEORETICAL AND CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Cohesion and Coherence in Text Linguistics

Halliday and Hasan (1976) define cohesion as the network of semantic relations that link elements within a text. These include reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) further argue that coherence arises from conceptual connectivity and the reader's ability to interpret textual relations.

In literary discourse, cohesion and coherence are not purely structural; they are interpretive and ideological (Toolan, 2009). Thus, analyzing these features in poetry reveals how linguistic patterns shape meaning.

3.2 African Literary Criticism and Language

African literary scholars have long interrogated the politics of language. Chinua Achebe (1975) advocates the adaptation of English to African contexts, while Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) calls for a return to indigenous languages.

However, critics such as Abiola Irele (2001) emphasize the hybridity of African literary expression, noting that writers like Soyinka deploy English in complex and subversive ways. Biodun Jeyifo (2004) further highlights Soyinka's reliance on irony and dramatic tension as vehicles of critique.

Additionally, Isidore Okpewho (1992) underscores the influence of oral traditions, while Chinweizu (1980s) stresses the strategic adaptation of Western forms. These perspectives collectively inform the present analysis.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive stylistic approach. The analysis is based on close reading of *Telephone Conversation*, focusing on:

- Identification of cohesive devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976)
- Examination of coherence through thematic and structural progression
- Integration of African literary theoretical insights

Textual excerpts are used as analytical evidence.

5. COHESION IN TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

5.1 Referential Cohesion and Discursive Control

The poem's opening lines:

“The price seemed reasonable, location / Indifferent”

establish context through implicit reference. The introduction of “the landlady” followed by the pronoun “she” creates a referential chain that maintains continuity (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

The speaker's declaration—“I am African”—functions as a cohesive pivot, triggering the silence that follows. The repetition “Silence. Silenced transmission...” exemplifies lexical cohesion reinforcing thematic tension. As Toolan (2009) suggests, such repetition intensifies discourse meaning.

5.2 Lexical Cohesion and Racial Semantics

1. The poem's lexical field is dominated by color imagery:
 - “Red booth... Red pillar-box... Red double-tiered omnibus”
 - “Milk chocolate,” “sepia,” “peroxide blonde,” “raven black”

This repetition forms a semantic network that foregrounds racial categorization. According to Abiola Irele (2001), African writers often deploy dense imagery to encode ideological meaning. Here, lexical cohesion mirrors colonial racial taxonomy while simultaneously subverting it.

5.3 Conjunction and Pragmatic Flow

The poem's conversational structure relies on both explicit and implicit conjunctions. The adversative "but" in:

"Facially, I am brunette, but madam..."

signals contrast and introduces irony. The fragmented syntax and pauses reflect what Biodun Jeyifo (2004) describes as Soyinka's dramatic technique, where meaning emerges through tension and interruption.

5.4 Parallelism and Structural Patterning

The listing of body parts:

"Palm of my hand, soles of my feet... My bottom raven black"

demonstrates structural cohesion through parallelism. This aligns with oral performance patterns identified by Isidore Okpewho (1992), where repetition and rhythm enhance meaning.

6. COHERENCE AND THEMATIC DEVELOPMENT

6.1 Narrative and Logical Coherence

The poem's progression—from inquiry to racial interrogation—follows a clear logical sequence. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) argue that such sequencing is essential for coherence. Each stage builds on the previous, culminating in satirical resolution.

6.2 Thematic Coherence and Satire

The central theme of racial prejudice is sustained throughout. The landlady's repeated questioning—"ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT"—anchors the discourse. The speaker's ironic response ("like plain or milk chocolate?") exemplifies what Biodun Jeyifo (2004) terms mediated satire.

6.3 Situational and Contextual Coherence

The imagery of British urban life ("Red booth," "pillar-box") situates the poem historically and socially. This aligns with Chinua Achebe's (1975) assertion that literature reflects lived experience.

6.4 Tonal and Ideological Consistency

The poem maintains coherence through sustained irony. The closing lines:

"Madam... wouldn't you rather / See for yourself?"

offer a coherent resolution that exposes the superficiality of racial judgment.

7. COHESION, COHERENCE, AND POSTCOLONIAL RESISTANCE

The integration of cohesion and coherence in the poem reflects what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes as the decolonization of discourse.

- Lexical repetition exposes racial obsession
- Structural coherence dramatizes oppression
- Irony subverts dominant ideology

As Chinweizu argues, African writers transform inherited forms into tools of resistance.

8. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that Soyinka's stylistic choices are inseparable from his ideological aims. The poem's cohesive density and coherent structure produce a powerful critique of racism.

By integrating stylistics with African literary criticism, the analysis bridges disciplinary divides and highlights the importance of linguistic form in postcolonial literature.

9. CONCLUSION

Telephone Conversation exemplifies the intricate relationship between cohesion, coherence, and ideology. Through referential patterns, lexical chains, and structural organization, Wole Soyinka constructs a unified and satirical text that challenges racial prejudice.

The study affirms that linguistic analysis is essential for understanding African literary texts and calls for further interdisciplinary research.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Extract of *Telephone Conversation*

Selected lines analyzed in this study include:

- “I am African.”
- “Silence. Silenced transmission...”
- “HOW DARK?”
- “Like plain or milk chocolate?”
- “Palm of my hand... soles of my feet...”
- “Wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?”

Appendix B: Analytical Framework Summary

Concept	Description	Application in Poem
Referential Cohesion	Use of pronouns and references	“she,” “I” maintain dialogue
Lexical Cohesion	Repetition of key terms	Color imagery (red, black, sepia)
Conjunction	Logical connectors	“but” signals contrast
Parallelism	Repeated structures	Body part descriptions
Coherence	Logical and thematic unity	Progression from inquiry to satire

Appendix C: Thematic Progression Model

1. Neutral inquiry
2. Racial disclosure
3. Silence/tension
4. Interrogation
5. Ironic elaboration
6. Satirical resolution