



**The Function of Classical African Literary Works: A Systemic Functional Analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman***

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**Abstract**

This paper is about the systemic functional analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, on the basis of the postulate that African classical literary works connote some significant functions. The methodology used in this analysis is the mixed method approach, which is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative linguistic data. Two extracts are therefore selected from the play on a qualitative basis, taking into account the relevance of the exchange in terms of information and the characters involved in the exchange. These are split into numbered analyzable units referred to as clauses in which the various mood components are meticulously and quantitatively identified. The results reveal that the extracts are essentially concerned with propositions, that is, the exchange of information about the rite; while some services are realized through proposals. Modal variables are profusely used in the extracts under

consideration, highlighting interlocutors' various attitudes and judgments regarding the traditional ritual of the king's horseman death. The analysis of the exchange has uncovered the peck order defined by the colonial administrators whose behaviors are profoundly marked by prejudices regarding the rite. Thus, Soyinka's play functions as a tool of information and education about African worldview.

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**Keywords:** Classical literary works, systemic functional linguistics, mood components, education and information, worldview

## Introduction

Almost a century after colonization –between 1800-1960- and its devastating consequences, African people are squelching to find their way or landmarks, be it political, economic or cultural. Colonization was not only an economic and political domination (Ocheni and Nwanko, 2012) but also a cultural one. Cesaire (1955/2000, p. 43) was very bitter and clear about the ripple effects of colonization when he wrote:

They talk to me about progress, about achievements, diseases cured, improved standard of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures, trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.

Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* is a masterpiece in this regards, insofar as it describes a colonial episode of misunderstanding between Africans and Europeans over a rite in the Yoruba society in Nigeria, during colonization. This work, like Soyinka's other works, has received lots of attention on the part of researchers surely because of its complexity and relevance in terms of the meanings that it may convey. Focusing his analysis on the structure and function in Soyinka's play, Ilori (1990) states that function is of the assertive kind; for Soyinka is attentive in exploring how persons and groups try to affirm themselves in different ways, and this is aimed at enhancing their social status and defining their society the instructions or guidelines it must follow, so as to attain order, normalcy, progress and development.

As for Migliavacca (2018), he asserts that the play can be considered as the key to a unified African identity, and this unification is basically about the metaphysical affinity for the different cultures of Africa. In writing the play, Soyinka's literary project is therefore a description of the African universe through the Yoruba perspective, campaigning for the existence of a metaphysical system typical of Black Africa in contrast with the Western system. The author has found in Yoruba customs and institutions an assimilative worldview that could absorb elements from

outer cultures while providing a fresh interpretive matrix with which to grasp the issues and ideas of different peoples and cultures. Thus, he offered this Yoruba view to speak for Africa as actually the African worldview.

McNulty (2011) paper also offers a significant analysis of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The researcher affirms that the play is about the different systems of law—Western and African— and the philosophical underpinnings driving their performative praxis. The play highlights the contact between European legality and the older systems of law and justice it seeks to change while emphasizing the metaphysical traumas that such a process results in. Without denying the pertinence of such analyses, this work focuses on language itself, exploring the interpersonal metafunction—the level of language through which culture seeps into the exchange, clarifying interlocutors' social relationship and enabling them to express their various judgments and attitudes towards each other and towards what is being exchanged. This work is therefore based on the premise that such an approach can reveal the function of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* in terms of information and teaching of the African past. Thus, the work is about the analysis of mood patterns that encode meanings related to African culture in the context of western supremacy as described in the play.

## 1. Theoretical Background

### 1.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a theory coined by Halliday (1973, 1978, 1985a) who contends that language is a complex semiotic system structured to convey three distinct and complementary types of meanings. It is systemic because language is a semiotic system or a system of signs; it is functional because language has many functions: it is a representation of human experiences, a message, and an exchange, which corresponds to the interpersonal, the experiential and textual functions. This article uses the grammar of interpersonal meaning, focusing on the five speech functions and their corresponding mood types:

- |             |        |                              |
|-------------|--------|------------------------------|
| ✓ Command   | —————→ | Imperative mood              |
| ✓ Offer     | —————→ | Modulated interrogative mood |
| ✓ Statement | —————→ | Declarative mood             |
| ✓ Question  | —————→ | Interrogative mood           |

The interpersonal meaning can also be expressed through adjuncts (Egins, 1994). They are defined as clause elements which contribute some additional (but not essential) information to the clause. Adjuncts are of three

kinds: experiential, textual and interpersonal. While Experiential adjuncts add interpersonal meanings to the clause by clarifying circumstances relating to time, place, cause, matter, etc., textual adjuncts connote meanings that have to do with cohesion and continuity in text. As far as interpersonal or modal adjuncts are concerned, they add meanings relating to probability, usually, familiarity, intimacy, solidarity, etc. they are therefore very crucial in the analysis of a text as an exchange. There are four types of modal adjuncts:

- ✓ Mood adjuncts
- ✓ Polarity adjuncts
- ✓ Comment adjuncts
- ✓ Vocative adjuncts

Modality is also an important concept that must be taken into account in the analysis of a clause as an exchange. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) hold that it is the linguistics items that actualize the intermediate degrees between the positive and the negative, between yes and no, through elements such as *sometimes, maybe, usually, perhaps*. Modality has two facets: modulation and moralization. When the intermediate degree is about prescription and proscription, it is referred to as modulation; and when it is about asserting and denying, it is called modalization.

## 2. Methods

Mixed-methods research is a research methodology that combines multiple methods to tackle research issues in a suitable and rational manner, which involves gathering, scrutinizing, explicating and enunciation both qualitative and quantitative data (Dawadi, Shrestha, & Giri, 2021, Doyle, Brady & Byrne, 2009). The paper adopts this method which actually consists in combining qualitative and quantitative findings in order to get more insights. It is therefore based on the pragmatic research principle, integrating philosophical frameworks of both post-positivism and interpretivism. The premise behind this approach is that the qualitative approach or the quantitative approach alone may have shortcomings that can be filled by the integration of both qualitative and quantitative results (American Psychological Association, 2020; Creswell, 2014). Thus, two extracts have been selected from the play on the qualitative basis and these are split into units referred to as clauses. Mood patterns have been identified quantitatively in these extracts so as to have an precise idea of their occurrence; whereas the analysis has been carried out both on the quantitative and the qualitative bases.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative Analysis of Extract 1

##### 3.1.1 Moods Types Analysis in Extract 1

Mood types occurrence is summarized in table 1

Mood types	Full	Minor	Elliptical	Total	Percentage
DM	275	20	10	305	73.84%
IntM	71	00	06	77	18.88%
ImpM	23	00	02	25	6.05%
Ex	05	00	01	06	1.45%
Total	374	20	19	413	100%

**Table 1.** Mood types occurrence

Table 1 shows that declarative moods are predominant (305), representing 73.84%, followed by interrogative moods (77), corresponding to 18.88%, and imperative moods (25), that is, 6.05%. As for exclamative moods, they are rarely used in the extract (06), corresponding to 1.45%. This means that the extract is mainly concerned with proposition or the exchange of information about the Yoruba system of values on the one hand, and the European worldview on the other hand; and that some orders are given and some services are asked through imperative moods. The table also reveals that the participants or interlocutors have expressed some anger or emotion about the tragedy described in the play.

Table 2 recapitulates the distribution of mood types among the participants.

Particip ants	D M <sub>r</sub> ull	DM minor	D M <sub>el</sub> lip	Ex full	Ex mino r	Ex ellip	Int M <sub>ful</sub> l	Int M <sub>min</sub> or	Int M <sub>elli</sub> p	Imp M <sub>full</sub>	Imp M <sub>mino</sub> r	Imp M <sub>ellip</sub>	Tota l
<b>Pilkings</b>	15 5	06	07	04	00	01	29	00	01	19	00	02	224
<b>Jane</b>	74	06	01	01	00	00	39	00	02	03	00	00	126
<b>Amusa</b>	17	02	00	00	00	00	01	00	00	01	00	00	21
<b>Joseph</b>	29	06	02	00	00	00	02	00	03	00	00	00	42
<b>Total</b>	27 5	20	10	05	00	01	71	00	06	23	00	02	413

**Table 2.** Distribution of mood types among the participants

Table 2 displays that the talk is monopolized by Pilkings (the colonial officer) and his wife Jane. 224/413 are used by Pilkings, equivalent to 54.23%, and Jane actualizes 126 clauses, standing for 30.50%. The houseboy of the colonial administrators is very active in the debate, for he utters 42 clauses, that is, 10.16%. Sergeant Amusa verbalizes 21 clauses, corresponding to 5.08%. This analysis clarifies the interpersonal relationship among the participants. Pilkings, as the representative of the colonial

administration, is in a position of power and so is his wife, Jane. The subordinate Sergeant Amusa is actually less involved in the dialogue, contenting himself with answering his bosses' questions and carrying out their orders. Joseph, the houseboy, is somehow active; for he has to execute his masters' orders. He is also in a position of subordination. Therefore, the exchange is carried out in a context of unequal power among the participants.

### 3.1.2 Analysis of Modality in Extract 1

Table 3 synthesizes the distribution of modal items among the participants

Participants	M <sup>-</sup> DM	M <sup>+</sup> DM	M <sup>-</sup> DM <sup>ellip</sup>	M <sup>+</sup> DM <sup>ellip</sup>	M <sup>-</sup> IntM	M+IntM	M-imp	Total	percentage
Pilkings	52	07	02	01	08	01	02	73	55.72%
Jane	33	05	00	00	04	00	01	43	32.80%
Amusa	03	00	00	00	01	00	00	04	3.05%
Joseph	07	03	00	00	01	00	00	11	8.39%
Total	95	15	02	01	14	01	03	131	100%

**Table 3.** Distribution of modal items among the participants

As it is elucidated in table 3, there is a considerable use of modality in the exchange. 131/413 (31.71%) clauses are modulated or modalized, which means that a lot of judgments related to probability, possibility or usuality are expressed, and that some services are asked and orders are given as well. The majority of modal elements are used by Pilkings (the colonial officer) and his wife, Jane. Pilkings voices 73/131 (55.72%) modulators and modalizers while his wife actualizes 43/131 (32.80%). It must also be noted that modulation is abundantly expressed in the extract, which implies that the interlocutors, notably Pilkings and his wife, give a great deal of orders and make a lot of suggestions and reflexions related to the tragic events described in the play.

### 3.1.3 Analysis of Adjuncts Types in Extract 1

Table 4 highlights the occurrence and distribution of adjuncts types among the participants.

Participants	Conj-A	Perc.	V A	Perc.	Cont-A	Perc.	C A	Perc.	P A	Perc.	total	PERC.
Pilkings	45	60.81%	35	41.17%	03	100%	01	20%	10	50%	94	50.26%
Jane	18	24.32%	27	31.76%	00	00	04	80%	02	10%	51	27.27%
Amusa	02	2.70%	9	10.58%	00	00	00	00	00	00	11	5.88%
Joseph	09	12.16%	14	16.47%	00	00	00	00	08	40%	31	16.57%
Total	74	100%	85	100%	03	100%	05	100%	20	100%	187	100%

**Table 4.** Distribution of adjuncts among the participants

Table 4 recapitulates the occurrence of adjuncts types in the extract on the one hand, and on the other it shows the distribution of these adjuncts among the participants. As it can be noted in the table, vocative adjuncts are predominantly used in the extract: 85/187, corresponding to 45.45%, followed by conjunctive adjuncts, which occur 74 times, representing 39.57%. The occurrence of the other adjunct types is insignificant. The majority of adjuncts are uttered by Pilkings, who verbalizes 94/187, that is, 50.26%; whereas his wife, Jane utters 51/187, equivalent to 27.27%. Joseph, the houseboy uses 31/187, corresponding to 16.57%. These are mainly vocative adjuncts that are used to show deference towards the masters or colonizers.

### 3.2 Quantitative Analysis of Extract 2

#### 3.2.1 Mood Types Analysis in Extract 2

Table 5 spotlights the distribution of mood types in extract 2.

Mood types	Full	Minor	Elliptical	Total	Percentage
DM	266	08	00	274	66.82%
IntM	96	01	05	102	24.87%
ImpM	14	02	03	19	4.63%
EX	08	05	02	15	3.65%
Total	384	16	10	410	100%

**Table 5.** Distribution of mood types in extract 2

Table 5 uncovers an important occurrence of declarative moods in the extract under consideration (274/410), equivalent to 66.82% whereas interrogatives clauses rank second (102/410), with a percentage of 24.87%. Imperatives and exclamatives occupy the third and the fourth place, corresponding to 4.63% (19/410) and 3.65% (15/410), respectively. Thus, the dialogue is basically concerned with proposition or the exchange information. Some services are also asked through proposals or imperative clauses. The occurrence of exclamative clauses stresses the expression of anger and emotion or surprise.

The distribution of mood types among the interlocutors is synthesized in table 6.

Participants	DM <sub>full</sub>	DM <sub>minor</sub>	D <sub>Me<sub>llip</sub></sub>	EX <sub>full</sub>	EX <sub>minor</sub>	EX <sub>ellip</sub>	Int <sub>Mfull</sub>	Int <sub>minor</sub>	Int <sub>Melli<sub>p</sub></sub>	Imp <sub>Mfull</sub>	Imp <sub>minor</sub>	Imp <sub>Melli<sub>p</sub></sub>	Total
AMUSA	23	02	00	00	01	00	03	00	00	03	00	02	34
WOMAN	30	00	00	02	00	00	14	00	03	01	00	01	51
IYALOA	24	02	00	00	00	00	07	00	02	03	00	00	38
GIRL	53	02	00	03	04	00	35	01	00	04	02	00	104
ELISIN	79	01	00	02	00	02	02	00	00	02	00	00	88

PRAISE - SINGER	57	01	00	01	00	00	35	00	00	01	00	00	95
TOTAL	266	08	00	08	05	02	96	01	05	14	02	03	410

**Table 6.** Distribution of mood types among the participants

The above table reveals that the debate or dialogue is dominated by the Girls, the Praise-Singer and Elesin (the main character), who utter 104/410 clauses (25.36%), 95/410 (23.17%), 88/410 (21.46%), respectively. *Woman* or *Women* verbalize 51/410 clauses (12.43%) whereas *Iyaloja* uses 38/410 clauses (9.26%). As for *Amusa*, the subordinate of the colonial administration, he actualizes 34/410 clauses (8.29%). This means that women are very active in the exchange and that the colonial administration seems to be reduced to a passive role by listening to the Women's defence of traditional values.

### 3.2.2 Analysis of Modality in Extract 2

Table 7 sums up the occurrence and distribution of modal items among the interlocutors.

Participants	M-DM	M+DM	M- IntM	M+IntM	M- imp	Total	pourcentage
AMUSA	05	01	00	00	01	07	6.36%
WOMAN	13	00	04	00	00	17	15.45%
IYALOJA	06	00	01	00	00	07	6.36%
GIRL	11	00	06	00	00	17	15.45%
ELISIN	17	01	00	00	00	18	16.36%
PRAISE- SINGER	24	01	18	01	00	44	40%
Total	76	03	29	01	01	110	100%

**Table 7.** Distribution of modal items among the participants

As it is indicated in table 7, there is a copious use of modal items in the extract. They occur 110/410, that is, 26.82%. The Praise-Singer monopolizes the use of modal items; he verbalizes 44/110 (40%) whereas *Woman* and *Girl* use the same number of modal elements, that is, 17/110 (16.36%). *Elesin*, the main character, is involved in 18/110 (16.36%), surpassing slightly *Amusa*, the colonial subordinate: 7/110 (6.36%). This means that many judgments regarding possibility or probability and inclination are expressed in the extract.



### 3.2.3 Analysis of Adjuncts types in Extract 2

The distribution and occurrence of adjuncts types are synthesized in table 8 below.

Participants	Conj -A	Perc.	V A	Perc.	Cont -A	Perc.	C A	Perc.	P A	Perc.	total	Perc.
AMUSA	06	6.33%	08	20%	00	00	00	00	01	14.28 %	15	9.80%
WOMAN	16	16.84 %	03	7.5%	00	00	00	00	00	00	19	12.41 %
IYALOJA	11	11.57 %	08	20%	01	25%	00	00	00	00	20	13.07 %
GIRL	13	13.68 %	03	7.5%	03	75%	04	57.14 %	05	71.42 %	28	18.30 %
ELESIN	26	27.36 %	05	12.5 %			01	14.28 %	01	14.28 %	33	21.56 %
PRAISE- SINGER	23	24.21 %	13	32.5 %	00	00	02	28.57 %	00	00	38	24.83 %
Total	95	100%	40	100%	04	100 %	07	100%	07	100%	153	100%

**Table 8.** Distribution of adjuncts types among the participants

The above table shows that conjunctive adjuncts rank first (95/153, representing 62.09%), followed by vocative adjuncts (40/153, corresponding to 26.14%). The other types of adjuncts are scarcely used in the extract under consideration: 07/153 (4.57%) polar adjuncts, 07/153 (4.57%) circumstantial adjuncts and 04/153 (2.61%) continuity adjuncts. In the majority, they are verbalized by Woman, Girl and Iyaloja (67/153, equivalent to 43.79%), who are female characters. The Praise-Singer is the sayer of 38/153, that is, 24.83; whereas Elesin is the sayer of 33/153, corresponding to 21.56%.

## 4. Discussion

This section categorizes and summarizes the data described through clear and meticulous linguistic statistics, so as to answer the critical questions related to the functions of classical African literary works, notably that of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. The analysis reveals that the exchange developed in the two extracts is about proposition, that is, information sharing. The greater number of clauses are declarative ones, both in extract 1 and 2: 305/413 (73.84%) and 274/410 (66.82%), respectively. The information exchanged is mainly about the 'barbaric or macabre' rite – to use the colonizers or the British colonial administrators terms– that must be organized: the King's Horseman death, one month after the King's death as exemplified in the following declarative clauses (154-157; 159-163): *No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die; It is native law and custom. The King died last month. Tonight is his burial. But before they can bury him, the Elesin must die so as to accompany him to heaven.*

These are answers to the colonizers questions through Joseph, the houseboy's words. He clarifies the origin and meaning of the rite, which demonstrates a sense of loyalty, dignity and commitment. Olunde's killing himself in the place of his coward and corrupt father in order to safeguard the family's honour is a perfect illustration of these African values. The story may function as important piece of information about the African past or metaphysical conception of life. The answers are not only given to white men but also to Africans themselves, who are implicitly urged to know their history in a context of dangerous confusions. When, for example, young girls bleach or African leaders, who are supposed to orient the youth, cannot define clear and relevant principles regarding economics of politics, it is paramount to reconsider the system of values.

The distribution of moods types spotlights the colonial hierarchy or peck order. The talk is dominated by Pilkings—the colonial administrator—and his wife in extract 1. Pilkings actualizes 224/413 clauses, corresponding to 54.23% whereas his wife utters 43/413 clauses, that is, 32.80%. They also utter the majority of imperative (22/23, corresponding to 95.65%) and interrogative (58/78, equivalent to 74.35%) clauses, which is an indication of power and authority. Sergeant Amusa and Joseph the houseboy talk rarely; they voice 4/413 and 11/413 clauses respectively. Female characters—Woman, Girl and Iyaloja—are very active in extract 2. In total, they verbalize 107/410 clauses, representing 26.09%. They do not submit to the colonial administration represented by Amusa, who interferes in order to stop the rite. He is ridiculed, almost manhandled and reduced to listening to women's arguments. He uses only 34/410 (8.29%) clauses. Two things can be noted regarding these data. In the first place, the play accentuates the peck order defined by colonizers and their subordinates, which still prevails in Africa. This must be understood for one can make mistakes in analysing the continent's multiples crises. In second place, women have an ambivalent position in this peck order. They are the cause of Elesin misfortune, for he succumbs to his new bride charm and consequently refuses to accomplish the ritual on the one hand; they boldly challenge the colonial authority by refusing to comply with the orders.

The analysis has also uncovered a profuse occurrence of modal element both in extract 1 and 2 –131/413, representing 31.71% in extract 1 and 110/410, corresponding to 26.82% in extract 2– .They are in the majority verbalized by Pilkings—the colonial officer– and his wife in extract 1 whereas in extract 2, they are appropriated by female characters—Girl, Woman and Iyaloja—whose voice can be equated, to some extent, to the African voice, insofar as they warn, inform and threaten the colonial representatives about the risk of changing, ignoring or flouting the age-old ritual. Female characters express all these judgements and attitudes through modal items.

Pilkings is the sayer of 73/131, standing for 55.72%. He affirms his authority and expresses his judgements, which can be interpreted as racial prejudices, by using modal components such as *will, must, perhaps, think, if, can*, etc. in clauses (041, 095, 303, 318, 306, 391, 399).

Finally, the description of mood patterns highlights significant instances of the three adjuncts types: interpersonal, textual and experiential. Here, the discussion is mainly focused on the interpersonal ones, which connote meanings related to power, familiarity and affection. Vocative and polar adjuncts crops up 85/187 (45.45%) and 20/187 (10.69%) times respectively in extract 1 and 2. In the majority, vocative adjuncts are uttered by Pilkings–35/85, corresponding to 41.17%– who gives administrative orders and instructions to avoid riots because of the presence of the British Prince in the city. He calls Joseph– the houseboy– and Amusa–the subordinate– without any form of politeness, showing his authority and power. Joseph verbalizes 08/20 (40%) polar adjuncts (yes and no) to obey and carry out the instructions in such clauses as *Yes master, Yes sir, No master, Oh yes madam, No sir, it has no power, etc.*, meaning obviously that he is in a position of inferiority (119, 142, 144, 154, 196).

The analysis has also displayed a significant number of vocative adjuncts, 40/153 (26.14%) The characters address themselves as *Madam, Amusa, Woman, Man, Iyaloja* and *Sergeant* in clause (54, 56, 77, 82, 83, 179, 194). These connote meanings related to anger, disagreements or misunderstanding about the administrative decision aimed at stopping the traditional rite. There is a social distance between the colonial representative and the rioters or the angry women. By contrast, the relationship between Girls and Iyaloja reflects affection expressed through terms such as *daughters, my children* in clauses (102, 187, 189).

## Conclusion

Soyinka's *Death and King's Horseman* is indubitably a masterpiece of African classical literary works that has interested a great number of researchers and critics. However, the analyses of this play lack some originality insofar as they are not based on linguistic approaches. The approach used in this paper focuses on linguistic components, which indicate power, affection, and familiarity on the one hand, and on the other hand it spotlights modal items which connote various judgments related to probability, possibility, inclination, order or command, etc. Actually, the analysis has been carried out from the interpersonal metafunction perspective, viewing language as an exchange of information or service. On the whole, the description of mood patterns reveals that the exchange is basically about the rite concerning the horseman's death and how the colonial administrators interfere to stop it. This information is verbalized

through declarative and interrogative clauses whereas imperative clauses clarify the peck order defined by colonizers. The same peck order is emphasized via the distribution of mood patterns among the participants but also through modal components, especially uttered by the colonial representatives, who are obviously in a position of power. Nevertheless, the social structure is not really respected in extract 2 where female characters dominate the talk and fearlessly refuse to submit to the colonial instructions. Behind the so-called barbaric rite, *Death and the King's Horseman* reminds African peoples about their ancestral values of honesty, loyalty and dignity. The rite or any other practice that has been agreed upon cannot be flouted by an individual, be he a King. In the context of pressing crises of all kinds, Soyinka's play can function as not only a means of education and information about the African ancestral values but also as a myth to forge an African ideology of unity around common beliefs and objectives.

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