The artistic significance of vowel elision and ellipsis in Mqapheli Mngadi’s cartoons

Sizwe Zwelakhe Dlamini (a)*

(a) Department of African Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper examines vowel elision and ellipsis in Mqapheli Mngadi’s cartoons. It intends to explore how these two aspects are employed by Mngadi for artistic effects in his cartoons. Even though vowel elision and ellipsis have been widely explored, there has not been a study, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, that considers these aspects in Mngadi’s cartoons. The study is done literary, and it adopts literary stylistics as a theoretical framework.

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Introduction

There seems to be little scholarship on cartoons from a literary point of view. Research that has been done on them mainly focuses on highlighting their social function such as to develop educational or language skills (Karakas, 2012; Alghonaim, 2019; Tamer, 2021; Duran, et al., 2021; Gamage, 2019). Other works, on the other hand, focus on examining cartoons as a political satiric tool (Werner, 2004; Ahmad et al., 2017; Kondowe et al., 2014; Samuels, 2017; Wekesa, 2012). Even though cartoons have received more attention in discipline such as Education, Linguistics, and Communications, there is less attention given to them in literary discourse. Cartoons are considered as a literary genre, and not just a visual literacy component in this paper. It is for this reason that they are analysed from the perspective of literary criticism. The aim is to investigate the literary artistic nature of cartoons by focusing on vowel elision and ellipsis.

There are some studies that have also attempted to analyse Mngadi’s isiZulu cartoons using literary criticism. For instance, Mtumane & Dlamini (2020) investigate the types of sentences that are evident in Mngadi’s cartoons. They uncover the artistic significance of the simple, compound, and complex sentences. Dlamini (2022), on the other hand, applies Ngara’s linguistic proper format to discuss the tenor of discourse as linguistic feature. He focuses on humour and satire, and how these aspects inform the quality of Mngadi’s cartoons. Even though the highlighted studies above have attempted to literary critique Mngadi’s cartoons, there is no study that has attempted to highlight the artistic significance of vowel elision and ellipsis on these cartoons so far. This paper thus finds its significance in this sense.

The analysis of data is done qualitatively in this paper. Since cartoons are primary sources, textual analysis is adopted as a research technique to gather and interpret data. In terms of theoretical grounding, literary stylistics is adopted since this paper seeks to expose Mngadi’s stylistic use of vowel elision and ellipsis. A brief elaboration on research methodology and theoretical framework is provided below before the discussion of vowel elision and ellipsis in selected cartoons.

Research methodology

* Corresponding author. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4279-4270

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This study utilises the qualitative research method. This method focuses on people’s perceptions and perspectives about the world. It is a broad methodological study of social actions, where an in-depth description and understanding of social actions in terms of specific context is made (Babbie & Mouton, 2015: 269). A brief and direct idea to this method is provided by Malterud (2001: 483) who says: “Qualitative method involves the systematic collection, organisation, and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or observation”. Qualitative research generally includes interviews, observations, surveys, content analysis of visual and written materials and oral history (Mason, 2002: 49). In this study, information is collected, organised and interpreted mainly from Mngadi’s selected cartoons.

Mngadi’s cartoons are mainly published in *Isolezwe, Eco Witness* and in his cartoon books. Even though the cartoons are published in these platforms, their collection is available on the Africartoons website (http://africartoons.com/cartoonist/qaps-mngadi) as well as on Mngadi’s Facebook page on cartoons. The analysed cartoons in this study are extracted from the website and the Facebook page. This should not affect their reliability as the author’s particulars, month, day, and year of the publication of the cartoons are written in each one of them.

**Theoretical framework**

Most scholars refer to an author’s peculiar way of writing and language usage when defining the concept of stylistics. For example, Crystal, Davy, and Leech, in Jeffries and McIntyre (2010: 1), define stylistics as: “A sub-discipline of linguistics that is concerned with the systematic analysis of style in language and how this can vary according to such factors as, for example, genre, context, historical period and author”. Ngara, in Tabu (2007: 3), similarly states: “This criticism also recognizes the significance of language in the writing of literature, where the technique and features of language such as tone, grammatical structure, and metaphor, and so on are used in literature”. Murfin and Ray (2003: 1370) consolidate the insights given above by stating: “Stylistics mostly refers to approaches used to analyse and interpret the language of literary art”.

The definitions given by the foregoing scholars highlight the centrality and significance of language when dealing with stylistics. Attention is paid to how language is used in literary texts. Simpson (2014: 3) explains the value of language in stylistics by remarking: “The reason why language is so important to stylisticians is because the various forms, patterns and levels that constitute linguistic structure are an important index of the function of the text”.

Simpson (2014) adds to the above statement by stating that undertaking stylistics enhances one’s way of thinking about language, which in turn, plays a pivotal role in the understanding of literary texts. Makhubela (1993: 10) maintains that one cannot recite style without mentioning language. In essence, style ceases to exist without language. Stylistics observes language, which in turn, reveals the author’s style. Murfin and Ray (2003: 465) allude to this by maintaining that stylistics is an approach that analyses aspects such as diction, syntax, phonology, figurative language, vocabulary and so forth, to determine the author’s style. The insights given by the scholars above explicate that stylistics is a literary theory that focuses on the author’s way of using language to artistically present or communicate his message to the audience. A critical analysis is made of the authors’ use of language to determine how they use it to deliver ideas or messages skillfully and effectively. Stylistics is thus a tool to interpret the use of language in literary forms.

Cartoons are also regarded as literary forms and, just like other forms, are not independent of language. They are peculiar from other literary forms in that they consist of written and visual language. Features of written language may include aspects such as the grammatical structure, tone, choice of words, rhythmic patterns, etc. Features of visual language, on the other side, involve caricature, visual metaphor, visual personification, portraiture, analogy, etc. Malinga (2000: 20) explains that there is a relationship between language and literature and this relationship forms stylistic criticism. This suggests that stylistics is a theory that focuses on the use of language in literature. Stylistics needs an ‘environment’ to operate in and that ‘environment’ is literature. Cartoons are thus also subject to being analysed through stylistics, with attention paid to vowel elision and ellipsis.

**The use of vowel elision and ellipsis in Mqapheli Mngadi’s cartoons**

This section considers the use of vowel elision and ellipsis in Mqapheli Mngadi’s cartoons. Each of the two aspects is explained prior to the analysis of selected cartoons, which will serve as examples.

**Vowel elision**

Vowel elision is one of the outstanding features in Mngadi’s cartoons. *MacMillan English Dictionary* (2002: 450) defines the term ‘elision’ as an act of omitting certain sounds when pronouncing a word. Febriyanti (2015: 15) provides a more detailed insight by saying: “Elision process happens when speakers leave or delete a phoneme out of pronunciation as an attempt to fasten and get rid of difficulties in speech”. This view highlights an important point that elision is not just about omitting sounds but omitting sounds for the purpose of pronouncing words quicker. Elision can occur in the form of a consonant or vowel, depending on the language. In Zulu and other African languages, it occurs in the form of vowels. Vowels are speech sounds produced when the air proceeds from the mouth without being blocked (*Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2013: 1755). There are five basic vowels in Zulu, namely: a, e, i, o, u. Vowel elision is therefore the omission of these vowels when pronouncing words.
The first example from which to analyse vowel elision in Mngadi’s work is observed from Cartoon 1 below:

![Figure 1: Cartoon 1; Source: Mngadi, 2016](image)

The cartoon portrays the characters of Tira (Mthokozzi Khathi), Mampintsha (Mandla Mphumulo) and Babes Wodumo (Bongekile Simelane) who are prominent South African musicians in the genre of house and kwaito. Tira and Mampintsha serve together in a Durban based music group called Big Nuz. Mampintsha and Babes Wodumo, on the other hand, are known to be a couple with Mampintsha known to have played an important role in Babes Wodumo’s success in music. This was done independently of Big Nuz. The cartoon is presenting the idea that Mampintsha pays less attention to Big Nuz and now places his focus more on Babes Wodumo. This may be because of Babes Wodumo’s success in music hitting greater heights.

Tira’s words in the cartoon above: “Mampintsha! Manje…, i-Big Nuz iqashive ngala, uyazi nje?” (Mampintsha! Now…, Big Nuz has been booked this side, do you even know?). expresses his amazement at Mampintsha’s act. In general, the cartoon demonstrates the power and influence women tend to have over men. It is clear in the cartoon that Mampintsha is being influenced by Babes Wodumo to an extent that he neglects his colleagues who are also his close friends. He has started and developed his music career with them. They have played an important role in his fame and success in the music industry, but he seems to be forgetting about that as he neglects them in favour of Babes Wodumo. The cartoon demonstrates the extent of woman’s influence over a man. It can go as far as separating one with his close friends.

It is explained above that the elision of phonemes is done to enable quick speech. In Figure 1, Mampintsha is explaining to Tira that he is still busy with his Babes and that he will focus on BIG NUZ some other time. Note should be taken that instead of saying uBabes wam(i) (My Babes) with the last vowel -i included, he says uBabes wam (My Babes) without the last vowel. Mngadi omits the last vowel to show that Mampintsha is making his speech fast. In day-to-day speech, when people use the possessive ‘wami’ (mine), they hardly include the last vowel because it does not allow the word to be pronounced quicker. Mngadi successfully uses this reality to relate his cartoons to real life situations.

Generally, the omission of the last vowel also makes the word sound like Xhosa, where the last vowel is normally omitted in pronunciation. For example, instead of saying ‘kunami’ (than me) in Zulu, ‘kunam’ (than me), with the last vowel -i being omitted, is used in Xhosa. It is the same with the Zulu phrase ‘into yami (my item) which is phrased as ‘into yam’ (my item) in Xhosa. It should be noted that, just like in the first example, the last vowel -i in the possessive yami (mine) of Zulu, is omitted in the case of Xhosa. In Zulu, the last vowel -i of ‘kunami’ and ‘yami’ is maintained because the last syllable –mi forms part of the first-person singular pronoun ‘mina’ (I). The last syllable –na will always be omitted if this pronoun is joined to any particle word. In the case of yami, it is joined to the particle ya-, hence the omission of the last syllable –na of mina.

This can be viewed slightly differently in Xhosa, however. In this instance, the first-person pronoun singular is mna (I) instead of mina. The fact that there is no vowel -i- in-between the consonants m and n of mna explains why the last vowel -i is always omitted. When the first-person singular pronoun is joined to the particle word ya-, the last syllable –na also gets omitted just like in Zulu. By omitting this last syllable, only the consonant m- remains without the vowel -i-. It is for this reason that it becomes yam (ya-+-mn+- na) instead of yami (ya-+-mi+-+na) of Zulu. It should be noted that the syllable –na is included in the above illustrations for the sake of showing the difference. The actual forms of these words are: ‘ya+-mi’ (yami) of Zulu and ‘ya-+-m’ (yam) of Xhosa.

The art of vowel elision is also evident in Masaka’s speech in Cartoon 2 below:
Figure 2: Cartoon 2; Source: Mngadi, 2014.

Figure 2 depicts the results of a match between Orlando Pirates and Free States Stars. The character of Masaka is celebrating that Orlando Pirates has defeated Free State Stars. Masaka is seen carrying a syringe, which is used to administer an enema, and on the television, a Free State Stars player is shown to be positioned like someone who is ready to receive the enema. From the context of the cartoon, this signifies that he is defeated. The syringe is thus used to portray that Orlando Pirates has defeated Free State Stars. The score in the television also reflects this as it shows that Orlando Pirates won 1-0 over Free State Stars. Mngadi uses this analogy to skilfully present this idea.

One of the lines Masaka uses to praise Pirates in Figure 2 is: “Nazo ke Ndod’emnyama!” (There you go Blackman!). The word group ‘Ndod’emnyama’ (Blackman) is actually made up of two words, the noun ‘Ndoda’ (Man) and the relative ‘emnyama’ (that is black). The last vowel -a of the noun ‘ndoda’ has been omitted so that the word group ‘Ndoda’emnyama’ (Blackman) can be pronounced quicker just like in everyday speech. Masaka articulates this word group quicker because he is shouting from excitement in this cartoon, hence the use of exclamation marks. It is rare, if not impossible, for someone who is excited to speak slowly. Orlando Pirates is regarded as ‘Ndoda emnyama’ (Blackman), because the team is associated with the black colour in general. This is also evident in their black jerseys.

The employment of vowel elision can also be examined from the cartoon below:

Figure 3: Cartoon 3; Source: Mngadi, 2014.

The cartoon shows a conflict between comrades of the African National Congress (ANC), on the one hand, and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), on the other. Mngadi highlights how members of the same parties fight among themselves. In the cartoon, one of the ANC members is seen using a chair as a weapon against his own comrade. This is also clear when the EFF member pokes his own member with a sword. The problem of fighting for positions is common in politics. Members of the same parties fight among themselves for positions, and sometimes they do this in the presence of their opponents as depicted in the cartoon above. What is happening in this cartoon suggests that the fighting over positions by political parties causes internal conflict within these parties, which makes them vulnerable to their respective rivals. Instead of being united and challenging their oppositions, they fight among themselves.

This problem is not only limited to politics, but to other areas of life where people frequently fight for positions as well. Greed is one of the causes of corruption. The same can be said about the issue of fighting for positions. It originates from greed among other things. It is people’s habit to want more in addition to what they already have. They always want more. It is for this reason that they fight for higher positions as they know that they will benefit more financially.
Figure 3 depicts one of the ANC members saying: “Ningazos’chathela nina la” (You, do not administer an enema to us here). It is clear that the vowel of the syllable -s(i)- in ‘ningazos’chathela’ is omitted. The original word is ‘ningazosichathela’ (you, do not administer an enema to us). The purpose of omitting vowels for the intention of making pronunciation quicker is evident even here. The ANC comrade is shouting from frustration, and it is therefore not a surprise that the vowel -i- is omitted to enable the word to be pronounced quicker as one would anticipate. Mngadi’s use of vowel omission, in an attempt to make the cartoon to be socially relevant, is evident even here.

Ellipsis

Another element of omission occurs through ellipsis. This form refers to the omission of one or more words in a sentence (Cuddon, 2013: 231; Baldick, 2001: 77, Hawthorn, 1998: 99). Satia (2000: 28) expands from the common definition given by the scholars above by indicating that ellipsis is generally employed for the purpose of revealing a “pause, thought or point of intersection in a discourse situation”. Alluding to this, Miller (2003: 252) says: “From a linguistic point of view, ellipsis involves constructions in which a grammatically required element is omitted by the speaker, thus creating a structural hole or gap”. Baldick (Op cit.) adds that even though the omitted words are imperative for complete meaning, they can be understood from the context in their absence. Ellipsis is, in essence, one of the stylistic tools or literary devices writers utilise to pass or communicate their messages. They do this through the omission of certain words for certain effects.

One of the ways of indicating ellipsis is through the use of three dots (but this is not always the case), which highlight that something has been excluded (Lutrin & Pincus, 2002: 12). Writers employ ellipsis for different stylistic reasons and Mngadi employs it for the purpose of indicating a pause in a person’s speech, and to show an incomplete mysterious thought.

The first example is analysed from Cartoon 4 in the words of Jacob Zuma, after Desmond Tutu warns him to “watch out”:

![Figure 4: Cartoon 4; Source: Mngadi, 2014.](image)

Desmond Tutu, the man on the left, is a South African priest who was instrumental during the struggle against apartheid. In real life, he once issued a statement where he expressed his discontent against the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC) and its president at the time, Jacob Zuma, the man on the right of the cartoon. Tutu complained about the values that the ANC was beginning to abandon and warned the party and its president to “watch out”. This was after the South African government refused to grant the religious leader from Tibet, the Dalai Lama, a visa to attend a conference in Cape Town (News 24, 2011).

In Figure 4 above, the first ellipsis dots in Zuma’s speech bubble indicate a pause or silence. It shows that he thinks, hence the silence, before answering Tutu. The second ellipsis, after answering Tutu, indicates that he has an unfinished thought that is mysterious. His facial expression also shows that there are some words in his mind that have not been uttered yet. It is evident that the ellipsis in the cartoon above is stylistically employed for the purpose of indicating a pause and to show an incomplete, mysterious thought. Tutu’s ellipsis shows that he has an unfinished thought as well. His warning shows how some of the people are beginning to question the ideals of the ANC. It also shows how some are beginning to show their discontent. Most of the people who are beginning to show discontentment are veterans of the party such as Tutu who are able to compare how the party was like in the past as compared to the present. His experience makes his argument solid, in a sense. Tutu is in a better position to compare what has changed and remained the same in the ANC. Even though he is not an active member of the party, and does not hold any position, he has been affiliated with ANC from the struggle against apartheid. He knows a lot about the party.

It is ironic to see that Zuma does not take Tutu’s words serious in Figure 4. His facial expression indicates that he is irritated by Tutu. The cartoonist thus uses this scenario to show that, in real life, there was bitterness that developed between Tutu and Zuma as a result of the religious leader who was not granted a visa to attend the conference in Cape Town.

The use of ellipsis is also evident in Figure 5 from the presenter’s words below:
Julius Malema is humorously displayed in a television show (Khumbul' ekhaya) in the cartoon above. Khumbul' ekhaya is a South African (SABC 1) television programme serving the purpose of reconciling people to their loved ones who went missing. Julius Malema, on the other hand, is a South African politician who was once a member of the ANC. He broke off from the ANC, the ruling party in South Africa, to form his new political party, named Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). That was after his conflict with the ANC. By using the analogy of Khumbul’ ekhaya, the cartoon is presenting the idea that the ANC is searching and seeking to be reconciled with Julius Malema, who left the party. The analogy of Khumbul’ ekhaya presents the idea that Malema is a loved one by the ANC. Individuals take their loved ones to Khumbul’ ekhaya because they miss and love them. An effort to search for them is made as a result of this mutually shared feeling. By using this analogy, the cartoonist depicts the idea that Malema was a loved one by the ANC hence the efforts to be reconciled with him.

The use of ellipsis can be analysed from the presenter’s speech above. She explains that some members of the ANC have asked to be assisted in searching for Malema, but she does not complete her sentence by explaining what happened to him. The use of the three dots indicates that something has been omitted from her statement. Khumbul’ ekhaya is a show for missing people and it would take someone who knows that to determine the missing portion from the presenter’s statement, and that could be the word ‘owalahl eka’ (the one who got lost). Ellipsis is thus utilised to depict an unfinished thought in this regard. This broadcast in the cartoon indicates that some of the members of the ANC value Malema’s presence in the party as they are determined to bring him back.

Another example is examined from Figure 6 below:

Another example of an ellipsis that expresses an incomplete, mysterious thought is evident in the cartoon above. Mama kamshana 4, 5 & 6 is on the phone and the ellipsis, as shown by the three dots in the statement: “We oh! ngiphuma ukuyokwenza izinzipho nezinkophe...” (We oh! I come back from making nails and eye lashes...), suggests that something has been omitted in her speech. The fact that she is yawning may also suggest that the ellipsis depicts a pause or silence in her speech. One cannot talk while yawning.

Ankeli is expressing his complaint in the cartoon above. He is complaining because he knows that Mama kamshana 4, 5 & 6 is using her children’s grant money to do Brazilian hair. The cartoon is highlighting one of the unethical phenomena in society, where women use their children’s grant money for their own interests. This includes doing expensive hair and other items for their beauty.

Cartoon 7 below also demonstrates the use of ellipsis:
The conflict between the Department of Education (DoE) and the South African Democratic Teacher’s Union (SADTU) is portrayed in Figure 7 above. This is a real conflict that took place between the two institutions over the Annual National Assessment (ANA), as shown by the battle over the paper in the cartoon. ANA is an annual assessment written nationally that tests pupil’s literacy and numeracy skills (Kanjee & Moloi, 2014: 91). While the DoE instituted and supported ANA, SADTU disapproved of it and claimed that it degraded teachers (The Witness, 2015). The cartoon shows one joint hand from different members of SADTU as they battle against ANA, and this signifies their unity and determination to eradicate this project. In reality, they were persistent in their determination to eradicate ANA and their efforts were rewarded as ANA was postponed in 2015.

The example of ellipsis is evident from the sentence: “Kahleni nizowudabula!” (Wait, you will tear it apart!), expressed by the personified DoE in the cartoon above. This sentence is not complete. The object is omitted and only represented by the object concord -wu-. The reader would have to read the label to understand that the object being referred to, and not written, is the Annual National Assessment (ANA).

The statement: “Sifuna kona!” (We want that!), by SADTU, is also not complete. SADTU members express that they ‘want that’ without specifying what they are referring to exactly. The reader would have to read the label and the personified DoE’s speech to determine that what SADTU wants is to tear ANA apart, which signifies the eradication of ANA. The context thus plays a role in bringing clarity as Baldick highlights above.

The same can be said about Figure 8 below as Ankeli’s speech demonstrates the use of ellipsis:

Mngadi uses labelling in the newspaper ‘Isolezwe’ to show some of the wrong doings of teachers in the cartoon above. This includes the habit of fighting for positions, striking, administering corporal punishment, absenteeism, dating and impregnating learners, to name a few. These are some of the common wrong doings that are often considered to be perpetuated by teachers. It seems like they have become a serious problem as there are constant reports on them. The cartoon highlights the fact that these wrong doings pose a problem to the progress of teaching and learning in general. There is no effective teaching and learning that can take place in such an environment as these problems directly affect both teachers and learners.

Ankeli’s statement in Figure 8 above: “Kuphela-ke into abayaziyo, nansi! Bafundisa nini?” (This is the only thing they know! When are they teaching?) is an example of ellipsis from a linguistic point of view; the statement is not complete. He remarks that this is what they know but does not specify whom he is referring to and what exactly it is that the people know. It would take the reader to
read what is written in the newspaper to understand that Ankeli is referring to the wrong doings of teachers. The examples above illustrate Mngadi’s successful use of ellipsis and the role of labelling in bringing full clarity.

Conclusion

The role vowel elision and ellipsis play, in contextualising the cartoons, was highlighted in this paper. Mngadi uses the two aspects to artistically convey his content to readers. While vowel elision marks the quick pronunciation of words, ellipsis signifies the incomplete nature of thoughts from characters. It also indicates the omission of words for brevity purposes. It is through the analysis of these aspects that Mngadi’s way of expressing himself artistically, to make his cartoons meaningful to analyse, is realised. This discussion has indicated that a literary approach to cartoons can also yield reliable analysis.

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