

The Choice of Diction as Empowerment for Marital Freedom: A Study of Selected Divorce Registers in a Nigerian Newspaper

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Abstract

For some time now, the female gender has strived to make an impression in the supposedly male dominated world. Consequently, several methods ranging from symposia, workshops, conferences, publications to appeal have been adopted to find a position for the female in the globe. In all of this, both the verbal and non-verbal means of communication are adopted. In Nigeria today, the woman has succeeded in finding her voice both in marriage and even outside marriage. Thus, contrary to what used to exist especially in the Northern part of the country and especially among members of the Islamic religion, talking about marriage and the rights of the woman, the women by their choice of diction now can determine their lot in wedlock and their choice to be let loose of the marital bondage. In this paper, we explore how the Nigerian female, through her choice of words, not only make her intentions known but also succeed at persuading her listeners to understand her plight. In doing this, we examine the divorce discourse of The Punch Newspaper between 1st January 2012 to 29 September, 2015. Adopting Engberg's (2010) second role of language for specific purposes, we unravel how the Nigerian females in the divorce dilemma combine discourse features, established through cultural knowledge and social background to fight her course. As suggested by Engberg, (2010) therefore, it was discovered from the analyzed data that the basic assumption lying behind the subject's choice of diction is marked by the characteristics of the participants in the communication business and the purposes pursued by the female participants. Apart from their use of metaphors, simile, analogy rhetoric, concession strategy etc., the female participants in this register also appeal to emotions. Such is the case with one of the informant's claim: "Please, I still need him; he is the father of my child; don't separate us". Also discovered in the data is the diction of common knowledge as well as the diction of abstraction as found in: "I am always available for his sexual satisfaction, but he does not respond".

Keywords: Marital Freedom, Saturday Punch Newspaper, Diction, Empowerment, Divorce Registers

Introduction

The concept of language change in society may be conceived beyond being a natural to a needed phenomenon among language users today. This is especially so when we consider the post-structuralists' view that man's linguistic identity is fluid. The Nigerian woman, in a bid to be relevant and socially vindicated, adopts language to make a point in the divorce register. In this paper, we explore how the Nigerian woman creates for herself a voice to be acknowledged by men on one hand and the entire society on the other. Our understanding of this linguistic creativity goes beyond the popular and possibly over-flogged issue of women's liberation to being what we have referred to as 'marital disentanglement via diction'. Such choice of words ensures not only emotional freedom but also helps to eradicate social disintegration which usually accompanies divorce in this part of the world.

We are not ignorant of the fact that several bodies not excluding individuals consider the liberation of women as confrontational, unhealthy, anti-social and even ungodly. However, if we consider Po-Vi-Liu's (2013) submission that language in many situations dictates the power we have in relation to our other colleagues and partners and to other people in society, then we will understand that our informants' careful though purposeful choice of words and expressions in this discourse is a needed tool to either retain their positions in marriage (in situations it is the men who want the divorce) or to avoid societal stigma which usually goes with divorce (in instances where the woman herself demands the breakup). In this paper, we see empowerment as an act of making someone stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their life and claiming their right.

Background to the Study

Marriage in Nigeria is neither as 'transparent' nor as 'rigid' as what obtains in the Ethiopia community. In Ethiopia, for instance, women cannot marry before they are eighteen. Similarly, the men cannot marry until they are twenty-two. There are no such rigid rules in Nigeria. The Nigerian female could marry as early as her family or even men around recognize she has the feminine features. Thus, some females get married at ridiculous ages such as age twelve or even below. These are ages where she cannot be said to understand the language of general communication let alone understand the marital language. Similarly, some men could also get themselves entangled before the 'age of reasoning'. The implication usually is that apart from the economic and emotional immaturity of such young married ones, we also recognize linguistic impoverishment that may afterwards result in their inability to keep the marriage alive or keep alive outside the marriage (by withstanding societal criticisms that accompany divorce).

Furthermore, while sanity could be relatively maintained in Ethiopia considering the grave punishment that follows misconduct by either of the parties, the Nigerian woman is usually at the mercy of both the husband and society as far as enjoying marriage vows is concerned. Following this, she tends to linger on irrespective of odds, afraid of being labeled.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, using Engberg's (2010) view of language for specific purposes, we expound how the informants (Nigerian women in divorce discourse) employ language contextually for the purpose of registering not only their intentions but also their human rights. Engberg (2010) views language for specific purposes as aspects of actual communication in specialized discursive domains. He recognizes two poles of the field. The second pole on which this research is anchored is closely connected to the concept of specialized meaning. In his words:

The center of this pole is the concept meant by the German term *fachsprache*, i.e. domain or subject specific language. This concept lays more weight upon the specialized meanings constituting a domain and upon the relations between these meanings and the linguistic choices conventionally made by the agents of the domain... this view is more discourse oriented in its approach (p. 144).

Our choice of this model is because it has its roots in sociology and dialectology. Consider how Engberg (2010: 144-145) puts it:

This study leads to an early interest in global model of communication in specialized settings combining text internal and text external factors in the descriptions and focusing upon global explanations including and combining discursual features, relevant knowledge, and social backgrounds rather than just finding specialized elements of the discourse.

We like Engberg see language use in this domain as being specialized. The understanding of the texts and the possible interpretations arrived at by the different participants are hinged on their sociological perception. To Engberg, "...the degree of specialization of a text and, connected to that, the relation between senders and receivers in a communicative situation concerning their respective levels of expertise is traditionally seen as a crucial factor when setting up models for specialized communication". (P. 14). The informants examined in this study adopt various styles to register their intentions.

Literature Review

Marriage takes place in Nigeria under three legal systems namely: common law (civil or statutory law), customary law and Islamic law. The issue of polygamy is gradually becoming less pronounced in the country although the men could still keep mistresses outside wedlock. It is worthy of note that most marriages under the customary and Islamic law are polygamous. Most Christian denominations still prohibit divorce, hanging on the biblical injunction found in I Timothy 3:2, 12 and Mark 10:2-9. For marriages that hold under the common law, the Matrimonial Cause Act says that a divorce may be granted to the petition if the marriage has broken down irretrievably.

A given marriage is said to have broken down irretrievably under certain conditions – such as non-consummation of marriage, adultery, a party deserting the marriage etc. Many reasons ranging from adultery, impotence of the husband, ill-treatment and cruelty to the

woman's barrenness may lead to the conditions that bring about divorce. Surprisingly, however, women could be divorced if they have no male children. It must be mentioned here that the rates of divorce have increased in the country in recent times. In this paper, we examine how women through their choice of diction in the divorce travail either retain their positions in the family (by fighting against divorce) or maintain a stigma-free status in society.

Methodology

Data which relate to marriage and divorce were collected from *The Punch* newspaper between 1st January 2012 through 29th of September, 2015. *The Punch*, also the publisher of *Saturday Punch*, is the most popular Nigerian dailies. In fact, it is believed to be second most read newspaper. It is a national paper which presents Nigeria's events of interest. It publishes more than 125,000 copies daily distributed to parts of the country. It also has an online version of the newspaper which can be read anywhere in the world. The paper dedicates a section to divorce issues in Nigeria in its Saturday editions. Such discourses are representative of all speech communities and religions in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we draw a link between the informants' choice of words and socio-cultural underpinning of the Nigerian people. In doing this, we first present the sample after which we examine how the discourse signals relevant knowledge and suggests possible logical direction to which the listeners should take.

Sample A

Also, he has made advances to all my friends including my siblings. He sleeps around with anything in skirt no matter the age, even those old enough to be his mother.

Saturday Punch, Feb. 9, 2012

That was the ordeal of a 44 year old woman who had been married for 25 years but would want the marriage dissolved. It is common knowledge to expect that a woman who had endured for that long in marriage should hang on till death. However, the informant, through her choice of diction, appealed to reasoning, here, presenting the danger that lies in staying a day longer with a man who 'who could sleep with anything in skirt'. The implication, therefore is that much more than committing adultery, the said husband could rape as well as sexually molest a female, irrespective of her age as long as she is in skirts. No sane society would want such a man around. The reference created of the man is more of a criminal than a husband. The overall generated message of this discourse therefore goes beyond listeners' knowledge of the meanings of the words. Its understanding could be related to Sullivan's (2010) concept of causal theories of reference and meaning. To him, the causal-historical theory is an externalist approach to reference, in that reference depends largely on factors external to the speaker's head-factors,

pertaining to the speakers' linguistic community and to the environment in which the expression in question evolved (p. 42).

It is little wonder therefore that, the mother of four, having empowered herself through her choice of diction could tell the court that it might sound awkward to dissolve her 25 year old marriage but that she knew what she was doing.

Sample B

My baby is two months old and I have not seen him for some time; he does not come home; even when the baby was sick, he did not show up. Instead, he calls me to abuse me that I should keep going about with a stupid court letter. His family does not care about me and the child either. His mother says she does not want me in the family because my mother sells herb

Saturday Punch, Dec. 15, 2012.

The use of speech in a distinctive way such as we have in sample B above creates a special effect. The list of activities or highlighted characteristics of the object of discourse in sample B is an example of innuendo. Innuendo is conceived as 'saying something without saying it', often implying something negative, through allusion or insinuation.

The wife, in Nigeria, most often than not is not expected to challenge her spouse let alone accuse him especially in public. In fact, in some communities, the woman has no right to partake in or contribute to any family discussion, especially when a third party is involved. Anything contrary is seen as insubordination. This informant, however, overcame this challenge through metaphorical sense. No responsible man, for instance, would abandon a two-month-old baby when he/she is well let alone abandon him/her when he/she is not well. Thus, although the aggrieved wife is prevented from calling her husband names due to social norms, she made her listeners understand the message by her use of innuendo.

What is more, she increased her attempt of empowering herself by stating that the family detests her because to them, her mother sells herb. Herbs in Nigeria serve a number of functions. They are used as prevention or cure for ailments. They could also be needed for some supernatural effects. It is usually believed that the herb seller has some supernatural power and could inflict sickness or doom on an enemy or rival as the case may be. Following this background knowledge, the informant implies a number of things although these have not been clearly said by her.

It is no news that the Nigerian community places much importance on procreation. As a matter of fact, one of the major reasons members of the community go into marriage is to have children. It is not surprising therefore that supplications such as: "May your children surround your table"; "We will come to rejoice with you in nine months' time" are heard on wedding days. If, however, prayers are unanswered, the woman usually is blamed for being unproductive.

Consequently, in a bid to retain her position in the home on the one hand, and her social dignity in society on the other, she takes responsibility for the couple's inability to beget children. It is thus expected of her to cooperate with her partner, in-laws, and the society all the way, whatever it will cost her. She thus carries the burden which may actually not be hers. Today, however, women react differently. They would either not accept total responsibility for 'barrenness' or choose to live their lives whether or not the babies do come. The informant in Sample C below, for instance, did the unimaginable of a Nigerian woman looking for the fruit of the womb. Consider her:

Sample C

She urged the court to dissolve the marriage, adding:
"I cannot continue to endure in an unproductive marriage
and with a man that has no respect for his wife."
Saturday Punch of 28th of September 2014.

How dare her. A number of sociolinguistic implicatures could be derived from the data. Contrary to what society expects, she publicly posits that her husband and not her should be seen as being responsible for an unproductive marriage. Following this claim, she would not mind a divorce. Furthermore, the pragmatic meaning derivable from the clause, "I cannot endure with a man that has no respect for his wife" is that of the woman conceiving of herself first as a human being before being a woman. What is more, another pragmatic implicature is seen in the man being presented as the indirect agent of non-productivity. How do we, for instance explain the informant's submission that though the marriage had not produced any child yet she was fed up with her husband's harshness.

Nigerian women, today, do not see marriage as an end in itself. Before now, the Nigerian woman would rather die of frustration than have a broken home. To fail in marriage was almost like a taboo. But there is a sense of liberation enjoyed relatively today. In the words of one Mrs. Bamitale Damilola Adeniyi (interviewed by *P.M. News* of Nov. 11, 2011), when asked what a woman should do when the man insists on divorce:

If a man wants a divorce, the woman should give it to him if she still cherishes her life. That means the man is already operating on high level. A woman cannot force herself on a man; it will be like a dog living in a lions' den.

Sample D

This informant, who herself filed for a divorce on the grounds that her pastor husband (a General Overseer) is fetish and adulterous adopts two major discourse strategies to register her intention – that of being liberated from a marital bondage. The first major method adopted by her is analogy rhetoric whereby she argues through parallel cases. Consider the cases as presented below.

Case 1

The informant told the court that her husband took a church member to a hotel in Enugu.

Three lexical choices of the informant help register some message. Their choice may not be unintentional. The first lexical choice is 'church-member'. In analogy rhetoric, the listener is expected to deduce the unsaid from the said. The idea of a pastor having carnal knowledge of his church member could be likened to God's accusation of the shepherd ill-treating the sheep during the period of the Prophet Jeremiah. What is more, the said Pastor is presented as nurturing a hotel rather than his church or home. The gravity of the offence is revealed in the fact that a pastor of a church at Sango (a city around Lagos) traveled to as far as Enugu (a city in the Eastern part of the country) to commit adultery.

Case 2

The lid blew off my husband's escapades when he mistakenly brought home the traveling bag of the concubine he took to the undisclosed hotel in Enugu.

There have been many struggles by different groups to liberate women all over the world. While the different efforts have supposedly liberated women from the domination of their male counterparts, government laws and education marginalization, they have surprisingly not been able to liberate the woman from the domination of social expectations. From our analyses, however, it is certain that women in the marriage divorce discourse adopt tactical rather than confrontational strategy to state the obvious. In case 2 above, for instance, the informant presents the man as not being as smart as society believes of the male gender after all. How will anyone explain why he would bring a wrong bag from a supposedly journey as long as presented?

Case 3

The embattled wife claimed that her step-son urged her to hire assassins to kill her husband (and of course the step-son's father) but she refused the advice.

Although case 3 is incongruous to cases 1 and 2 above, it is relevant in reflecting the informant's innocence and affirming the genuineness of her claims.

Case 4

She pleaded with the court to dissolve her marriage on the grounds that it lacked love, stressing that her husband whom she said possessed a PhD charmed her.

The weapon of argument employed by the plaintiff in this case lies in making her audience draw the link between somebody holding a PhD and his being involved in charm. The two ordinarily should not be on a par. The argument, therefore, is that we do not expect a PhD

holder to be associated with magical powers whose authenticity cannot be proven especially when such a PhD holder is also a pastor.

Case 5

“I did not know my husband had nine children with his other wife before I married him. I was already four months pregnant before I discovered he had nine children. There was nothing I could do at that point,” she said.

Case 5 is a follow up on the previous cases. The informant aimed at empowering herself through her choice of lexis enough to be freed from the stigma which ordinarily accompanies a woman or anybody at that who rubbishes a “man of God”. To ensure this, apart from adopting the analogy rhetoric, the informant also employed the concession strategy. Concession is an argumentative strategy whereby a speaker having presented some cases leaves the hearer to judge by himself. The judge in court could not do otherwise than submit that the defendant (the Pastor, General Overseer) had acted contrary to what is expected of clerics like him – living above board by showing good examples.

(Cases 1-5 were taken from *Saturday Punch* of August 31, 2013)

Sample E

She said, “My husband is a shameless man. He slept with my best friend. My husband is a womanizer. I caught him making love to my best friend in her house. I refuse to employ any house help again as he has turned them into sex machine. I stopped making love to him and I stopped washing his clothes when I always discovered sperm in his boxers”.

Saturday Punch of August 24, 2013.

This is the blunt and raw declaration of a defendant whose husband had asked that their 12 year old marriage be dissolved on the grounds of alleged threat to life and lack of respect for the plaintiff. As a form of defense, the defendant adopts taboo language. What does it matter anyway, the embattled married Nigerian woman may ask.

In Kottak’s (2001:269) view, “culture is an attribute not of individuals per se but of individuals as members of group”. Thus, culture is transmitted in society. The members of a community are therefore guided by some norms. These norms are necessary to regulate members’ behaviour to ensure peaceful co-existence among them. It is a taboo, for instance, in Nigeria to employ vulgar language especially in public. We notice a disregard for such norms in Sample E above. This may not be unintentional. The informant’s choice of diction may not be unconnected with her aim to register her disregard for a custom that sees the woman as an instrument, a slave to be driven around in matrimony.

Sample F

In informant F's words: "What my husband said is true, I always beat him but I do not know what usually comes over me whenever I did that. Some unknown spirits push me to do it. I still love my husband and I want the matter to be settled amicably. I do not want to leave him and I promise that I will never beat him again".

Saturday Punch of August 24, 2013.q

The specimen above will ordinarily send a shiver down the spine of a Nigerian male adult. This time not necessarily that of fear but rather of indignation. The social import of a working Nigerian home lies in the man's ability to provide for the members of his family, dictate the lifestyle of the inmates and possibly physically assault his wife. These features typically characterize homes which are totally anchored on the African's beliefs concerning the marriage institution and how it should be run. Certain practices are taboo in the society. For instance, in the Igala community, it is an abomination for a man to hold a broom to sweep let alone do this where women are present. What's more, it is an inhibition, a ban that the wife should beat her husband. Society in its entirety frowns at this. The informant, in order to escape the social stigma that accompanies her action and inaction appeals to emotion. In her words, she is being controlled by some unseen spirits and still loves her husband. What a dilemma.

Sample G (i)

"Ibrahim is a hot tempered person, he gets angry at the slightest provocation," she said, adding that even when I am pregnant he beats me.

Saturday Punch 28th September, 2015.

Sample G (ii)

"I bought a motorcycle (okada) for my husband to use for commercial purposes but he stays at home and does not work. He later sold the motorcycle without my consent and I do not know what he used the money for," the estranged wife said.

Saturday Punch 28th September, 2015.

There is truly no doubt that the state of the mind of the speaker or writer places some constraints on the quantity or quality of words he/she uses in discourse. The fact however remains that even at this, the norms that guide participants of a given community in discourse still stand out. The import of language use in this domain (where the estranged wife defends the superiority of her proposition irrespective of what society dictates) is noticeable. She prevailed against the socio-cultural variables that ordinarily affect the production of discourse. The informant's choice of the present tense form of the word *beats* against the past tense form of *beat*

is significant to the overall meaning and messages derived. The assumption is that the husband even outside court has the tendency to beat her in pregnancy. To complement this is her systematic presentation of herself as a being capable of providing for the family, having the right to decisions taken in the family and a major partner in the business running of the family. These propositions cannot be obviously stated except they are woven round a discourse for the audience to digest just as she had done in the text. By her use of language, she has established the proposition that whoever controls the language controls the culture. Language as used by this informant is intended to perform a communicative act. This intention is better understood by considering Osoba and Sobola's (2014:208) view that:

Every utterance made by a speaker is meant to perform an action that is changing the reality of the situation in context. It is the performative function or illocutionary act of the speech acts. The outcome of a communicative act is the action carried out as a result of the utterance, which is illocutionary result.

Sample H:

She said, "My husband's smoking habit is uncontrollable. It is so worrisome that he smokes cigarette even in our Bedroom not minding my presence.

She went further to say that:

He derives pleasure in wining and dining with friends not minding me and the children

Saturday Punch, September 14, 2015.

Contrary to the informant's husband's expectation that his wife should endure matrimonial abuse all the way (in his words, "my wife knew I smoke cigarette before she agreed to marry me"; so I cannot understand why she is now complaining about my smoking habit), the informant brought in reasoning beyond the generally expected proposition of the Nigerian marriage domain. The basic observation in sample H above lies behind the the way discourse had been written as characterizing the ideology of the informant in this communication process and the purposes pursued by her. The recent law in various parts of the country that forbade smoking in public and in the presence of children could have helped somewhat in empowering the informant. The idea, therefore is that as much as language and culture are interwoven with the latter being the carrier of the former, members of a society actually make-up the elements found in the culture. Thus, if language changes, we expect norms and practices of the culture in question to equally change. Marriage is about living and not existing irrespective of cultural norms that dictate behavior and reasoning. This informs sample I below:

Sample I:

"My Lord, I want an end to this marriage because I see no reason in enduring with a man that value cigarette smoking more

than his wife.” Continuing, she said, “my husband will even at times, smoke in our bedroom and sitting room, polluting the whole environment and making it uncomfortable for living,” she said.

Saturday Punch, Jan 18, 2015.

It is observable how the wife tied their inability to have children to her husband’s excessive smoking habit although she did not categorically express this in words. Consider the newspaper report. “According to her, their marriage was contracted in 2011 and had yet to produce any child”, Successful communication is guided by a number of factors among which is tactfulness. By her conscientious choice of words, this informant adopts favourable linguistic discernment thus presenting her argument to be strong enough to convince her ‘Lord’, the court president, without saying things that would upset societal laid down norms and values.

The study of language for specific purposes (LSP) goes beyond being an applied linguistics to being the application of appropriate means of interaction. Language intelligence or better still communicative intelligence which transcends one having abstract linguistic knowledge to his/her understanding circumstantial principles needed to register his/her intention without offending the other party is demonstrated by the informants. This informs sample J below:

Sample J:

“Everyday he beats me silly and he says he is a Christian, she said”

Saturday Punch February 9th, 2012.

The two lexical items that catch the addressees’ attention in the text J are **silly** and **Christian**. Much is expected of the addressee to deduce of the character and personality of the actor (i.e husband in question as well as his act. Silly is used in this discourse does not presuppose simple, unsophisticated or ordinary. Rather, it could connote which are pitiable, deserving compassion, helpless on one hand and semiconscious on the other hand. The ambiguity created by the speaker may not be unintentional. As a matter of fact, the word **silly** may be erroneously taken as a slang item. Generally, we see the discourse as a departure from the normal models of communication. The discourse is actually selective. This selectivity we tie round Titscher et al’s (2000) three stage selection process which consist of the components of information, utterance and understanding. The information process relates to the selection from a (known or unknown) repertoire of possible themes just as the word **silly** suggests from these various options, the addressee is expected to decipher what is indicated. The third selection of understanding brings about a change of state in the reliever. The court president, for instance, is left to read as many meanings as possible to the item. Similarly, by her use of the item **Christian**, the informant creates several images in the minds of her audience, the court president inclusive. A Christian is enjoined to make peace and be at peace with all men. What do we make of a supposed Christian who beats his wife silly everyday?

Our informants' choice of words may not be divorced from the pragmatic impulse informants want to propel. Firth 1957, maintains that normal linguistic behavior is meaning effort directed towards the maintenance of appropriate patterns of life. Our informants sometimes use particular lexical items to reveal the negative roles played by their actors. The implication is that the overall contextual meaning of such chosen words says a lot about the person being talked about, the way he perceives himself, his roles in society (i.e. in the marriage domain) and his relationship with one other members in the marriage domain. Consider sample K.

Sample K:

“My husband is a pathological liar, it was after ten years that I know that the woman he called his cousin and her children are his wife and children”, she said.

Saturday Punch, July 13th 2013.

The relations that exist between the items **pathological** and **lie** transcend that of collocation to semantics. If collocation suggests the harmony that items keep I discourse such that the mention of one almost immediately suggest the other(s) in the family, then we could hold that **pathology** and **liar** belong to different families. We may, however, be wrong after all if we consider the insanity that lies in the misrepresentation of identity displayed by the man of discourse in text K. The informant sees him (her husband) as being not only a liar but also somebody who has deviated from a healthy, or normal condition. Much is implied here. Language does much more than to express a speaker's view or opinion. To Oyetade (2015), it also helps in fostering an enabling environment for human development. What the informant unknowingly has done in this discourse is to unearth the taken-for-granted behaviours in marriage which could in the end bring about values that may jeopardize the family at one end of the scale and the entire society at the other end of the scale.

Conclusion

The findings of the work show that the Nigerian woman attempts to empower herself through her choice of diction, bearing it in mind that society itself through its customs and practices bury her in challenges which usually accompany marriage and demands in the country. We see this as a healthy development. The idea is to set the Nigerian woman free of what Egbo (2010) presents as gendered language practices which can affect the overall life chances of girls and women. Egbo goes on to say: “In many parts of the world, access to certain kinds of language and discourse is often associated with increases in life chances which are a friction of two elements – options and ligatures”. (p. 450). We hold that though the Nigerian woman already has formed bonds by virtue of her immersion in the Nigerian culture (ligatures) she has options to reject negative societal dictates through her choice of diction. It is clear from the foregoing that the success of the struggle for women's liberation may not be race, class, or even

group motivated but rather through individual diction. The women examined in this study and by extension every woman in this category want to be loved and respected for who they are as people, and not as some purchased materials. What the informants do indirectly is build upon the victories of the women's liberation movement of the sixties through their choice of diction.

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