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Divorce as Conflict: Representation of Participants in Selected Nigerian Newspaper Reports on Divorce Cases

AYO OSISANWO¹ AND VICTOR OLUWAYEMI²

Abstract

A number of studies have been carried out on divorce from sociological, psychological and religious standpoints. Studies on divorce from linguistic perspective in Nigeria are hard to come by. Therefore, this paper conceives divorce as a conflict site and examines representations of participants in selected Nigerian newspaper reports on divorce cases. Data for the study were drawn from fifteen divorce reports, five from each of *The Punch*, *The Guardian* and *The Nigerian Tribune* newspapers published electronically between 2016 and 2018. The data were analysed using Halliday's transitivity aspect of the systemic functional linguistics and Fetzer's macro concept of context. Five processes (material, verbal, mental, relational and existential) are used in presenting both negative and positive representational strategies. Following Fetzer's categorisations, three context types (linguistic, social and socio-cultural) helped in projecting twelve representational strategies. While ten of the strategies are for negative other-representations, including husband as killer or beater, ritualist, adulterer, uncaring, less than a man, and pretender or liar, and wife as diabolical or wicked, adulteress, uncaring or unsupportive, and dangerous or violent; two of the strategies are for positive self-representations, including husband as caring and wife as loving. The paper concludes that conflicting couples represent themselves as good while they present their partner as bad to achieve their desired goals.

Keywords: Nigerian newspaper reports divorce cases, marital conflict, representation of participants,

Introduction

Divorce is one of the silent but major challenges in the contemporary world. Divorce, like any other concept, has various definitions; but what is common in the definitions is that a marriage relationship is brought to an end. Nwoye (1999, p. 453) says “divorce is the only event that marks the official end of a marriage, just like a wedding ceremony marks the official beginning of the same marriage”. Munroe (2010) sees divorce as a societal condition which has become increasingly common since World War II. Compared to some years back, divorce has been on the increase in the Nigerian society. In every human society where various kinds of relationships are contracted,

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whether maritally or otherwise, conflict is inevitable. Hence, marital conflict is one of the realities in the contemporary world. In the words of Akanni (2006, p. 12), “fifty percent of the troubles on the face of the earth today are linked with troubles in the home”. Numerous reasons can be given to be the causes of marital conflict. Such reasons include lack of trust, financial incapability, infidelity, infertility, barrenness, impotence, third party influence or interference, sexual incompatibility, educational differences and joblessness. In a conflict discourse, language, whether linguistic or paralinguistic, serves as a potent and dominant weapon employed against one's opponent and most times, the goal of persons in conflict is to outsmart their opponent so as to win.

The media occupy a prominent place in the life of citizens of a country as they are kept abreast of happenings in their immediate and extended society. News is an important aspect of human life which has been with man from the very origin of life (Osisanwo (2016c). The reportage of marital conflicts in general and divorce in particular is one of the concentrations of the media, both electronic and print. However, since meaning is not neutral in media reports, but pragmatic and ideological, this study examines representations of participants in divorce cases reported in the selected Nigerian newspapers.

Literature Review and Statement of the Problem

Studies abound on media discourse from different fields of study in the world in general and in Nigeria in particular. Among these studies, especially from linguistic standpoints, are Taiwo (2007), Ayoola (2010), Osisanwo (2016a, 2016b), Odebunmi and Oloyede (2016) and Dunu (2017). Extant studies on divorce are mostly from sociological (Amadi and Amadi, 2014; Adeniran, 2015) and psychological (Adegoke, 2010; Tolorunleke, 2013) perspectives. Taiwo (2007) concentrates on language, ideology and power relations in Nigerian newspaper headlines. Ayoola (2010) looks at how actors in the Niger Delta crises in Nigeria represent themselves and others in their discourses as captured in Nigerian newspapers. Osisanwo (2016a) delves into the representation of Nigerian general elections and social actors in selected Nigerian news magazines' reports. Osisanwo (2016b) explores the discursive representation of *Boko Haram* terrorism in selected Nigerian newspapers. Similarly, Odebunmi and Oloyede (2016) examine frames and pragmatic strategies deployed by Nigerian newspaper reporters on the *Boko Haram* insurgency.

In their study, Amadi and Amadi (2014) explore the causes, consequences and management strategies of marital crises in the Nigerian society. Their findings indicate that crises in marital homes are occasioned by factors including incompatibility in social and sexual life, lack of marital confidence, third-party syndrome and economic disquiets. In another study,

Adeniran (2015) analyses the causal factors of divorce in African homes, and notes that the rampant occurrence of divorce in African homes is found to have socio-economic and political effects on the society. The study shows that the respondents perceived barrenness and infertility as the major causes of divorce. Similarly, Adegoke (2010) studies socio-cultural factors as determinants of divorce rates among women of reproductive age in five randomly selected local government areas in Ibadan metropolis in Nigeria. The study finds out that there is a relationship between cultural factors and childlessness within marriage, support by family and relatives, age at marriage, couple's role obligation and couple's ethnic/cultural background and divorce rates among women of reproductive age.

Without any doubt, none of these studies, although important to the current study, has examined divorce cases reported in the Nigerian newspapers from a linguistic viewpoint. Therefore, this study investigates how conflicting couples (husbands and wives) in the selected newspaper reports on divorce cases represent themselves, on the one hand, and their partners, on the other hand, to achieve their desired goal which is either for or against the divorce.

Methodology

Data for this study were gathered from three widely read Nigerian newspapers –*The Guardian*, *The Punch* and *The Nigerian Tribune*. These national dailies have nationwide coverage and frequently feature divorce reports. The data for the study were restricted to fifteen divorce reports, five for each of the selected newspapers between May 2016 and May 2018 because a number of divorce cases were reported during this period. The headlines and cover stories of these reports were purposively sampled for the analysis to reveal how participants in the reported divorce cases present themselves and their partners. The reported divorce cases, as at the time of reportage, were either ongoing or completed. Halliday's transitivity aspect of the Systemic Functional Linguistics and Fetzer's macro concept of context serve as the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Orientation

To achieve its objective, this study adopts Halliday's transitivity system of the Systemic Functional Linguistics and Fetzer's macro concept of context. In Halliday's transitivity system, the clause is seen as representation (ideational function), as an exchange (interpersonal function) and as a message (textual function). The clause as representation captures the experiences of human beings as representing 'worlds' whether imagined or experienced (Halliday, 1985, p.101). This function of the clause makes humans to be involved in the lives of other people, animals and other things in the world. Thus, the clause trifurcates into three components, namely the

process, the participants and the circumstance (Halliday, 1985, p. 199). These are “semantic categories that show how phenomena in the real world are presented in linguistic structures” (Halliday, 1985, p. 102).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004, p. 280), transitivity “is a theory of representation of process types of participants and the 'participant functions' associated with each process in the clause.” To the proponents, “the concepts of process, participant and circumstance are semantic categories that explain in the most general way how phenomena of our experience of the world are construed as linguistic structures” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 224). There are six types of transitivity processes. They are material, mental and relational, which are the main types, and behavioural, verbal and existential, which are the additional types.

Working within the macro concept of context by bringing together various types of context, Fetzer (2015) recognises four main types of context, namely linguistic, social, socio-cultural and cognitive contexts. She explains them thus:

Linguistic context refers to linguistic material that surrounds the linguistic unit to be examined, that is clauses, phrases, and constructions in syntax and morphology, propositions in semantics, and phonemes in phonology.

Social context comprises the extra-linguistic context of a speech situation and refers to its constitutive parts, viz. participants (e.g., speaker, hearer and audience) and their interactional roles, such as animator, principal, strategist (Goffman 1981), the immediate concrete physical surrounding including setting and time, and the global concrete surroundings including institutional domains.

Sociocultural context represents a culture-specific configuration and interpretation of social context and its basic parameters, such as time, space and institution.

Cognitive context refers to a psychological construct, as if reflected in 'context as other minds' (Givón, 2005), comprising mental representations, propositions and assumptions, for instance (Fetzer, 2015, p. 17-18).

She illuminates further on the concept of context in relation to pragmatics and socio-pragmatics as "a relational construct relating individual actors and their surroundings, relating social actions and their surroundings, relating social actions, and relating the set of individual actors and their social actions to their surroundings" (Fetzer & Akman, 2002, p. 391). Hence, transitivity choices and context in the data are identified and

how they are used in capturing the representation of discourse participants with lexical choices is examined.

Analysis and Findings

Two broad representational strategies are identified in the sampled data used by the couples in the divorce cases to represent selves and their partners. The first is the negative other-representation and the second is positive self-representation. Ten negative other-representational strategies and two positive self-representational strategies are identified, with the former being dominant. Types of context found in the data are linguistic, social, socio-cultural and cognitive contexts following Fetzer's categorisations.

Negative Other-representation

The dominant construction of discourse participants in the sampled divorce reports is negative other-representation. The ten negative other-representational strategies are classified into two: six, for husbands and four, for wives. For husbands, they include: husband as a(n) killer/beater, adulterer, ritualist, uncaring, less than a man, and pretender/liar. For wives, they are: wife as a(n) diabolical/wicked, adulteress, uncaring/unsupportive, and dangerous/violent. Each is taken in turn presently.

Husband as a Killer/Beater

A killer is a person who puts an end to the life of another person while a beater is someone who beats another person. The petitioner, a woman, represents her husband as a killer/beater. The lexical items “killed” and “beat” are used by the woman in her accusation against her husband. *The Guardian* newspaper foregrounds the negative labelling by presenting it as an introductory sentence. Text 1 below illustrates this.

Text 1:

My husband killed our baby when he beat the hell out of me three days to my delivery. (*The Guardian*, March 23, 2017)

Text 2:

My husband is a brute and has turned me into his punching bag. Hardly does a day pass by without him beating me. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, September 23, 2017)

In text 1, two material clauses make up the sentence. The material actions “killed” and “beat” are carried out by the same actor, represented by the nominal group “my husband” in the main clause and the third person pronoun “he” in the subordinate clause. The nominal group “our baby” and the first

person objective pronoun “me” are the goals of the material actions of the actor. The main clause seems to be suggesting that the husband intentionally “killed” his child but the subordinate clause provides more information about how the action of “killing” in the main clause is carried out. The subordinate clause functions as an adverbial clause of manner as it modifies the material process “killed” in the main clause. It further incriminates the husband who is presented not only as a killer but also a beater. The victim of the actions of killing and beating is directly his wife who from the circumstance of the subordinate clause is revealed to be heavily pregnant. The nominal group, “the hell out of me” instantiates the intense and brutal nature of the beating the wife is subjected to by her husband. Cognitive and social contexts are noteworthy here. In the former, the woman retells what happens in the past between herself and her husband –which is the shared knowledge between the duo– and in the latter, she uses her words to incriminate her husband since a court of law thrives on evidence and testimonies. Thus, the husband is presented as a beater whose act of beating his wife, whose expected delivery day was three days away, resulted in the death of their baby. With this accusation, the wife appeals to emotions of her addressees, particularly the court, to save her from a killing and beating husband by dissolving her marriage because her life is in grave danger.

The accusation in text 2 is a bit different from that of text 1. The first main clause in text 2 has an instance of relational process of being. The identified is the nominal group “My husband” while the relational process is the equative verb “is” and the identifier is the nominal group “a brute”. The lexical item “brute” has synonyms such as “bully”, “thug”, “beast” and “monster”. Thus, the metaphorisation of the husband as “a brute” connotes some animalistic tendencies and wild nature of the man who throws caution to the wind and beats his wife. The second main clause which is a material clause further heightens the beastly description given to the man in the first clause. The material process “has turned” is performed by the elliptical actor “my husband” and the goal (sufferer) is the first person pronoun “me” while a prepositional group “into his punching bag” shows the circumstance. The complement of the prepositional group “his punching bag” introduces another kind of social context –a boxing context– into the discourse where a “punching bag” is used by a boxer to train and it is always at the receiving end for it cannot fight back. This simply means that the wife is a helpless victim like a “punching bag” which suffers ceaselessly in the hands of the boxer – her husband.

Husband as an Adulterer

Some of the husbands in the data are presented as adulterers. Adultery has to do with having a voluntary sexual relationship with another person other than one's spouse and this can also be referred to as infidelity, which is

one of the identified causes of divorce in the society (Amada & Amadi, 2014). Near synonyms of adultery are used in describing some husbands in divorce reports, as exemplified in texts 3 and 4 below.

Text 3:

My husband abandoned us after he impregnated another woman. (*The Punch*, December 11, 2017)

Text 4:

My husband was sleeping with our housemaid and that was why he was against me sending her back to her parent. (*The Guardian*, December 22, 2017)

Texts 3 and 4 capture negative representations of husbands as adulterers by their wives in divorce discourse. In text 3, the material processes in the main clause “abandoned” and in the subordinate clause “impregnated” are performed by the actor “my husband” whom the third person singular pronoun “he” anaphorically locates in the main clause. However, the focus is on the circumstance in which the adulterous act of the accused husband is well portrayed because the material process in the main clause is as a result of that of the subordinate. The material action in the subordinate clause “impregnated” which is executed by the husband has a nominal group “another woman” as its direct object. Here, the husband is not only exposed as a person who enjoys adultery but also goes on to “impregnate another woman”. The modifying adjective “another” in the nominal group “another woman” is used to portray the “otherness” of the discourse and to underscore the commission of an act of adultery. Within the marital context, the man is supposed to be married to his wife alone; having “another” woman is not acceptable to the wife. Although the goal of the action of “impregnating” is “another woman”, the actual sufferer of this action in the context of the discourse is mainly his wife with his children.

Also, in text 4, the husband is represented as an adulterer. This is shown in the material process “was sleeping with” which is performed by the actor “my husband”. The phrasal verb “sleep with” is used to mean having sex with someone, and in this text, the person being “slept with” is the goal “our housemaid”. The past continuous verb used denotes the continuous series of sexual intercourse the husband has with the housemaid. That the husband stoops low to the extent of having sex continuously with his housemaid foregrounds how morally bankrupt he is. This interpretation is further validated in the second main clause where a relational process is evident. The demonstrative pronoun “that” in the second main clause refers to the first main clause as being the reason for which the man does not want his wife to send the housemaid back to her parents; for it can be said that he is actually

enjoying his uninterrupted adulterous relationship with the housemaid.

Husband as a Ritualist

This is another instance of a negative construction in the sampled data. A ritualist is someone who performs a series of religious or spiritual procedures for the purpose of getting some material gains or benefits, especially to the detriment of another person. Since the media thrive on presenting catchy deleterious news to the public, this negative representation is presented as an introductory statement by *The Guardian* newspaper. Text 5 is an example of this construction.

Text 5:

A mother of three, Nike Akinbile, has told a Mapo Customary Court in Ibadan that her husband, Femi, is desperately making effort to use her for monetary [sic] ritual. (*The Guardian*, September 17, 2016)

This excerpt is an example of a verbal clause. The verbal process, “has told”, is performed by the sayer “a mother of three” with its appositive qualifier, “Nike Akinbile”. The receiver of the verbiage is “a Mapo Customary Court in Ibadan” and the target of the verbiage is directly “her husband, Femi”. Here, she constructs her husband as a money ritualist. Within the verbiage is a material process with a discontinuous verbal group “is desperately making”. The insertion of an adverbial item “desperately” with the usage of a continuous verb “making” is to emphasise the enormity of her husband's “effort” or quest for sudden wealth. She presents herself as the target and victim of her husband's ritualistic tendency as shown in the circumstance “to use her for monetary [sic] ritual”. In relation to the socio-cultural context, it is believed by many tribes in Nigeria (the physical context of the reported event) that wicked persons can use other people as sacrifice to get wealth and the receiver of the verbiage being a customary court is an enabling context for the sustenance of such an accusation. The petitioner, Nike Akinbile, appeals to emotions so as to get divorced from the man whose desperate actions are inimical to her life and well-being.

Husband as Uncaring

Almost all the women suing for divorce in the sampled divorce reports label their husbands as uncaring either by implication or through lexical choices that show their men as uncaring husbands. To be uncaring is to be characterised by lack of care and empathy for someone. This is explained textually presently.

Text 6:

“...my husband did not care for me because I did not bear him any child,” the plaintiff said. (*The Punch*, September 6, 2017)

Text 7:

Eunice, in her suit, alleged that her husband, Reuben Ogbugwo, cares less about their children's welfare, neglected her and also denied her conjugal right. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, September 23, 2017)

In text 6, the woman accuses her husband of uncaring behaviour. The verbal process “said” is performed by the plaintiff, a woman. Her verbiage contains the accusation levelled against her husband. The verbiage is a complex sentence with a main clause and a subordinate clause. The main clause typifies a mental process which is “did not care”, the senser is “my husband” while the phenomenon is “for me”. The subordinate clause, “because I did not bear him any child” is an adverbial clause of reason which modifies the mental action, “did not care”, in the main clause. In relation to the socio-cultural context, this is to further validate the importance given to childbearing in marriage in Nigeria where childless women are treated with scorn and reproach. She appeals to the court to grant her desire. The reporter presents a paraphrased account of the divorce case in text 7. Here is an instance of verbal process signalled by “alleged” with “Eunice” as the sayer and the verbiage is “that her husband, Reuben Ogbugwo, cares less about their children's welfare, neglected her and also denied her conjugal right”. In the verbiage are three main clauses. The first has a mental action “cares” that is reduced by the adverb “less”. The senser is “her husband” appositively named “Reuben Ogbugwo,” while the phenomenon is “about their children's welfare”. The second and third main clauses have material processes – “neglected” and “denied”. These material actions are performed by an elliptical actor, “her husband”, while “her” and “her conjugal right” are the goals of the actions. In a sane socio-cultural context of marriage in Nigeria, the man is expected to care for his family but the opposite is what obtains here. Also, the conjugation of both mental and material actions in the excerpt is to vividly project the uncaring behaviour of the accused husband, not only to his wife but also to his children. The man is, therefore, constructed as highly selfish and self-centred. Hence, it is not surprising that his wife is fed up with his uncaring attitude and wants to divorce him.

Husband as Less than a Man

When someone is said to be less than a man, such a man cannot do what his mates can do successfully, especially in a marital relationship. Also, sexual intimacy is one of the most important aspects of marriage and its lack

or inadequacy is always a cause of marital conflict (Amadi & Amadi, 2014). In text 8, a woman seeks divorce because of her husband's irregular erection.

Text 8:

Kate alleged that Michael's manhood always have [sic] an inconsistent erection and that any time the manhood becomes erect, he ejaculates within few seconds which was not expected of a real man. (*The Punch*, November 14, 2017)

In this example, the verbal process “alleged” is performed by the sayer, “Kate”. The verbiage represents the negative construction she gives her husband. In the verbiage, there are a number of processes. The first clause of the verbiage is a relational process which is “has”, “Michael's manhood” is the carrier while the nominal group, “inconsistent erection” is the possessed. She goes on to reveal, in the remaining part of the verbiage, how her husband's manhood has inconsistent erection and the final part of the verbiage, “which is not expected of a real man” shows that her husband is not a real man since “he ejaculates within few seconds” of having erection. Moreso, the clause “which is not expected of a real man” implies some deviation from the norm of marital, social and cultural contexts which expect husbands to be able to sexually satisfy their wives. Therefore, any man who cannot satisfy his wife sexually is socially and culturally seen as less than a man and he is usually laughed to scorn by people. Also, the woman may not be able to get pregnant because of her husband's “inconsistent erection”. Kate, the wife who makes the allegation, thus wants the court to dissolve her marriage.

Husband as a Pretender/Liar

Some wives in the divorce reports construct their husbands as pretenders or liars. A pretender is someone who displays an opposite picture of what she or he actually is in order to cheat other people, while a liar is someone who lies or fails to do what he or she promises earlier. This is illustrated in texts 9 and 10.

Text 9:

She said, “He pretended to be nice. But when he impregnated me, he began beating me whenever I demanded money for antenatal care.” (*The Punch*, August 23, 2017)

Text 10:

“My husband lied that I threatened to kill myself because he wanted to take a new wife. Why should I especially that I was with a child (SIC)” she asked. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, April 15, 2017)

In these examples, the husband is constructed as a pretender and a liar. Both texts display verbal processes with the wives as the sayers of the verbal actions “said” and “asked” and the courts are the receivers of their verbiages. In text 9, the verbiage is “he pretended to be nice. But when he impregnated me, he began beating me whenever I demanded money for antenatal care”. In the first main clause, the lexical item “pretended” is used by the wife to denote her husband as a pretender. However, his pretence ends after making the woman pregnant. This makes him to perform the material action in the second main clause, “began beating” and the goal/sufferer of this action is the pronoun “me” which co-textually refers to “Modinat”, his wife, in the divorce report. The circumstance of the second main clause, “whenever I demanded money for antenatal care,” portrays the man as an irresponsible man who is only good at making a woman pregnant but incapable of taking care of his responsibility. On the other hand, the verbiage in text 10 is “my husband lied that I threatened to kill myself because he wanted to take a new wife. Why should I especially that I was with a child”. The verbal action, “lied”, is used by the wife to construct her husband as a liar. She is consequently denying her husband's accusation which is in the verbiage of the verbal process “lied”; that is, “that I threatened to kill myself because he wanted to take a new wife”. She further justifies herself as she asks a rhetorical question in the text . She implies the impossibility of killing herself even if her husband takes another wife when she understands that she will not only be taking her own life but that of the baby in her womb.

Wife as Diabolical/Wicked

In the data, a man labels his wife as diabolical and wicked because of some alleged things the wife is accused of doing to her husband. Being diabolical is to use occult means to inflict pains on another person while being wicked is to be evil or mischievous by nature. In this case, the husband is the petitioner who wants to divorce his wife. This is illustrated in texts 11 and 12.

Text 11:

Aderonke made me impotent through her diabolical mean (sic). (*The Guardian*, December 22, 2017)

Text 12:

There is no herbalist my wife does not know. (*The Guardian*, December 22, 2017)

In text 11, the material process, “made”, is carried out by an actor which is identified by the proper noun, “Aderonke”, while the goal of the action is

represented by the pronoun “me”. The adjective, “impotent”, is an attribute which completes the material process performed on the goal, “me”, while the circumstantial detail of how the process is performed is revealed by the prepositional phrase “through her diabolical mean”. Here, the wife is portrayed as someone who has some evil power which she uses on her husband to make him “impotent”. The identity ascribed to “Aderonke” in the excerpt can be construed as “wife as wicked”. The circumstance in the clause further heightens this interpretation for the woman does not just “make” her husband “impotent” but does so “through her diabolical mean”. A negative identity, through a negative labelling signalled by the combination of a possessive pronoun and an attributive adjective which pre-modifies the nominal head in “her diabolical mean”, is thus given to the woman in the material process. Therefore, the husband appeals to pity so as to be free from the woman. Also, text 12 reveals the woman is diabolical. Here is an example of an existential clause. The process is a copular verb, “is”, while the nominal group “no herbalist” is the existent which is complemented by a mental clause, “my wife does not know”. The essence of the complement is to implicate and give some negative attributes to the woman. In the report, the nominal group, “my wife”, is labelled as fetish and through her fetishism – knowing herbalists – she inflicts some psychological pains on her husband.

Wife as Dangerous/Violent

A dangerous or violent person is someone who is likely to injure or harm somebody, or damage or destroy something. Husbands also construct their wives in the newspaper reports as dangerous or violent. That is, their wives are threats to their lives and well-being. Texts 13 and 14 exemplify this.

Text 13:

“Ekwutobi threatened to kill me if I marry another woman, and now I have two women after her. She fought with one of the women that had a twins (sic) for me and that landed her in a police station,” he said. (*The Guardian*, March 23, 2017)

Text 14:

“On a daily basis, she threatens my life, saying she has people that will kill me in a twinkle of eyes (sic) like chicken and that chicken's death is more significant than my death,” Linus told the court. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, January 23, 2018)

Texts 13 and 14 exemplify verbal processes with verbatim quotations of the sayers and these verbal processes subsume other processes, especially material processes. In text 13, the verbal action, “said”, is carried out by the sayer, represented by a third person singular subjective pronoun, “he”, which

refers to “Mgbenka”, the husband in the linguistic context of the report. The target of his verbiage is his wife, named in the text as “Ekwutobi” and the receiver is the court. The verbiage is “Ekwutobi threatened to kill me if I marry another woman, and now I have two women after her. She fought with one of the women that had a twins for me and that landed her in a police station”. This verbiage contains two sentences with six clauses. The first sentence has two main clauses and a subordinate clause. In the first main clause depended on by the subordinate clause, the verbal action “threatened” is said by the sayer, “Ekwutobi” and the verbiage “to kill me if I marry another woman” is directed to the husband signalled by the pronouns “me” and “I”. The verb, modified by the conditional subordinate clause, “kill” in the alleged verbiage of the wife portrays her as a dangerous and violent person who is capable of harming somebody, especially her husband, to death. Her dangerous and violent personality is reinforced by the second sentence which contains a material action “fought with” performed by the actor “she” (referring to Ekwutobi) whose sufferer/goal is the nominal group, “one of the women that has a twins for me”. This also reveals Ekwutobi as a fighter and as a consequence of her action, she gets arrested by the police. With these negative descriptions of the wife, the husband sues for a divorce so as to be free from his dangerous and violent wife.

In the same vein, text 14 also typifies a verbal process. The verbal action, “told”, is performed by the sayer, “Linus”, the husband of the accused woman. The court is the receiver of the verbiage and his wife is the target of his verbiage captured thus: “on a daily basis, she threatens my life, saying she has people that will kill me in a twinkle of eyes like chicken and that chicken's death is more significant than my death”. The wife is accused of performing some verbal actions of “threatening” and “saying”, and a relational action of possessing, which is shown by the verb “has” and the possessed is “people that will kill me in a twinkle of eyes like chicken”. The verbal group in the qualifier of the nominal group, “will kill”, represents the extent of danger posed by the wife to her husband.

This is intensified by the comparison made between the man's life and that of a chicken to emphasise how insignificant the man's life is to his wife. It is even alleged that the death of a chicken will be more glorious than her husband's death. Thus, one wonders the depth of hate and aversion the accused woman has for her husband. Also, the thematisation of the prepositional group “on a daily basis” which functions as an adjunct in the sentence instantiates the non-stop threats the husband is perpetually getting from his wife which, therefore, keeps him in a constant state of fear and distress. He can, therefore, regain his peace and rest of mind if the court grants his prayer for a divorce.

Wife as an Adulteress

Adultery, as said above, is having a sexual relationship with another person other than one's spouse. As some wives accuse their husbands of adultery in the sampled newspaper reports so also do some husbands construct their wives as adulteresses and prostitutes; thereby ascribing negative labels to the women in their allegations against them in the court. Consider the illustrations in texts 15 and 16.

Text 15:

My wife had sexual affair with two of my church members, a deacon and a bishop. Both of them were telling my other members that they slept with my wife because she enticed them. (*The Punch*, May 12, 2018)

Text 16:

I caught my wife in bed with another man in our room. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, September 23, 2017)

Texts 15 and 16 are instances of negative representations of wives as adulterous. In text 15, the relational verb is “had” with nominal group “my wife” as the carrier and the attribute, which subsumes a circumstantial detail, is “sexual affair with two of my church members, a deacon and a bishop”. The noun, “affair”, is used euphemistically to denote a sexual intercourse. The embedded circumstance shows the persons that the accused wife has sexual intercourse with. The final subordinate clause in text 15 projects the woman as a chronic and habitual adulteress as revealed by the material verb “enticed” which she performs on the goal “them” (the deacon and the bishop). Hence, adultery, being one of the grounds for divorce, serves as the basis for the pastor's suit for a divorce.

Similarly, in text 16, the woman is constructed as adulterous. Here, the material action, “caught” is carried out by the actor, “I” which refers to “Reuben” who is the husband in the divorce report. The goal of this action is “my wife”, which locates “Eunice” in the report. The circumstance is “in bed with another man in our room”. It is in the circumstance of the clause that the adulterous lifestyle of the woman is revealed. The prepositional group, “in bed with another man in our room”, captures a representation of a daring promiscuous and sexually loose woman who has the boldness to not only have sex with “another man” but also to bring her sexual partner into her husband's house to have sex there. This negative construction of the wife by her husband provides the premise for agreeing to the divorce suit.

Wife as Unsupportive/Uncaring

The data show that one of the negative constructions given to wives

by their husbands is wife as unsupportive and uncaring. Being unsupportive means not being of help to someone, especially a friend or spouse, so as to frustrate the person's plan and make such a plan fail. Marriage, being a union based on care and mutual support, is therefore threatened when spouses become unsupportive and uncaring to each other. To this end, husbands who accuse their wives thus opt for a divorce.

Text 17:

My wife made life unbearable for me. (*The Punch*, December 11, 2017)

Text 18:

...my wife never supported my pastoral call. (*The Nigerian Tribune*, February 14, 2018)

In text 17, the verb, “made”, is a material action performed by the actor, “my wife”. The goal of the material is represented by an abstract noun “life” which is qualified by the adjective “unbearable”. The beneficiary of the action is denoted by a prepositional group “for me”. The adjective “unbearable” has negative near synonyms such as “agonising”, “excruciating”, “awful”, “insufferable”, and “horrendous”, among others. As the beneficiary of the action, the husband is hence confined to a life that is filled with frustrations, pains, torture and agony by his wife. Therefore, the wife is presented as uncaring and evil. In addition, text 18 typifies the construction of wife as unsupportive. The mental action “supported” which is modified by a negative adverb “never” has the nominal group, “my wife” as its senser and the phenomenon is “my pastoral call”. The usage of the negative adverb, “never”, in the sentence portrays the wife as unsupportive. The denotative meaning of the adverb, “never”, is “certainly not: not in any circumstances at all”. This implies that the wife will most definitely perpetuate her action of “never supporting” her husband's pastoral call; therefore, giving the man the opportunity of seeking a divorce from his perpetually unsupportive wife.

Positive Self-representation

Although negative-other representation pervades divorce discourse as seen in the sampled data in which all of the participants represent selves as victims who suffer the actions and inactions of their partners, two instances of positive self-representation are identified in the data. These are “husband as caring” and “wife as loving”, respectively. Texts 19 and 20 illustrate the two.

Husband as Caring

To be caring is to be kind, sensitive and empathetic to others and their needs. Here, the participant gives a positive representation for himself as

caring as he opposes his wife's suit for divorce as exemplified in text 19 below.

Text 19:

“Your honour, I have suffered greatly all this while to sustain and marry Nike. I was the one that sent her to school and made her self-employed...” (*The Guardian*, September 17, 2016)

In text 19, the vocative, “your honour”, shows that the following statement is addressed to the court president. The mental action, “have suffered”, has the first person singular pronoun “I”, which anaphorically refers to “Femi” in the report, as its senser and the extent of the mental action is shown by its modifying adverbial item, “greatly”, and further reinforces the adjective modified prepositional group, “all this while”, while the phenomenon is “to sustain and marry Nike”. The man chronicles his actions which portray him as a caring husband. The second sentence in the text has a relational process “was” and the pronoun “I” as its carrier. The attribute is “one that sent her to school and made her self-employed”. In this attribute, two material actions are identifiable – “sent” and “made” – and both have the same person as their goal – “her” (referring to Nike, his wife). The circumstance of the first material action is “to school” while the second material action is complemented by an attribute “self-employed”. In essence, the husband is validating that he is a caring husband; for it is only caring husbands who can “send” their wives “to school” and “make” them “self-employed”. The respondent's claims are in sync with socio-cultural script in which husbands are to be providers and protectors of their families. To further show how much he cares for his family, the man does not agree to the divorce suit of his wife as revealed in the report.

Wife as Loving

A loving person gives what she or he has to another person even when the person being loved does not deserve it, especially someone close, in making life worthwhile for the person. This is the lone overt positive self-representation in the sampled data given by a woman to herself as illustrated presently in text 20.

Text 20:

...the wife still claims she loves her husband. (*The Guardian*, Dec. 22, 2017)

This example contains two clauses. The main clause has a verbal process “claims” performed by the sayer, “the wife” and the verbiage is “she loves her husband”. In the verbiage is a mental process, “loves”, which has “she”

(referring to the wife) as the senser and “her husband” as the phenomenon. The lexical item “still” seems to imply that, as supported by the context of the report, even if her husband does not love her anymore or even though he has done many things to hurt her, she will continue to love him. However, the verbal process “claims” contextually reveals that the reporter does not seem to agree with the wife: the use of “claims” reveals an element of untruthfulness; which is a deliberate contextual juxtapositioning by the reporter to discredit the wife's “claim”. This is one of the ways the media covertly inject their viewpoint and bias into their reportage. The woman thus constructs “wife as loving” frame for herself and this is intensified when she appeals to the court not to dissolve her marriage.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the representation of participants in selected divorce cases reported in the Nigerian newspapers. It sourced data from three selected Nigerian newspapers which report divorce cases. It looked at how discourse participants, particularly couples, represent themselves and their partners in divorce reports. It discovered that five processes, that is, material, verbal, mental, relational and existential, were used in presenting both negative and positive representational strategies. On the other hand, following Fetzer's categorisations, three context types, that is, linguistic, social and socio-cultural context types, helped in projecting a total of twelve representational strategies. Out of them, ten were for negative-other representations which are husband as a killer or beater, ritualist, adulterer, uncaring, less than a man, and pretender or liar, and wife as diabolical or wicked, adulteress, uncaring or unsupportive, and dangerous or violent. Only two of the representational strategies were positive self-representations which were husband as caring and wife as loving. In sum, conflicting couples represent themselves as good while they present their partners as bad to achieve their desired goals.

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