

Verbal violence: A silent dimension of domestic violence in families in Akwakuma, Imo State

Ngozi Jovita N. Umelo & Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto

Department of English Language and Literature

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

E-mail: njovic59@yahoo.com

Abstract

Obviously, both men and women can be perpetrators as well as victims of domestic violence. Verbal violence implied the use of profane and dehumanized language to intimidate or control a hearer to the demands of the speaker. It was more prevalent in families and women's verbal violence against husbands was ignored by the public or unpronounced as most men became so shameful to be engaged in verbal exchange of words. The study explored the ways in which wives verbally violated their husbands in homes that inflicted emotional pain on men. The emotional pain remained unseen hence the silent domestic violence. The study anchored on Erving Goffman (1967) face-threatening acts theory and Leech (1983) politeness maxims. Twenty-five (25) samples of verbal violence utterances constituted data for analysis. It was revealed that name-calling, insult, sarcasm, negative prediction, criticism, comparison etc

were threats to face-worth, caused emotional pain and therefore constituted silent dimension of violence on men in families. Again, wives manipulated these as weapons of threat, instigation, mockery, embarrassment, destruction and expression of dissatisfaction. The paper concluded that verbal violence utterances on husbands yielded negative effects which made them to indulge in illicit acts, alcoholism, womanizing and divorce. Therefore, it was recommended that wives should desist from this silent emotional hurt on men so as to curtail wife battery, divorce and suicide.

Introduction

The family stands as a microcosm of a nation. Its peace and conflict are perceived through words among interactants. Words are powerful tools that can either maintain or animate relationship between husband and wife. Women are flippant by nature. Women can speak to pacify or trigger conflict that may degenerate to physical violence. Most physical violence from men are responses to emotional violence from women and the emotional pain is a silent dimension of domestic violence against men. The essence of communication is largely dependent on the existence of language. It performs the social and expressive functions that allow us do things like; thinking, praising, boasting, insulting, apologizing and promising that convey to others how we feel about them. We use language to persuade others to

our convictions and urge them towards action by crafting text that demonstrate the logic and appeal to those convictions (Fasold and Linton, 2012). Algeo and Butcher (2014) assert that “to be human is to use language”.

Language spoken by a family defines and identifies the individual members of that family. To this, Mckay (1983) emphasizing the importance of communication in family relationship submits that “a family with chronic poor communication becomes a pressure cooker”. Each member is vulnerable to emotional devastation. The children especially are susceptible to a range of physical and psychological symptoms. Families get into trouble when members are prohibited from expressing certain feelings, needs or awareness. The family as a unit is meant to create awareness, inculcate in the children the dynamics of conflicts and the promotion of peace making skills in homes as a necessary channel of socialization (Gumut, 2016). Kunnuji (2014) and Bazza (2010) lament that the family which has been regarded as the ideal basic unit of the society where there is support, love, understanding and care has turned out to be the most oppressive institution for serious violence, hostility and conflicts. Also, Nwankwo (2002) opines that the law still ignores the gravity of the problem. Therefore, a family with poor communication resorts to verbal violence.

Verbal violence entails the use of profane, dehumanizing and insulting language to cause emotional pains or distress on others. It is an act of hate speech, insults, swearing, curses, coercion and teasing of a person who is in control of the other (Lepper, 1973). The act of verbal violence has become an epidemic in some families which pose threats on the face-value of some men from the wives. Utterances of verbal violence on men gradually escalate to a level where they can no longer contain but rather go on unlawful measures. In all spheres of life, we encounter verbal violence. The perpetrator does not intimidate the victim with blows but humiliates him/her with words in order to make the addressee to be under certain influence or control.

In the process of verbal violence, the speaker is not interested in the hearer's opinion or face-worth but only in the enforcement of his/her authority as the superior. The perpetrator is often in a superior position from the beginning; in a male-female relationship, the man; in parents-children relationship, the parents; in an employer-employee relationship, the employer; in a teacher-student relationship, the teacher; in madam-house help relationship, the madam; in husband-wife relationship, the husband, all these are usually the violent patterns but it is more silent against men in families and that is the focus of this study. Therefore, it is against this backdrop that this study explores the illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects of the silent dimension of

verbal violence on husbands in families from wives as instrument to alcoholism, womanizing, wife battery, divorce and at times murder in families.

Over time, wives are seen as victims of domestic violence and physical violence irrespective of the fact that physical violence most times is a response to verbal violence when husbands are no longer able to contain with such acts. Some men by nature are not good at verbal exchange rather they silently endure or walk out to a drinking bar to avoid verbal violence from women who use it as weapon of mockery, blackmail, destruction etc to undo their husbands in families. Profane and demeaning tags on husbands by their wives create negative self-perception about the husbands. With the negative self-perception, husbands turn to brute inflicting pain and wrecking havocs in the family. They develop hatred on their abusive wives, womanize, withdraw their financial obligations, keep late night, resort to wife battery and eventually divorce. Therefore, this study intends to explore utterances of verbal violence on husbands from their wives which can lure them into all manner of unlawful acts.

Conceptual clarification

Verbal violence is a prevalent form of communication in families that is known to have negative and destructive effects on the addressee. It is a profane language use that has a deep influence and leaves an indelible mark on the

addressee. Hyden (2015) explains verbal violence as an act that has the intent or perceived intent to symbolically hurt or threaten to hurt another. Verbal violence is defined as the use of derogatory and destructive language on another person (Ewurum, Njoku and Umeh, 2019). It is “any language or remark that is intended to cause distress to the individual which can be perceived as being demeaning, humiliating, intimidating or disrespectful resulting in feelings of inferiority, lowered self-worth and self-esteem, stunned goals and ambition (Brennan qtd in Lani, 2018). Lani (2018) included in her definition of verbal abuse “as the use of critical or insulting behavior”. The work argues that the word behavior keeps the definition open to include not just words that are spoken but the tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. These instances are normally overt in nature but at times can be subtle like double-edge comments. In agreement, this study submits that verbal violence implies derogatory expressions, rude/nasty remarks, stony silence and unmitigated attitudes on others.

Kembe (2008) maintains that “verbal violence is an act of constant criticism, name-calling, social rejection, sarcasm and put downs on an individual” while Natalie et al (2006) submit that “verbal abuse confers risk on victims because it influences the development of a self-critical style”. Lepper (1973) posits that “verbal abuse is an act of hate speech, insults, swearing, curses, coercion

and teasing of a person who is in control of the other while Obinuju (2014) as cited in Kembe (2008) reveals that “the society contributes to perpetuating the act of verbal abuse by not taking it seriously enough and by treating it as expected, normal or deserved”. This does not contradict the traditional Nigerian child rearing practice where the child is rebuked and chastised for doing wrong. Durojaiye (1976) explains that “clear-cut-roles, obligations, rights, expectations and sanctions were important aspects of the education and socialization of the children”.

According to the United Nation’s Standard (cited in Kembe, 2008) “verbal abuse is a condition of causing or permitting to occur of any form of offensive or harmful contact on the body of a person. Such a contact incorporates any form of interaction, exchange of communication that brings shame, embarrassment, fear or disgrace to the person”. Thus, it can be stated that verbal violence is much more emotionally damaging than other types of abuse. This confirms the adage which says “sticks and stones may break my home but words will break my heart”. Verbal violence is hurtful without physical injury and leads to domestic violence with physical evidence.

Domestic violence is a situation where a member of a household is targeted by another member (Obasi, 2013). Kaur and Garg (2008) describes domestic violence as the power misused by one adult in a

relationship to control another and the violence can take the form of physical assault, psychological abuse, social abuse, financial abuse or sexual assault. Generally, domestic violence connotes violence against any member of a household but often times, women are the sole igniters of domestic violence which is a response to verbal violence. Tesch, Bekerian, English and Harrington (2010) posit that people are still reluctant to believe that women are capable of perpetrating violence. However, Alejo (2014) opine that both men and women can be the perpetrators or victims in a heterosexual or same-sex relationships and he noted that Domestic Violence Resource Center estimated that between 600,000 and six million women and between 100,000 and six million men were victims of domestic violence in 2003. While Barber (2008) posit that only a small percentage of abused men are willing to speak out in fear of ridicule, social isolation and humiliation. Generally speaking, both men and women can be perpetrators as well as victims of emotional violence but violation on men by women has been so silent and has not received much public attention. Therefore, this study is conceptualizing verbal violence against men as any utterance of women that makes the men feel worthless, embarrassed, insulted, unloved, unappreciated, deprived, incompatible, disrespected, and emotionally devastated.

Causes of verbal violence

Verbal violence in families assume different patterns ranging from overt to subtle such as humiliation, accusation, unwarranted questions, interruption, command, disapproval, confrontation, blame, condemnation, rhetorical question, insult, criticism, negative prediction, stony silence, denial, rejection etc. Generally, women are more loquacious than men and that at times make them use derogatory words consciously or unconsciously in family interactions. Kembe (2008) submits that causes of verbal violence include; family background, economic hardship, disciplinary measures, anger, laziness and shabby dressing. Supporting the mentioned causes of verbal violence, this study wants to establish the following as causes of verbal violence on husbands by their wives in the family. They are: dissatisfaction, hatred, adultery, disrespect, disobedience, gossip, mockery and negative comparison. In a family where these acts are exhibited by a wife, the husband would be an object of silent violence. For example, when a wife compares her husband with another woman's husband by saying look at Sir Emma, he bought an expensive jewelry for his wife Nneka and you are here telling me to manage only five thousand naira (#5000) for the week. Is he not a man like you stingy poor man? When a man is being compared to negatively in such a manner, his being violated silently and the wife no longer respect him. This

implies that the husband is a victim of verbal violence and the wife a perpetrator as can be seen in some families.

Theoretical framework

This study anchors on Erving Goffman (1967) theory of face. Goffman (1967) accounts for face in interaction. The notion of “face” comes from his work on face and from the English “folk” notion “efface” which ties up concepts of being embarrassed and humiliated as ‘loosing face’. Goffman (1967) defines face as “a person’s sense of self-esteem (positive face) and the desire to determine their own course of action (negative face). In agreement, this study opines that face is a mask that changes depending on the audience. Spolsky (2008) observes that two ways of showing consideration for people’s feelings can be related to the notion of face. There are two aspects of people’s feelings that enter into face;

- Desires to not be imposed upon (negative face)
- Desires to be liked, admired, ratified, related to positively (positive face)

Correspondingly, Goffman (1967) identifies two types of face: positive face and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be seen as a good person, the positive consistent self-image that people have and their desire to be liked, appreciated and approved of by at least some other

people. It is designed to meet the face need by performing an action like complimenting or showing concern for another person. Negative face is the desire to remain autonomous or the right to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others. Faces of interactants are adversely affected with verbal violence and it devastates husbands emotionally. When a man's face is jeopardized with verbal violence from the wife, love vanishes and hatred becomes inevitable. Any action or utterance however mild which might conceivably upset the delicate balance of face maintenance is face-threatening activity (FTA) (Goffman, 1999). An interactant who is made to lose face will be embarrassed or offended. In an interactional situation, all participants are expected to show some level of consideration and solidarity for none to be defaced, out of face or lose face. This principle is the foundation for the conversational maxims as proposed by Leech (1983).

Politeness maxims

Leech (1983) posits politeness maxim as a way of explaining how politeness operates in conversational exchanges. Leech's concept on politeness maxims is concerned with conflict avoidance and geared towards comity. A polite speaker tactfully employs language in order to make his/her statements acceptable to the

decoders. To be polite is saying the socially correct things (Lakoff, 2005). Leech observes that politeness is sometimes relative to people and their culture, expressed through language use. He identifies seven (7) politeness maxims as thus;

1. Tact maxim which stipulates that speakers should;
 - a. minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to others and maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to others.
 - b. minimize the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize the expression of polite beliefs.
2. Generosity maxim states that interactants should;
 - a. minimize benefit to self
 - b. maximize cost to self
3. Approbation maxim states that speakers should;
 - a. minimize dispraise of others
 - b. maximize praise or approval of others
4. Modesty maxim stipulates that speakers should always;
 - a. minimize the expression of praise of self
 - b. maximize the expression of dispraise of self
5. Agreement maxim states;
 - a. minimize the expression of disagreement between self and others
 - b. maximize agreement between self and others
6. Sympathy maxim stipulates that speakers should;

- a. minimize antipathy between self and others
 - b. maximize sympathy between self and others.
7. Pollyanna maxim states that;
People should look at the bright side instead of the gloomy side in talking about others.

Methodology

The methodology for this study entails observation and oral interviews. Husbands and wives in some homes in Akwakuma and offices were observed and interviewed orally to obtain words being used against husbands. Thirty married men and women were randomly interviewed to ascertain verbal violence utterances used in altercations in families. Goffman (1967) theory on face and Leech (1983) politeness maxims were deployed in analyzing the selected data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section is concerned with the analysis of data presented on verbal violence that face-threatening acts and violations of politeness maxims.

Verbal violence as face-threatening act and violations of tact and approbation politeness maxims

Utterances of verbal violence are face-threatening acts employed by wives to intimidate their husbands and enforce their wants. Wives who adopt verbal violence do so to make their husbands lose face and this is in line

with Goffman (1967) stance that “any utterance or action however mild which might conceivably upset the delicate balance of face maintenance is face-threatening activity. Tact maxim specifies that interactants should “minimize expression of beliefs which imply cost to others and maximize expression of beliefs which imply benefit to others”. This part fits in with Brown and Levinson (1978) negative politeness strategy of minimizing the imposition. The tact maxim also demands of interactants to “minimize the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize the expression of polite beliefs”. Brown and Levinson (1978) positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer’s interest, wants and needs are reflected in second part of tact maxim.

Verbal violence utterances that depict violations of approbation and tact maxims

S/N	Data	Source
Text 1	Lazy fool!	Wife whose husband lost his job
Text 2	Useless thing!	Wife whose husband was sick
Text 3	Shameless poor man!	Wife who was the bread winner
Text 4	Dead man!	Wife whose husband was bedridden
Text 5	Vagabond!	Wife whose husband was addicted to draft play

Text 6	Good for nothing he goat!	Wife who saw her husband as only been good in bed
Text 7	Womanizer!	Wife whose husband did not show love
Text 8	Living corpse!	Wife whose husband was a liability
Text 9	Worthless entity!	Wife whose husband was unproductive
Text 10	Wicked man!	Wife whose husband did not care for

The above unmitigated utterances were expressive of the empathetic deixis depicting wives emotions against their husbands. The verbal violence utterances were face-threatening attacks that mitigated the face-worth addressee. The verbal attacks maximize the disapproval of the husbands' inadequacies and minimize the approval of their actions and so constitute a violation of approbation and tact maxims. The verbal violence utterances were extractors in that they were designed to devastate and manipulate the addressee. The derogatory tags maximize dispraise of husbands and were crafted to hurt and subdue the men. A husband constantly tagged dead man, living corpse and worthless is dehumanized as non-existing and that portrays the height of scorn and disdain a wife holds for the husband. The face-threatening acts can make the man to hate, divorce or even kill to prove wrong of what he is being branded and

the perlocutionary effects are anger, depression, animosity and so on.

Verbal violence as violations of generosity, agreement and sympathy maxims

S/N	Data	Sources
Text 11	Stupid ignoramus!	Wife who believed her husband to be illiterate
Text 12	Selfish man!	Wife whose husband did not care for
Text 13	Unreasonable and thickheaded man!	Wife whose husband doubted
Text 14	Callous idiot!	Wife whose husband did not regard
Text 15	Coward!	Wife who believed her was not bold
Text 16	Dumb weakling!	Wife who saw her husband as non active
Text 17	Miserable liar!	Wife who did not trust her husband
Text 18	Mad man!	Wife whose husband was furious at
Text 19	Frustrated thing!	Wife who believed her husband was helpless
Text 20	Hopeless stinking man!	Wife whose husband lost hope
Text 21	Rejected corpse!	Wife who believed her husband had no place

Text 22	Ungrateful man!	Wife whose husband did not appreciate
Text 23	Big for nothing!	Wife whose husband was fat but unproductive
Text 24	Dirty man!	Wife who perceived her husband dirty
Text 25	Stupid braggart!	Wife whose husband boast

Generosity maxim demands that interactants should minimize benefit to self and maximize cost self. Agreement maxim states that speakers should minimize the expression of disagreement between self and others and maximize agreement between self and others while sympathy maxim stipulates that speakers should minimize antipathy between self and others and maximize sympathy between self and others. From the above samples; **selfish man, big for nothing, ungrateful man, callous idiot** were violations of generosity maxim as the wife abused the husband who failed what was expected of him. Also, the verbal violence utterances; **coward, miserable liar, unreasonable and thickeheaded man, mad man and stupid braggart**, violated the agreement maxim by maximizing disagreement and minimizing agreement. A husband branded ‘miserable liar, unreasonable and thickeheaded’ proved that the wife was not in agreement with his words. Again, abuses such as; **stupid**

ignoramus, dirty man, frustrated thing, dumb weakling, hopeless stinking man and rejected corpse were contrary to the stipulations of sympathy maxims. Wives maximize antipathy and minimize sympathy against their husbands who they believed to be better than. The verbal attacks are face-threatening targeted and caused the addressee to lose face. This is in line with Goffman's (1967) assertion that "an interactant who is made to lose face will be embarrassed or offended". Therefore, it was evident that all sampled utterances of verbal violence in families were face-threatening acts and violations of politeness maxims.

Conclusion

The study concludes that all verbal violence utterances are indices of conflict that may create fistful duels that can lead to divorce, fight, or death. The utterances are made to register the wives' displeasure and negative feelings manipulated as weapons of hurt, expression of anger, disaffection and disappointment. Also, the altercations produce hatred, animosity and deliberate avoidance. Moreover, illicit acts, alcoholism, womanizing and divorce are the perlocutionary effects of the silent dimension of verbal violence against husbands by wives in families.

Here, there is the need that for family members especially wives to be wary of their language use. The wives should deploy polite language to their husbands

for peace, love, enhancement of face-value and desist from the silent emotional hurt of verbal violence on men in order to shun wife battery, divorce and murder.

References

- Alejo, K. (2014). Long term physical and mental health effects of domestic violence. *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science*.2(1).
- Algeo, J. and Butcher, C.A (2014). *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (7th ed) USA: Wadsworth.
- Barber, C.F. (2008). Domestic violence against men. *Nursing Standard*. 22(51) 35-39.
- Brown, P. (1980). How and why are women more polite: Some evidence from Mayan community. In S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker and N. Furman (Eds). *Women and -language in literature and society*(p.111-136). New York: Praeger.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S.C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- _____ (1978). Universals in language usage: politeness phenomena. In E.N. Goody, (Ed), *Questions and politeness*.(P. 56-289). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Durojaiye, M. A. (1976). *A new introduction of educational psychology*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Limited.
- Ewurum, R. N., Njoku, J.N. and Umeh, I.J. (2019). A Pragmatic Analysis of Verbal Abuse As Face-Threatening Acts. *NATELCEP Journal of language and communication studies*.
- Fasold, R. W. and Linton, J.C. (2012). *An introduction to language and linguistic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1967a). *Face and face work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____ (1967b). *Interaction ritual: Essay on face to face behavior*. Garden city, New York: Anchor.
- Gumut, V. (2016). *Peace Education and Peer Meditation*. In S.G. Best (Ed). *Introduction to Peace in West Africa: A reader*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.

- Hyden, M. (2015). Verbal aggression as prehistory of woman battering. *Journal of family violence*, 10,55-71.
- Kembe, E.M. (2008). Causes and Effects on Adolescent Personality. *Journal of family development* Vol.3.
- Kunnuji, M.O.N. (2014). Experience of domestic violence and acceptance of intimate partner violence among out-of-school adolescent girls in iwaya community, Lagos State. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 30(4), 543-564.
- Lakoff, R. (2005). The politics of mice. *Journal of politeness research: language, behavior, culture*. Vol.1 (2) 173-191.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Harlow: Longman.
- Lepper, M.R. (1973). Dissonance, self-perception and honesty in chilfren. *Journal of personality and social psychology*. Vol. 2.
- Mckay, M., Davids, M. and Fanning, P. (1983). *Messages: The communication skills book*. Oakland, New Harbinger publications.

Natalie, S.E., Edelyn, V., Thomas, J. and Kristopher, J.P. (2006). Parental verbal abuse and the mediating role of self-criticism in adult internalizing disorders. *Jorunal of affective disorders*. Florida State University, United States.

Nwankwo, O. (2002). *Manual on Domestic Violence*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Pub.co.ltd.

Spolsky, B. (2008). *Socio-linguistics*. Hongkong: Oxford University Press.

Tesch, B., Berkerian, D., English, P and Harrington, E. (2010). Same-sex domestic violence: why victims are more at risk. *International Journal of Police Science & Management*.12(4), 526-535.

.
Ngozi Jovita N. Umelo is a postgraduate student of the Department of English and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto is a professor of sociolinguistics in the Department of English and Literature, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.