

Linguistic Strategies and Power Negotiation in Spousal Conflicts in ‘The Justice Court’

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Abstract

This study examined power dynamics in spousal discourse within a Nigerian media courtroom context, addressing the gap in research on how everyday marital conflicts function as sites of discursive power negotiation. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the linguistic strategies used to assert control in spousal conflicts and to analyse how couples negotiated power relations through language. The study was grounded in Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, which provided a framework for interpreting language as a social practice shaped by power and ideology. A qualitative methodology was adopted, involving the purposive selection of two episodes of *The Justice Court* obtained from YouTube. The episodes were repeatedly viewed and transcribed verbatim to ensure analytical accuracy. The study found that spouses employed linguistic strategies such as repetition, modality, possessive pronouns, reported speech, and rhetorical questions to assert dominance or resist subordination. It also found that power was not fixed but dynamically negotiated through interaction. Furthermore, the study revealed that language served as a key resource for constructing gender roles, authority, and identity in conflict situations. The study concluded that spousal discourse functioned as a critical site for the enactment and contestation of power. The study contributed to existing knowledge by demonstrating how media representations of marital disputes reflect broader socio-cultural ideologies and expand discourse studies within the Nigerian context.

Keywords: spousal discourse, power dynamics, critical discourse analysis, linguistic strategies, Nigerian media.

Introduction

Language functions as a primary medium through which spouses manage interaction in marriage, particularly during conflict, where issues of authority, control, and resistance become visible. In marital relationships, language conveys emotions, ideas, and experiences, while also shaping interpersonal dynamics and social roles (Nweke, 2024). Conflicts are an inevitable feature of intimate relationships, reflecting differences in expectations, responsibilities, and power distribution. Everyday disagreements may escalate into disputes that manifest as frustration, strain, loss of trust, anxiety, and emotional discomfort, all expressed and negotiated through language. Communication in

such contexts does not only transmit meaning but also produces and reflects relational hierarchies and societal norms. Linguistic choices, including lexical selection, tone, repetition, and modality, allow spouses to position themselves and contest or reinforce authority, making marital discourse a rich site for understanding power relations. Conflict discourse also reveals the ideological assumptions underpinning gender roles, authority, and responsibilities within the household (Chiluwa, 2021, 2024; Holtgraves, 2014; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2013).

Within Nigerian society, social expectations often grant men authority as heads of households, while women are expected to be accommodating, supportive, and responsible for domestic management. Disruption of these expectations frequently triggers conflict, with language serving as the primary mechanism through which power, accountability, and social norms are negotiated (Argyle & Furnham, 1983; Glenn & Weaver, 1979). Televised programs such as *The Justice Court* provide a mediated setting in which real-life marital disputes are publicly aired, enabling detailed observation of how spouses express grievances, assert authority, and resist control. In this context, participants strategically employ linguistic resources to influence perceptions, justify actions, and negotiate relational positions (Andrus, 2009; Osisanwo et al., 2018). Episodes 206 and 175 of *The Justice Court* were analysed using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on the descriptive stage of the three-dimensional model to examine textual features, discursive strategies, and underlying power ideologies. The courtroom setting, structured with formal roles including judge, plaintiff, defendant, and audience, situates conflict within both legal and social frameworks, offering insight into the ways spouses enact and contest authority through language.

Existing studies have extensively documented causes of marital conflict, communication patterns, and general power relations between spouses. However, limited attention has been given to the precise discursive strategies through which Nigerian spouses assert authority, resist domination, or negotiate relational control in mediated contexts such as television courtroom programmes. The specific linguistic mechanisms that shape power dynamics remain underexplored, particularly in settings that combine personal, cultural, and public dimensions of conflict. Addressing this gap, the study aimed to examine how language functions as a tool for asserting, maintaining, or challenging power during spousal disputes. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the linguistic strategies spouses use to assert power and control during conflicts, explore how spouses negotiate or resist power relations in conflict interactions, and investigate how the public courtroom setting influences the deployment and reception of these strategies. Understanding these mechanisms provides insight into the intersection of language, culture, and power in Nigerian marital discourse and offers a framework for analysing how mediated conflict reflects and reinforces broader societal expectations. This focus allows for the advancement of knowledge on the role of discourse in intimate relationships, highlighting the interplay between linguistic practice, social norms, and relational authority. The study contributes novel insights by linking detailed linguistic analysis to socio-cultural context, demonstrating the ways in which power is discursively constructed, contested, and negotiated in televised spousal conflicts.

Literature Review

Language and Power

Language functions as a central medium through which power is enacted, maintained, and challenged in social interaction (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1998). Within marital discourse, communication reflects not only personal intentions but also broader ideological structures that shape relationships. Tannen (2001) explained that conversational styles between spouses often involve subtle competition for control, where differences in interactional patterns may lead to misunderstanding or conflict. Such patterns are influenced by expectations regarding authority and gender roles. Studies within African contexts have shown that these expectations are closely tied to cultural norms that position men in dominant roles and women in more accommodating positions (Odebunmi, 2019; Bamgbose, 2021). These norms are not fixed but are negotiated through everyday communication, especially during disagreement. Language therefore becomes a means through which spouses express authority, compliance, or resistance. Srimati and Barrett (2022) examined the performative nature of marriage, noting that the felicity of marital pronouncements does not depend solely on the words spoken but also on the social conditions that give them meaning. This suggests that power within marriage is not only expressed through explicit statements but also through the institutional and cultural frameworks that shape interpretation. Such perspectives reinforce the view that language operates as a social practice embedded in power relations.

Spouses employ a range of linguistic resources to manage power during interaction, particularly in conflict situations. Pronouns, modality, repetition, and turn-taking patterns serve as tools for asserting authority or resisting control. These features enable speakers to position themselves and others in ways that reflect dominance or submission. Ukaegbu (2021) examined language use in conflict and noted that the interpretation of statements as abusive depends on context, intention, and relational dynamics. A single utterance may be perceived as offensive or acceptable depending on situational factors, which shows the flexible nature of meaning in discourse. This flexibility allows speakers to negotiate power through subtle linguistic choices rather than overt confrontation. Shareen (2019) explored representations of gender in fairytales and found that male characters are often associated with authority and aggression, while female characters are depicted as compliant yet strategic in navigating constraints. These representations mirror societal expectations that influence real-life communication patterns, including marital interaction. Such findings suggest that language both reflects and reinforces social ideologies related to gender and authority. The examination of linguistic strategies in spousal discourse therefore provides insight into how power is constructed, maintained, and challenged within intimate relationships, making it an important area of study in discourse analysis.

Spousal Communication and Conflict

Research on spousal communication has consistently identified communication patterns and power struggles as central factors influencing marital satisfaction and stability. Glenn and Weaver (1979) argued that the quality of interaction between spouses is closely linked to marital happiness, noting that effective communication promotes understanding while persistent breakdown leads to dissatisfaction. Patterns of interaction such as interruption, avoidance, or hostile responses often intensify disagreement and create emotional distance between partners. Argyle and Furnham (1983) further explained that conflict in

relationships frequently arises from unmet expectations and attempts by individuals to assert control within the relationship. These expectations may relate to roles, responsibilities, or emotional support, and when they are not fulfilled, tension develops. Language becomes the medium through which such dissatisfaction is expressed, negotiated, or resisted (Adesina & Jegede, 2019). Communication during conflict is therefore not merely a reflection of disagreement but also a process through which relational positions are defined and contested. In many cases, repeated negative communication patterns reinforce imbalance in relationships, especially where one partner consistently dominates interaction. This suggests that spousal discourse is shaped by both interpersonal dynamics and broader social expectations, making it a relevant domain for examining how language functions within intimate relationships.

Emotional expression also plays a significant role in shaping spousal communication, particularly in multilingual and culturally diverse contexts. Yesem and Seyed (2022) examined the role of emotion in family language policy, stressing that emotional factors should be considered as a key component of multilingual interaction within families. Their study showed that language choice in the home is not only a matter of linguistic competence but also tied to emotional attachment, identity, and interpersonal relationships. In marital contexts, emotions such as anger, frustration, affection, or empathy influence how messages are conveyed and interpreted during conflict. The use of a particular language or code may signal solidarity, distance, or authority, depending on the situation. This perspective suggests that conflict interaction cannot be fully understood without considering the emotional and linguistic resources available to speakers. Communication breakdown may therefore arise not only from structural patterns but also from emotional misalignment between partners. The integration of emotional and linguistic analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of marital conflict, especially in settings where multiple languages are used. Such insights reinforce the importance of examining spousal discourse as a site where language, emotion, and power intersect, shaping the outcomes of interaction and the quality of marital relationships.

Language, Power Negotiation and Spousal Conflicts

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a relevant framework for examining how language functions in the construction and negotiation of power within spousal conflicts. Wodak and Meyer (2016) maintained that discourse is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned, indicating that language both shapes and reflects social realities. Fairclough (2013) further explained that everyday language carries ideological meanings that influence how individuals perceive and enact social relations. Within marital contexts, these perspectives suggest that communication between spouses is shaped by broader cultural expectations and social structures. Studies within Nigeria have shown that marital disputes often reflect tensions related to gender roles, economic responsibilities, and societal expectations (Akinwotu, 2020; Okoro, 2022; Jegede, 2024a, 2024b). Such tensions are expressed and managed through discourse, particularly during conflict situations where issues of authority and resistance become more visible. Nweke (2024), using a systemic functional linguistic approach, analysed spousal conflictual language in J. P. Clark's *The Wives* and demonstrated how experiential meanings in language represent conflict between spouses. This supports the view that linguistic structures encode relational meanings and power positions. Chilwa (2024) also examined the language of conflict and peace, noting that linguistic representation plays a role in shaping social and

political realities, including interpersonal conflict. These studies indicate that spousal discourse is not isolated but connected to wider ideological and cultural frameworks.

Further research has examined how discourse practices contribute to the construction of identity and power in both interpersonal and mediated contexts. Romanus et al. (2024) investigated endearment terms in social media interactions and argued that such expressions function as strategies for constructing gender identity and social meaning. Although their focus was on online discourse, the findings are relevant to marital interaction where similar linguistic strategies may signal intimacy, authority, or resistance. Evans et al. (2019) applied critical discourse approaches to conflict situations such as protests and political activism, describing language in conflict as a tool for sustaining hostility through accusation, blame, and verbal aggression. This perspective is applicable to spousal conflicts where similar strategies may be used to assert dominance or challenge authority. Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of CDA, which examines text, discursive practice, and social practice, provides a structured approach to analysing how such meanings are produced and interpreted. Through this model, it becomes possible to examine how linguistic choices in spousal interaction reflect underlying ideologies and power relations. Despite existing studies on marital conflict and discourse, limited attention has been given to the specific linguistic strategies through which spouses negotiate power in Nigerian media contexts. This gap justifies the present study, which focuses on how spouses construct, maintain, and challenge power during conflict interaction, with the aim of revealing the social meanings embedded in their discourse.

Theoretical Framework: Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) presents discourse as a form of social practice that operates at three interrelated levels: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The textual level focuses on the formal properties of language, including vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and rhetorical structures, which are analysed to reveal how meaning is constructed. The level of discursive practice examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, paying attention to processes such as intertextuality and the influence of institutional contexts on communication. The third level, social practice, situates discourse within broader social and cultural structures, where issues of ideology, power, and dominance are embedded. Fairclough (1989) argued that discourse both shapes and is shaped by society, meaning that language reflects existing power relations while also contributing to their maintenance or transformation. This framework enables a systematic analysis of how linguistic choices are connected to wider social meanings, making it suitable for examining the relationship between language and power in different contexts.

The application of Fairclough's model to the present study provides a structured approach for analysing how spouses construct and negotiate power during conflict interaction. At the textual level, the study examines linguistic features such as pronouns, modality, repetition, and rhetorical questions to identify how authority and resistance are expressed in spousal discourse. The discursive practice level considers how the interactions are produced within the setting of *The Justice Court*, where participants present their cases before a judge and an audience, shaping how they construct their narratives and position themselves. This level also accounts for the influence of the media context on the

presentation and interpretation of spousal conflicts. At the level of social practice, the analysis interprets the discourse in relation to broader cultural ideologies, particularly those concerning gender roles, authority, and marital expectations in Nigerian society. Through this multi-level analysis, the framework enables the study to reveal how power relations are encoded in language and how spouses use discourse to assert, negotiate, or challenge dominance within conflict situations.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to examine linguistic strategies in the negotiation of power within spousal conflicts. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on language use, meaning, and interaction rather than numerical measurement. This design aligned with the research objectives, which sought to identify linguistic strategies and examine how spouses negotiate power during conflict. A qualitative approach enabled detailed interpretation of discourse within its social context, which would not be adequately captured through quantitative methods. The choice of design was therefore justified on the basis of its suitability for discourse-oriented research and its capacity to provide rich, context-sensitive insights. The data for the study consisted of audio-visual materials drawn from two selected episodes of *The Justice Court*, a Nigerian reality courtroom programme that presents real-life disputes. The data were qualitative in nature, comprising spoken interactions, verbal exchanges, and paralinguistic features observable within the episodes. These materials were selected because they provided authentic instances of spousal conflict within a structured yet naturalistic setting. The population of the study included all episodes of the programme featuring marital disputes, while the sample consisted of two episodes, specifically episodes 206 and 175, selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was appropriate because it allowed the selection of episodes that clearly reflected the phenomenon under investigation, thereby enhancing the relevance and credibility of the data. Data collection involved repeated viewing of the selected episodes to ensure familiarity with the content and accuracy in transcription. Relevant segments of spousal interaction were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic details necessary for analysis. A coding framework based on discourse analytical categories was applied to identify recurring linguistic features such as pronouns, modality, repetition, and rhetorical structures. Ethical considerations were observed through the anonymisation of participants, with names replaced by neutral identifiers. Data analysis was conducted using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on the textual and social dimensions of discourse. This approach enabled the identification of patterns and meanings within the data while ensuring analytical rigour and transparency. The procedures adopted were sufficiently detailed to allow replication and to support the validity and reliability of the findings.

Results

The selected episodes of *The Justice Court* provided rich data for examining how spouses used language to construct, negotiate, and contest power within marital conflicts. The courtroom setting placed private disputes in a public and institutional space, where each participant sought not only to present facts but also to shape perception, gain legitimacy, and secure favourable judgement. The excerpts analysed revealed that linguistic choices were not neutral; rather, they reflected culturally grounded assumptions about marriage, responsibility, gender roles, and authority in Nigerian society. The analysis showed that

spouses relied on a range of discourse strategies such as labelling, repetition, reported speech, modality, possessive pronouns, identity construction, and rhetorical questioning to assert dominance or resist control. These strategies functioned within a broader socio-cultural framework where expectations of male authority and female responsibility influenced both the production and interpretation of discourse.

Linguistic Strategies and Power Negotiation in Spousal Conflicts in 'The Justice Court'

Excerpt 1: The husband stated, "We have been living together as husband and wife for the past six years, but what I noticed in her is that she is hot tempered, she's lazy also in terms of house chores, the issue started last year when she had an affair with a guy that lives in a third house to my house."

This utterance illustrates the strategic use of evaluative language to construct a negative identity for the wife. The descriptors "hot tempered" and "lazy" serve as moral judgements that position the wife as deficient in expected marital roles, particularly within a cultural context where women are often associated with domestic responsibility and emotional restraint. The husband's narrative foregrounds his perspective as an observer and evaluator, thereby placing himself in a position of authority. The reference to an alleged affair further intensifies the moral framing, presenting the wife as violating both marital trust and social expectations of fidelity. The phrase "a guy that lives in a third house to my house" localises the accusation, giving it a sense of immediacy and credibility within the community context. This construction does not merely describe behaviour; it seeks to legitimise the husband's stance and justify his grievances. The language reflects an attempt to align personal conflict with broader cultural values, thereby strengthening his claim to moral and relational authority.

Excerpt 2: The wife stated, "Ma, I carry over 80% of everything in the house and he does nothing... I will pay house rent, I will fix bills, I will buy him clothes... Ma, your honour! This man is a liar..."

The wife's response demonstrates a deliberate effort to counter the husband's claims through self-representation and assertion of agency. The repeated use of the pronoun "I" foregrounds her role as the primary contributor to the household, while the action verbs "pay," "fix," and "buy" emphasise tangible responsibilities. This pattern of repetition functions as a rhetorical strategy that reinforces her credibility and positions her as industrious and responsible. The quantification "over 80%" introduces an element of measurement, which strengthens her claim by suggesting objectivity. The direct accusation "this man is a liar" challenges the husband's narrative and attempts to discredit his account. Within the courtroom context, this form of address also seeks to persuade the authority figure by presenting a clear contrast between her contribution and his alleged failure. The language reflects a reversal of traditional expectations, where the wife presents herself as the economic backbone of the household. This repositioning challenges established gender norms and reframes the power dynamic within the relationship.

Excerpt 3: The wife stated, "I left his house like five times... he will tell me, 'I am coming for my child, you took my child away... Then he will say, 'If you don't want me to take daughter away from you, then come back home.'"

This excerpt reveals the use of reported speech as a means of reconstructing past interactions and attributing intention to the husband. The repetition of "my child" and "my daughter" reflects the husband's claim to ownership and authority over the child, which is presented as a basis for exerting control over the wife. The cyclical structure of the narrative, where departure is followed by threats and return, suggests a pattern of coercion. The wife's recounting of these utterances positions her as a subject of pressure, while simultaneously inviting the audience to interpret the husband's actions as manipulative. The use of reported speech allows the speaker to frame the interaction in a way that supports her position, highlighting specific statements that convey threat and control. Within the cultural context, children often represent continuity and social legitimacy in marriage, making them a powerful resource in conflict situations. The husband's alleged use of the child as leverage reflects an attempt to maintain authority through emotional pressure, while the wife's narration exposes and challenges this strategy.

Excerpt 4: The wife stated, "He is used to saying that 'If I see you with another man, I will send you away'. Then I decided to lie to him that I have fornicated maybe he will send me away... Is it possible for a woman to have sex with fifteen men and tell her husband?"

This excerpt illustrates the role of modality and rhetorical questioning in the negotiation of power. The statement "I will send you away" expresses a high degree of certainty and authority, reflecting the husband's attempt to assert control over the wife's behaviour. The wife's response introduces an element of resistance through strategic deception, which she presents as a means of escaping the relationship. The rhetorical question at the end challenges the plausibility of the situation and invites the audience to question the husband's claims. This form of questioning serves to undermine his authority while also appealing to shared cultural assumptions about morality and credibility. The interaction reflects a complex dynamic where control and resistance are enacted through language. The wife's use of exaggeration and questioning demonstrates an attempt to disrupt the husband's narrative and reposition herself within the conflict.

Excerpt 5: The husband stated, "She changed my daughter's school without my consent... I don't know her school now."

The use of possessive pronouns such as "my daughter" and "my consent" reflects a claim to authority and decision-making power within the family. The statement frames the wife's action as a violation of this authority, thereby constructing the conflict as a struggle over control rather than a disagreement over practical matters. The emphasis on lack of knowledge, "I don't know her school now," positions the husband as excluded and undermined, which serves to justify his grievance. Within the socio-cultural context, decision-making regarding children is often associated with paternal authority, and deviation from this expectation may be interpreted as disrespect or challenge. The language used in this excerpt reinforces the perception of the husband's role as a central authority figure, while simultaneously presenting the wife's action as an act of defiance.

Excerpt 6: The wife stated, "I met him during my service here as a youth corps member, I am always careful to fall into relationship because I am a sickle cell patient... I later accepted his request to share a relationship."

This excerpt reflects a strategy of identity construction where the speaker presents herself as cautious, responsible, and vulnerable. The reference to her health condition introduces a dimension of personal risk, which enhances her credibility and evokes sympathy. The emphasis on carefulness suggests moral discipline and rational decision-making, which contrasts with any portrayal of irresponsibility. This self-presentation functions as a means of establishing moral authority within the interaction, positioning the speaker as someone who entered the relationship with sincerity and awareness. The narrative also reflects broader cultural expectations regarding women's conduct in relationships, where modesty and caution are valued. The language used serves to align the speaker with these expectations, thereby strengthening her position within the dispute.

Excerpt 7: The husband stated, "Contrary to what she said that I was denying, I did not deny... I actually went to her parents and that was a mistake I made. I had a pure heart, I told her parents that I am responsible for pregnancy but I don't love the mother anymore. I will only take care of her and the child."

This statement reveals a separation between responsibility and emotional commitment. The husband acknowledges involvement but withdraws affective attachment, which reflects a strategic positioning that limits his obligations. The claim of having a "pure heart" serves as a moral justification, while the admission of mistake introduces an element of self-awareness. The distinction between caring for the child and rejecting the mother reflects a selective acceptance of responsibility, which allows the speaker to maintain a sense of control. Within the cultural context, acknowledgment of pregnancy carries expectations of commitment, and deviation from this expectation creates tension. The language used in this excerpt reflects an attempt to redefine these expectations in a way that preserves the speaker's autonomy.

Excerpt 8: The husband stated, "It is not as if I cannot manage you but the way you are spreading that kind of information, you can destroy me. It is better you report me to the police than telling lies against me."

The phrase "manage you" reflects an assumption of authority and control, suggesting that the speaker views the relationship in hierarchical terms. The concern about reputation, "you can destroy me," indicates the importance of public perception within the social context. The statement frames the wife's actions as harmful and unjustified, thereby shifting attention from the original issue to the consequences of her behaviour. The suggestion to report to the police introduces an alternative form of authority, which the speaker presents as more legitimate than public accusation. This strategy reflects an attempt to reclaim control over the narrative and to reassert dominance within the interaction.

Excerpt 9: The husband stated, "I gave 200,000 to her mother instead of 120,000... I realised I was supposed to pay 120,000... I also told her not to go home to her parents after the discharge but she refused because I believe that a woman stays at her husband's

house to take care of her newborn baby... when she took the twins there I did not ask of her."

This excerpt demonstrates the use of economic and cultural arguments to assert authority. The detailed reference to financial contribution serves to establish credibility and responsibility, while the emphasis on overpayment suggests generosity. The statement regarding the wife's movement reflects a belief in traditional norms, where a woman is expected to remain in her husband's home. The refusal to accept this expectation is presented as disobedience, which justifies the speaker's withdrawal. The language reflects a combination of economic control and cultural ideology, where financial provision and adherence to social norms are used as measures of authority. The interaction illustrates how power is negotiated through reference to both material and cultural resources.

Across the analysed excerpts, the findings demonstrate that spousal conflicts are shaped by strategic language use that reflects broader socio-cultural values. Speakers employed linguistic resources to construct identities, assign blame, and negotiate authority within the relationship. The courtroom setting amplified these strategies, as participants sought to persuade both the judge and the audience. The analysis shows that language in spousal conflict serves not only to express disagreement but also to enact and contest power, making it a significant site for understanding the relationship between discourse, culture, and social structure.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of episodes 206 and 175 of *The Justice Court* demonstrates that language functions as a central tool for asserting, negotiating, and contesting power in spousal conflicts. Both husbands and wives strategically deployed lexical choices, repetition, reported speech, and rhetorical questioning to construct authority or resist domination. For instance, husbands frequently employed evaluative labels such as "hot tempered" or "lazy," as well as possessive pronouns like "my daughter" and "my consent," to reinforce control over both their partners and familial decisions. These strategies reflect culturally embedded expectations of male authority and responsibility within Nigerian marital contexts. Conversely, wives countered these assertions by emphasising agency through repetition of action verbs, quantified contributions, and identity construction. Statements such as "I carry over 80% of everything in the house" repositioned the wife as economically indispensable and morally responsible, challenging traditional gender hierarchies. The findings suggest that linguistic strategies are not merely expressive but functionally instrumental, allowing spouses to negotiate status, legitimacy, and moral credibility within conflicts.

The data further reveal that conflict narratives are mediated by socio-cultural norms, including expectations of fidelity, domestic responsibility, and parental authority. Reported speech and modality emerged as particularly effective tools for manipulating perception and establishing relational power. Husbands' threats regarding children or marital fidelity illustrate attempts to exert coercive influence, while wives' use of rhetorical questioning and strategic disclosure highlights resistance and reframing of authority. Economic contributions and references to traditional norms, such as where a wife should reside post-childbirth, further shaped the negotiation of power, combining material and cultural leverage. These findings indicate that marital discourse operates as a

site where individual interests intersect with broader ideological frameworks, producing tension and contestation. The courtroom setting intensified these strategies, as spouses performed not only for each other but also for public and institutional audiences, amplifying the stakes of discourse. Overall, the study confirms that spousal conflict is both a personal and social process, with language serving as a medium through which power, identity, and social expectation are enacted and contested.

Conclusion

The study concludes that language functions as a central instrument through which power, authority, and resistance are enacted in spousal conflicts. Analysis of the selected episodes of *The Justice Court* revealed that both husbands and wives strategically employed lexical choices, pronouns, repetition, reported speech, modality, and rhetorical questioning to assert dominance, negotiate control, or challenge their partner's claims. Patterns emerged indicating that husbands often relied on cultural and moral authority, economic contributions, and control over children to legitimise their position, while wives utilised identity construction, emphasis on household contributions, and narrative reframing to resist subordination. These findings demonstrate that marital discourse extends beyond personal disagreement, reflecting broader socio-cultural norms and expectations concerning gender roles, authority, and relational responsibilities within Nigerian society. The study highlights the significance of examining language in conflict not only to understand interpersonal dynamics but also to reveal how social ideologies and cultural values are reproduced and contested in everyday interactions. The insights gained have potential applications for counselling, conflict resolution, and media analysis, providing a framework for interpreting how discourse shapes, maintains, and challenges power in intimate relationships, and offering a foundation for further research on marital communication and socio-cultural negotiation in mediated and real-life settings.

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