

Article

Bullying Ideology in Intra-Female Discourse: A Functional Analysis of Childlessness in Nigerian Nollywood

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Abstract

This study investigates intra-female bullying in the context of childlessness within Nigerian Nollywood home videos. While prior work has documented female harassment by male partners in marriage, less attention has been given to how women target other women – particularly in infertility settings. Focusing on mothers-in-law's verbal aggression toward their childless daughters-in-law, this research foregrounds co-female bullying within childless marriages. Using a purposive sample of three Nollywood films, twenty-seven sentences were selected as data and analyzed through Halliday's interpersonal metafunction of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The findings indicate that mothers-in-law deploy declaratives to state information that stigmatizes the childless woman; interrogatives to render psychological distress; imperatives to intimidate or constrain; and exclamatives to pronounce judgments on infertility. The study discusses how these functional sentence types function as bullying tools – threatening, insulting, taunting, excluding, spreading rumors, and eliciting emotional distress. It concludes that language serves as a social instrument that shapes and reflects power relations in mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dynamics. The authors advocate increased awareness of language use in such contexts and call for broader research on women's discourses across diverse settings, as well as educational initiatives to mitigate psychological harm linked to intra-female bullying.

Keywords: *Language, Bullying, childless context, functional analysis, Nollywood videos*

Introduction

The importance of language in social interactions cannot be overemphasised or taken for granted because without it, society, as we know it, would be impossible. Language is not only the most effective means of communication, but also the most ingenious, flexible, and productive. No wonder, Langacker (1968:23) avers that "Language is neither the sound passing through the air nor the thought they represent. Language is the device that allows A and B to pair the two". That means that it is language that establishes sound-meaning correlations, pairing meanings with signals to enable people to exchange ideas via an observable sequence of sound. It could lend itself to a manipulative tool that could be used to condition people's thoughts. According to Austin (1962), language is not only used in saying things but also in performing actions. One serious negative action that language can be made to perform is bullying. Bullying is one social phenomenon that has received attention from different fields of life. These include, among others, in the areas of politics, education, health, family relationships, peer relationships, workplace, and so on. The majority of the studies project the male folk, especially the youth and teenagers, as major players in bullying activities. This study seeks to interrogate intra-female discourses from three Nigerian home videos to underscore the fact that adult females, in the context of bareness, use functional constructions to bully the younger childless women.

Literature Review

Bullying has received greater attention from researchers, ranging from what constitutes bullying, types, its impact on individuals and society at large, contexts of bullying, and possible prevention. It is one social act that describes interpersonal relationships and the social power at work between individuals and groups. Bullying can be verbal or non-verbal. It is an act that makes the perpetrator feel good and superior over the bullied, who is left with the feelings of victimization that can result in low self-esteem, depression, frustration, anxiety, and, in some cases, suicide.

Bullying, according to Juvonen et al. (2014), is using force, duress, intimidation to abuse, violently dominate, or intimidate. It is a behavior that portrays physical or social power inequality between the bully and the bullied. *Burger et al (2015) see bullying* as a subtype of violent behavior characterized by three traits: unfriendliness, power imbalance, and repeated retaliations for a long time. In other words, bullying can be verbally expressed or nonverbally repeated. It can also be by showing aggression, abusive actions aimed at hurting someone's physical, mental, or emotional disposition. The objects of bullying are regarded as a group based on differences in certain social expectations, social class, or status.

Bullying varies in types. There can be physical, verbal, and non-verbal or relational bullying. Physical violence involves physical violence against someone's body or property. The verbal has to do with the aggressive use of the voice in speaking. The relational uses social relationships to hurt others. Verbal aggression, which is the main focus of this paper, deals with verbal bullying. It is a way of using words orally to create hurt or harmful feelings in an individual or group. It is a communication style that uses words of abuse, threats, power, and domination against the comfort of another. It is a social contradiction that reveals social power imbalance within a group or among individuals. Infante & Wigley (1986) define verbal violence as a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self-esteem of other people instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication. Identified verbal bullying includes lying against someone or spreading rumors, name-calling, harassing someone, intimidating someone, yelling at or lashing out words at someone in a discourteous or unfriendly tone, especially without any cause, mocking someone's voice or manner of speaking, laughing at someone, passing insults, and making a jest of someone.

Bullying produces some effects, particularly on the bullied. According to Remedy Health Media (2021), bullying can cause social seclusion, shame, sleeplessness, poor eating habits, low self-concept, nervousness, bedwetting, poor health, and emotional disorder, leading to different pains in the stomach, head, muscle, and other parts of the body, which may eventually defy medical intervention.

There has been an upsurge in the number of women without children. Present-day childlessness is occurring increasingly often among healthy families who are living within marriage or cohabiting and who are sexually active (Coleman, 1996). A woman is said to be childless if she has not experienced the delivery of a live or stillborn child. Therefore, childlessness can be construed from the biological perspective. However, a woman may act as a surrogate mother to a child/children

that she did not give birth to if she is the foster or adoptive parent or looking after her partner's children (Portanti & Whitworth, 2009). This gives a background to why the women with children see themselves as powerful (special and elevated status) to bully/ verbally assault the vulnerable and powerless (low status) childless women.

As a matter of fact, and based on the data for this study, within the confines of sisterhood, there is an obvious social contradiction to the claims of feminism and its variants. Accordingly, Sheila (1980) contends that feminists value women in and of themselves and for themselves, not in the hypocritical fashion of male-dominated culture. They see themselves as strong, capable, intelligent, and successful ethical human beings. They value autonomy for themselves as individuals and for women as a group who are developing their own political, social, economic, and personal destinies. The point here is that evidences of verbal aggression in women discourses undermine the rationality of these claims, especially in regards to the juxtaposing of ideas of myth and reality, ignorance and knowledge. The reality and knowledge created in the home videos for this study expose a negative new dimension to the functional approaches of English sentences from female intra-gender situational discourses. Hence, English functional sentences are used as a means of verbal aggression/psychological bullying in women discourses as contained in the home videos. For this study, our attention will focus on the use of verbal aggression/bullying in intra-female gender discourses that center around childlessness.

Theoretical Framework

The place of grammatical theories cannot be overemphasised as intellectual paradigms to explicate concepts of language. That is why a study of this nature will necessarily require a theory of language description. According to Freeman (ed.) (1970: 68), quoting Halliday (1964):

If the linguistic analysis of literature is to be of any value or significance at all, it must be done against the background of a general description of the language using the same theories, methods and categories.

In order to achieve this, some factors are considered in adopting a descriptive framework for the study. There are quite a number of linguistic models, which include Traditional Grammar, the Structural Grammar, the Transformational Generative Grammar, and the Systemic Functional Grammar. These grammatical descriptions belong to different periods and have different purposes.

The grammatical model preferred in this research is the Systemic Functional Grammar. It was pioneered by Michael Alexander Kirkwood (MAK) Halliday, who also owes some allegiance to J. R. Firth. The Systemic Functional Grammar was named Scale and Category grammar in the initial development, Halliday (1961), because of insistence on a definite ranking of units. However, with time, a new name, Systemic Functional Grammar, was given to encapsulate four categories of unit, structure, class, and system, which are used to account for the fundamental grammatical patterns of any human language (Halliday, 1966a). According to the development, unit and class apply to both surface and deep planes of grammar,

while structure and system operate only at the surface and deep grammar systematically. The grammar at the surface plane deals with how grammatical structures are formed and their elements but the deep plane explains how semantic features are organised into networks and the conditions for allowing new entries into the network. In addition, classes are defined by their role in structure. Thus, the class, nominal group, is defined by its function either as subject or complement in a clause. Moreover, the grammar believes that there are differences in the delicacy of grammatical items, whereby some occupy the primary level of delicacy and others occupy the secondary level of delicacy.

In Systemic Functional Grammar, the system is central because the theory believes that meaning in language is a well-ordered phenomenon. A system, according to Halliday (1973: 6), is "a set of options with an entry condition: that is to say, a set of things of which one must be chosen, together with a statement of the conditions under which the choice is available". Therefore, the theory emphasizes meaning. Language users unconsciously choose to say what they say out of several options at their disposal within the language they use, as conditioned by relevant extra-linguistic parameters. It is these linguistic choices that are referred to as the system of meanings, which are realised in the wording of the language. Language is seen as a social semiotic (Halliday, 1978). That is, how people use language with each other to accomplish everyday social life.

Moreover, the Systemic Functional Grammar can be divided into functional components. These functional components are referred to as 'metafunctions' according to Halliday (1985a: xiii-xvi). They are the 'ideational', 'interpersonal', and 'textual'. The ideational metafunction deals with the construction of experience through language by which a speaker expresses his experience of the external world and his own world of consciousness. The interpersonal metafunction involves the actors in a discourse, and it presents language as performing actions either to the people or by the people. However, the textual component supports the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions by presenting what is usually called relevance.

There are countless ways of constructing sentences. The sentence decided upon by a speaker/writer will depend on several factors as subject matter, the occasion, the audience, the nature of response envisaged, and personal disposition. However, "the English sentence can be approached from two perspectives, vis-à-vis functional and structural" (Onadeko, 2000b:87). The structural type deals with the components of a sentence in terms of the number and types of clauses that make up the sentence, while the functional aspect has to do with the use to which a sentence is put. Accordingly, a sentence may be declarative when it is just a statement of fact; interrogative when it is used to ask a question; imperative when it is issuing an order; and exclamatory when it is an expression of sudden surprise, joy, anger, or any feeling. The focus of this paper is on the functional aspect of sentences deployed by women in selected Nigerian home videos whose story lines revolve around situations of childlessness.

Drawing from the interpersonal meta-function dimension of language use, this study intends to analyse women's utterances in the context of childlessness in selected Nigerian home videos to underscore the functional aspects of the female character discourses. In other words, it seeks to establish the relationship between

the sentence choices that women make in discourses that involve situations of childlessness and the meaning they intend to project. Thus, through the language use of these women, we get to know the organisation of their world in maintaining or not, positive interpersonal relationships, especially in the face of childlessness.

Research Method

The data used in this paper were gathered from three purposively selected Nollywood home videos. The first video is titled “A Little Lie,” produced by Chinedu C., and released in 2016. The second film is titled “Impatient Mother-in-Law,” produced by Obi M. and released in 2016, while the third is titled “Under Fire” by Onyeka J.O. and released into the market in 2015. The choice of the three videos was based on the relevance of their subject matter to the context of the research, which is a women discourse in childless situations. A total of twenty-seven sentences uttered by different women were sampled from the three videos; eleven sentences from the first, four from the second, and twelve from the third. The functional type of each sentence is first of all determined before stating the underlying purpose for which the sentence is uttered. The analysis of the data utilized Halliday’s (1973) Systemic Functional Linguistics framework through both qualitative and quantitative methods to underscore what bullying women accomplish with functional sentences.

Table 1: Presentation of Data

Video Title	S/N	Extract Sentence	Sentence Type
A Little Lie	1.	You cannot buy what I need in the market.	Declarative
	2.	My daughter-in-law has refused to give me a grandchild.	Declarative
	3.	Let her cry and confess her sins.	Imperative
	4.	Who knows the number of abortions she committed and the number of children she killed?	Interrogative
	5.	Let her confess that God may forgive her and give her	Imperative
	6.	Did you look at the dining table, does it look complete?	Interrogative
	7.	You are supposed to have a father, mother, and children so that your table will be full and your food will be sweeter.	Declarative
	8.	Why are you eating? Are you not supposed to share food with your children?	Interrogative
	9.	What are you cooking? Is that what you came to this house to do? Cooking for whom?	Interrogative
	10.	You should be starving in this house until you have given me a baby.	Imperative
	11.	Get out of the kitchen. (She turns off the fire and throws the pot down)	Imperative
Impatient Mother-in-law	12.	Not one more word from you.	Imperative
	13.	These seats over here are for real women; women with children.	Declarative
	14.	This meeting is for real Umuada women.	Declarative
	15.	I have become an object of mockery to Umuada women.	Declarative
Under Fire	16.	After eight years of staying with my son, you have nothing to show for it.	Declarative

	17.	Of course, I have come to the conclusion that you are a man.	Declarative
	18.	I have brought to my son a real woman.	Declarative
	19.	I have rejected you.	Declarative
	20.	Precious, you are not only barren but wicked; you are very wicked.	Declarative
	21.	You think you are the only one to eat from my son's dining table?	Interrogative
	22.	Come on, go and get my food, this is my son's house.	Imperative
	23.	If your fellow witches have sent you to come and kill me, tell them you didn't see me.	Imperative
	24.	Precious, leave that food.	Imperative
	25.	Is it only food you came here to eat?	Interrogative
	26.	Your mates fill their stomachs and deliver at the maternity, but you fill your stomach and deliver at the toilet.	Declarative
	27.	Useless girl, good for nothing!	Exclamatory

Result and Discussion

Table 1 shows the functional types of sentences extracted from the home videos. What becomes obvious is that all functional types of sentences are deployed by the women to bully their co-women in childless contexts. However, the sentences are used for different derogatory intentions, some of which are deliberate and others that are unintended. The frequency of each sentence type is presented in the succeeding Table 2 to investigate which is predominantly used by the bullying women.

Table 2: Frequency of the Sampled Functional Sentence Types

Sentence Types	Frequency	%
Declarative	12	44.4
Imperative	8	29.6
Interrogative	6	22.2
Exclamatory	1	3.7
Total	27	100

The statistics represented in Table 2 above are expected. Declarative sentences take the lion's share by occurring 12 times, representing 44.4%, while imperative sentences are 8, representing 29.6%. Interrogative sentences come next with 6 appearances, taking 22.2% while exclamatory sentences appear once, taking just 3.7%. Apart from the fact that the declarative sentence is usually the most used construction in any human interaction, it becomes the means for stating the cold facts for the bullying woman in a childless context. The women who use declarative sentences need to come out straight, bold, and blunt to express their anger, dislike for the childless situation of their co-women, and hatred for their ineptitude. The declarative constructions do not hide feelings and do not know how to pretend or

mince words. This is exactly what played out in several instances where one woman or the other is found deploying the use of declarative sentences to bully the childless woman. For example:

1. You cannot buy what I need in the market.
2. You are supposed to have a father, mother, and children so that your table will be full and your food will be sweeter.
3. I have brought to my son a real woman.

The sentences above were statements uttered by the mother-in-law to bully the childless son's wife. The first is a hash reply to a simple request from the daughter-in-law for the mother-in-law to say what she would like her to buy from the market. Instead of the mother-in-law appreciating the request and returning the courtesy, she decided to open up on the delicate matter of the daughter-in-law's childless situation without regard for her feelings. The reply "you cannot buy what I need in the market" is loaded with meanings and at the same time poignant. What else will a woman need in such a situation that cannot be bought in the market than a child? That blunt statement is enough to immediately water down the enthusiasm of a daughter-in-law who is seeking by all means to satisfy a visiting mother-in-law. It can dampen her morale and activate her sad mood. While it is a fact that a child cannot be bought in the market, one does not expect the mother-in-law to subject the daughter-in-law to such ridicule, particularly at such an auspicious moment when the latter is trying to be nice to the former. The second sentence is equally blunt but somehow contains both statements of fact and untruth. While having a table surrounded by father, mother, and children makes the table full, interesting, and enjoyable, it becomes untruth when it determines the taste that the food gives. However, the mother-in-law is only venting her annoyance at the scanty table that lacks the presence of children. This is an indirect way of insulting the daughter-in-law for her childlessness and to mock her. The third declarative sentence is the most fierce and unexpected. It is used to issue a quick quit warrant to the daughter-in-law without giving any room for negotiation. The too sharp, straightforward sentence momentarily announces the sack/rejection of the childless woman without an appeal. The sentence is also used indirectly to blackmail the childless woman emotionally by implying that she is not a "real" woman. It becomes obvious that declarative sentences in the sampled home videos are used to mock, provoke, demoralize, taunt, insult, accuse, lambast, badly tag the childless woman, and declare open rejection for her.

The second most used sentences by the bullying women in childless contexts are the imperative sentences. Imperative sentences occur 8 times and represent 29.6% of the total number of functional sentences used in the sampled home videos. Imperative sentences are normally used to issue direct orders or commands, requests, invitations, warnings, or instructions. The bullying women use imperative sentences in childless contexts to show some level of imposition on their bullied counterparts. The use of imperative sentences by women in matrimonial matters in the sampled videos reveals the socio-cultural disposition of the African setting, which puts the elderly women in a position where they can exercise control over the young women. And that is the socio-cultural right the mother-in-law or sister-in-law enjoys over their daughter-in-law or the wife of their brother, as the case may

be. Some of the imperative sentences are meant to express unquestionable vetoes, impolite requests, and outright hostility to the childless woman by the bullying co-woman. These are some examples from the extracted structures:

4. Let her cry and confess her sins.
5. Not one more word from you.
6. You should be starving in this house until you have given me a baby.
7. Precious, leave that food.

A critical examination of the sentences from the excerpted structures above points to utterances made by merciless women to bully their co-women. The fourth was uttered by a mother-in-law to dissuade others from placating a crying woman after she had been humiliated for her childless condition. The wicked mother-in-law “encouraged” the woman to continue to cry and confess her sins as if the crying would absolve her of her sins. This imperative sentence only succeeds in subjecting the crying woman to a moment of emotional turmoil and humiliation. “Let her cry and confess her sins” as a statement indicts the woman and inculcates her as the cause of her childless situation. The Yoruba socio-cultural environment, where the film is set, believes that a woman who is a witch might have sworn never to give birth to any child. The statement is therefore an indirect way of saying she is a witch and that she has a skeleton in her cupboard. This is not only insulting, it is also name-calling.

The fifth sentence is more authoritative in silencing the childless woman. Her situation, notwithstanding pathetic, was not seen as something that could give her a voice in society. This voice is not only commanding, it is also issuing a threat. This commanding tone is intended to subjugate and suppress the barren woman. The statement is meant to exert serious psychological tension and gravity on her helpless condition. It is to cow her and enslave her consciousness. It inflicts pains of an inferiority complex upon the childless sufferer and renders her at the mercy of the oppressing voice. “Not one more word from you” is uttered to completely withdraw the right of the traumatized and stigmatized childless woman to any opinion.

The sixth and seventh sentences carry heavy weight in traumatizing and suppressing the childless woman as well. The woman’s right to have any say is not the only thing threatened; her right to live is also boldly challenged. The sentences question her right to have access to any food unless she can produce children. The orders allow no options. The obligatory tone achieved by the deontic modality “should” does not permit the woman to eat. The direct reference achieved by the summon “Precious” is to identify the subject of the attack and to confront her openly. Then, “leave that food” is an order that she must obey at all costs. Thus, imperative sentences in the sampled text openly challenge the rights of the barren women to live or have a say, even in their matrimonial homes.

Another functional sentence type used to bully the childless woman in the sampled videos is the interrogative sentence. Interrogative sentences in the sampled texts are 6, taking 22.2% in the statistics. The interrogative sentence's question is deployed to probingly indict the childless woman and to subject her to very deep thought about

her condition. These questions are to further traumatize her and make her feel sorry for her situation. Examples:

8. Who knows the number of abortions she committed and the number of children she killed?
9. Why are you eating? Are you not supposed to share food with your children?
10. What are you cooking? Is that what you came to this house to do? Cooking for whom?

In the interrogative constructions cited above, the bullying woman is using sentence 8 to indirectly adduce the childlessness of the woman to several abortions that she is likely to have committed. The question is both rhetorical and indicting. It portrays the woman as a useless person who has probably lived a reckless life before marriage. The two questions contained in the single sentence are not asking for her opinion on the matter but pronouncing judgment upon her in being somehow precise about her tendency to commit a “number of abortions” and killing a “number of children”. This is to deliberately grieve the childless woman and to mock her condition.

Example 9 contains two questions asked in quick succession. The first is a non-polar question, while the second is a polar question. The questions are to query the audacity of the childless woman to eat without children around her table. The questions are to trouble her peace of mind and destabilize her emotions. Number 10 is too akin to number 9. It contains three questions in successive aggravations. The opening question, “What are you cooking?” is non-polar, while the other two, “Is that what you came to this house to do? Cooking for whom?” are polar questions. Although none of the questions were expected to be replied to by the addressee, they come in the form of rhetorical enquiries to directly flog and wound the conscience of the childless woman. The questions are expected to call her attention to her condition of childlessness in order to plunge her into deep sorrow and inflict her with shame. They are to remind her that her role in her husband’s house is far more than just cooking, and that the essence of cooking by a wife in the matrimonial home is for the children.

There is only one use of an exclamatory sentence in the sampled texts, which translates to 3.7%. This is a sparing occurrence, no doubt. The implication is that the bullies in childless contexts hardly ever raise their voice to intimidate or threaten the childless woman. They do so with craftiness and technical subtlety in order not to easily give themselves away to the people around them, that they are bullying the woman. The bully will, in most cases, keep quiet once she notices that someone is approaching, and perhaps displays a positive disposition to muffle her resentment for the childless woman. Exclamatory sentences are rarely used, but by necessity in provocative situations when the bully is ready to damn the consequences and does not care who is listening or around. Thus, the sentence, “Useless girl, good for nothing!” coming as an exclamatory construction was uttered by the angry mother-in-law against her childless daughter-in-law to write her off and to make her feel worthless. This is to further taunt the lady and to traumatize her.

Conclusion

Language as a social tool defines every social relationship as well as gives meaning within social contexts. The four functional sentences in the English language have been identified to be in use in bullying situations, particularly by women against co-women in childless contexts. Relying on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, which establishes the fact that language can be used to perform social functions, it is obvious from the analysis done in this research that the bullying women use functional sentences in their discourses, especially in the context of childlessness, to bully their co-women. These functional sentences act as bullying tools for mothers-in-law against childless daughters-in-law. The declarative sentences are used to state facts or give information that reminds the childless woman of her condition of childlessness. The interrogatives are used to elicit psychological or mental torture. The imperatives are used to intimidate or subdue the childless woman. The exclamatory is sparingly used, but essentially used to express serious provocation against the childless woman, which mostly results in name-calling and writing off the woman. There is no doubt that these functional sentences are used as devices to threaten, insult, mock, taunt, exclude, spread false rumours, intimidate, as well as elicit or provoke emotional torture on the victims. The study, therefore, recommends appropriate language use in contexts by women to avoid the psychological torture they put their sisters through. There is a need for more studies into women's language use in different contexts and intentional education of women on the realities of their language use on their fellow women.

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