

Pragmatic Study of Silence in Marital Discourse in Some Nollywood Films

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Abstract

Silence in marital discourse is a communicative resource within spousal interaction, particularly in contexts of conflict, power negotiation, and emotional exchange. Existing studies have examined marital discourse through verbal interaction, (im)politeness strategies, and pragmatic markers, but have not specifically examined silence as a pragmatic act within Nollywood films. Therefore, this study examines the pragmatic functions of silence in selected Nollywood films to identify its types and functions, and contribution to meaning in marital discourse. The data for the study were purposively collected from two Nollywood films, *The Plea* and *A Private Storm*, sourced from YouTube. These films reflect marital relationships within Nigerian sociocultural contexts, particularly experiences of abuse, conflict, and emotional negotiation which study investigates. Instances of silence were identified from spousal interactions and analysed within their situational contexts using Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory. The findings reveal that silence operates within shared situational knowledge and is interpreted through contextual factors such as inference, reference, and relational dynamics. The study identifies different types of silence such as submission and compliance, resistance and protest, manipulation and control, emotional withdrawal, trauma-induced fear, and concealment and denial. These forms of silence are used to perform pragmatic acts such as avoiding violence, diffusing tension, resisting abuse, exerting control, withdrawing emotionally, and concealing reality. However, silence functions as a meaningful communicative act that contributes to the overall interpretation of marital discourse and reflects the sociocultural realities that shape interaction in Nigerian society. This study contributes to expanding the scope on pragmatics, discourse and film studies

Keyword: Silence, marital discourse, pragmatic acts, Nollywood films.

Introduction

Marital discourse is a complex communication system that involves interactions beyond verbal conversation that conforms to spouses' desired meaning. This type of discourse between spouses plays a crucial role in shaping marital relationships, and the patterns, language, and interaction styles that define marital discourse are essential for managing meaningful conversation and conflict. Scholars like Lawes (2), Gottman (23), and Tannen (29) describe marital discourse as the patterned verbal and nonverbal interaction through which spouses construct relational meaning, negotiate roles, and manage interpersonal expectations within marriage. Meeting these interpersonal expectations, conflicts, and disagreements sets the stage to strengthen their bonds through verbal and non-verbal dialogue, with the implications of silence.

The implicature of silence refers to meaning conveyed through the omission of verbal responses, where silence acts as a communicative act rather than a mere absence of sound, while the interpretation is highly dependent on contextual factors. However, silence is not merely the absence of speech or a meaningless signifier; rather, it serves as a valid turn in marital discourse. Adeseeke et al. (875) agree that silence is not a learned communicative behaviour claiming it's a kind of non-verbal communication that can indeed be a powerful message. Hence, it conveys information that words fail to do in human different areas of life. Communicators use it more frequently, understand it more easily, and sometimes value it more than speech or words.

Silence is a significant aspect of communication, not merely the absence of speech. It serves various social meanings and functions within relational and interactional contexts, particularly in marital discourse. According to Schroter (15), silence conveys meaning, regulates interactions, and expresses stances shaped by cultural contexts. He suggests that silence has multiple communicative purposes and, whether intentional or not, retains pragmatic functions. The interpretation of silence hinges on contextual cues, leading to varying meanings depending on the relationship between communicators. Jacob Mey's pragmatic act theory extends speech act theory by emphasising context and social interaction, asserting that the nuances of speech and silence derive meaning from their situational context, as seen in films where context influences language and character behaviour.

Film is a rich, multifaceted database for research, providing both qualitative visual data and quantitative metadata for analysing societal and cultural trends. It is also used in research as a source of information

and an artistic tool for exploring complex themes (Emily Moyer-Gusé et al., 369). Nollywood, a subset of film types, is the heart of the Nigerian film industry, and it is the second-largest in the world and the largest in Africa by virtue of the enormous volume of films produced yearly (Haynes, 1). Nollywood films represent the social realities of Nigerians through narratives that explore themes such as family relationships, morality, corruption, religion, and marriage, making them a rich repository of data for studies on interaction issues (Osiasanwo & Akintaro, 10), including silence in marital discourse, which this study intends to explore.

However, this study aims to examine the pragmatic acts of silence in two selected Nollywood films on marital discourse from *Private Storm* and *The Plea* by Mercy Johnson and Lancelot Imaseun, using Jacob Mey's pragmatic acts theory to identify the types of pragmatic silence, their functions and contributions to the comprehensive meaning of marital discourse. The significance of the study lies in its contribution to understanding the pragmatic functions of silence in marital communication while highlighting the societal and cultural factors that influence silence in diverse contexts and how they contribute to the implications of meaning in discourse.

Many studies on marital discourse are primarily concerned with the spoken narrative as the central medium of communication and source of data for analysis. Likewise, within film discourse, attention often centres on verbal and visual representations, leaving out silence as a communicative strategy. Brooks et al. (1999); Chiaro (2009); and Campbell and Moroz (2014) have explored different aspects of silence and marital discourse dynamics, extending into the context of silence and the role it plays in interactions and meaning negotiations. However, this study focuses on the pragmatic investigation of silence in Nollywood films related to marital discourse. Similarly, Nweke (2024a & b), and Mary Omoboye et al have analysed marital discourse through mood systems in spousal interactions in drama, and communication patterns in marital satisfaction. The closest related work to this study is Iyiola and Abel's analysis of marital conflict in *Le Silence* (2019), a Francophone Cameroonian film, focusing on language, silence, and cinematic technique. The previous studies have focused on either pragmatic acts or silence in marital discourse and other aspects of marital discourse. Little attention was given to the role of silence as a communicative tool in marital discourse within Nollywood films. This study addresses that gap by applying Jacob Mey's pragmatic act theory, which explores how

actions or non-action can convey meaning in communication, to the selected Nollywood films.

This study aims to investigate the pragmatic acts of silence in the selected Nollywood films with the following objectives:

- i. Identify the pragmatic silence types in the films.
- ii. Examine the pragmatic acts performed through silence.
- iii. Analyse the influence of context in the interpretation of silence.

Literature Review

Pragmatics, Silence and Context in Communication

Pragmatics plays a crucial role in the negotiation of meaning, particularly regarding the interpretation of silence as both a verbal and non-verbal element of communication. González-Lloret (92) highlights that pragmatics encompasses both gestures and language, while Taguchi (194) emphasises its relational aspects across various contexts. Silence is increasingly recognised as a significant form of communication that necessitates contextual understanding, which is influenced by interpersonal relationships and shared knowledge. Contemporary research, contrary to earlier views, acknowledges silence as a meaningful communicative tool in discourse, particularly in marital interactions. Authors like Amer et al (52) advocate for viewing silence as a deliberate communicative act, shaped by cultural and contextual factors, rather than as purely negative. The study illustrates that silence, especially within question-answer dynamics, can serve as an intentional response that enriches communication, aligning with Odebunmi's assertion that speech acts are contextually contingent. Kurzon (17) and Brooks (9) further affirm the context-dependence of silence, underscoring the necessity for interpreters to leverage shared knowledge and cultural awareness to derive its meaning effectively. This underscores the tenet at which this study pitches its understanding.

Context plays a crucial role in understanding marital discourse, including interactions between couples and their communications about marital issues. Silence, like speech, relies on context for interpretation and reflects societal norms that shape verbal behaviour. It is vital to grasp the dynamics of marital discourse, which involves both verbal and nonverbal exchanges that allow partners to express emotions, negotiate differences, and manage relationships. This discourse is significantly shaped by power dynamics and conflict. The interplay between silence and context illustrates that silence holds communicative significance

similar to spoken dialogue. Key pragmatic actions in marital discourse, such as insults and apologies, often lead to silence during conflicts. By examining Nollywood films that depict marital content, the study aims to explore how silence is pragmatically utilised across various contexts of marital communication, thereby enhancing understanding of its role in interpersonal and societal dynamics.

Nollywood films serve as a crucial cultural medium that articulates Nigerian values, conflicts, and lifestyles. They are considered reflections of contemporary Nigerian society and address themes such as family relationships, morality, and social mobility (Haynes 8; Okome 5). The growth of Nollywood in the 1990s, aided by affordable video technology, transformed it into a major global film industry recognised for its high production output (Larkin 295). Nollywood storytelling, marked by melodrama and moral teachings, combines indigenous elements and universal themes to create resonant narratives. Studies of language in Nollywood films reveal how dialogue mirrors social norms and cultural identity, often employing Nigerian English and indigenous languages (Igboanusi, Haynes). However, Akintaro and Oyetunji (33) affirm that marital conflicts often lead to silence, characterised by pragmatic actions such as insults and apologies, and that the role of film discourse remains a valuable database, offering an opportunity to explore its pragmatic implications, particularly regarding domestic conflict and emotional relationships within Nigerian marital narratives. This exploration is essential for understanding the full scope of communication styles in Nollywood and their reflection of marital discourse in Nigerian society.

Empirical review

Amer et. al. (52) explores the concept of 'silence' from both pragmatic and literary perspectives. Pragmatically, silence serves as a significant communication tool that is culturally dependent. In literature, particularly in novels, silence is portrayed as a humanistic device that compels readers to engage more deeply with the text, often revealing hidden meanings. Writers utilise silence to enhance the emotional impact, which can sometimes be misconstrued as a lack of communication. In poetry, silence is depicted in various ways, inviting readers to experience it and, occasionally, personified as a tangible entity. This study however is concerned with silence in marital dialogue.

Iyiola and Abel (138) analyse the portrayal of marital conflict in Brice Fansi's film *Le Silence* (2019) through language, silence, and

cinematic techniques. It employs a qualitative socio-stylistic approach to explore emotional tensions within the multilingual Cameroonian context. Key findings include criticism, sarcasm, stonewalling, and code-switching as markers of discord, with language and silence playing significant roles in the negotiation of power and expression of gender roles. The film highlights the husband's linguistic dominance and the wife's vulnerability, with language shifts reflecting intimacy and authority changes. The study concludes by recommending interdisciplinary collaboration, media literacy integration, and further exploration of multilingual cinematic communication. The purview of this study is showing how silence is not just a communicative device but also a means for women to save face and avoid violence.

Nweke examines the language use of spouses in J.P. Clark's play, "The Wives' Revolt," utilizing Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics as the framework. It aims to reveal the representation of conflictual language through transitivity processes by examining 29 excerpts that illustrate spousal conflict. A qualitative method was employed for data analysis, revealing that four out of six transitivity types (material, mental, relational, and verbal) are used to express actions, feelings, and arguments during conflicts. The material process predominates, indicating that physical actions are more frequent in their interactions, with male characters demonstrating dominance through the use of transitive verbs. This analysis helps elucidate the conflicting issues present in the spouses' interactions. This differs from this current research as Jacob Mey's pragmatic act theory is utilized to analyse the communicative function of marriage.

Previous studies on pragmatic acts have examined the works of authors like Ogungbe and Omolabi (2020) who analysed seven selected humour pieces about Coronavirus on social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, using Pragmatic Acts Theory. The study highlights the social functions of Comedic Material Humour (CMH) as reflective of citizens' freedoms and as a critique of corrupt and inefficient leadership in Nigeria, especially regarding health facilities. The construction of CMH serves as satire on the socioeconomic and health challenges faced by the population, reinforcing status differences and enhancing social connections. Ultimately, the authors conclude that humour not only entertains but also addresses significant societal issues impacting Nigerian citizens. This research although also uses the pragmatic act theory, its concern is on the pragmatic act performed by silence.

In a similar vein, Osisanwo, Akintaro and Atoloye (2024) investigate humour in Maryam Apaokagi's comedy skits, focusing on types, pragmatic functions, and their contribution to discourse meaning, grounded in Jacob Mey's Pragmatic Acts Theory. The data includes eight selected skits reflecting family issues, revealing four interlocutory contexts: couple, sibling, mother-child, and distant-family relationships. The study identifies eight pragmatic acts that express humour, such as warnings, promises, requests, orders, questions, scolding, exaggeration, and speculation. These acts, aimed at defusing conflicts, rely on conversational and contextual factors such as inference, reference, relevance, and shared situational knowledge, showcasing diverse approaches to handling family issues.

This study differs from the others as it seeks to employ the pragmatic act theory to examine the pragmatic functional types of silence, the role the silence was subjected to by the actors in the films, the context in marital discourse that accord the silence their affordances and the way they are used to negotiate power, conflict, and emotions.

Theoretical framework

Pragmatics Acts Theory

This study mainly adopts the Pragmatic Act Theory (PAT) of Mey (2001), which builds on the speech act theories of J.L. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Unlike the speech act theory, pragmatic acts do not necessarily include specific acts of speech. In essence, Mey's pragmatic acts theory is an ambitious approach to explaining how pragmemes are represented in pragmatic acts in speech situations. His main criticism against the speech act theory is that for speech acts to be effective, they have to be situated: "they both rely on, and actively create, the situation in which they are realised (Mey 218). He asserts that "there are no speech acts, but only situated speech acts, or instantiated pragmatic acts.

Consequently, the emphasis is not on the conditions and rules for an individual speech act but on characterising a general situational prototype (what Mey calls a pragmeme) that can be executed in the situation (Fafiyebi et al. 46). Thus, a particular pragmeme can be substantiated and realised through individual pragmatic acts. In other words, a pragmatic act is an instance of adapting oneself to a context and the context to oneself. What counts as a practice (i.e., what can be subsumed under a particular pragmeme as an allopract) depends on the participants' understanding of the situation and the outcome of the act in a given context.

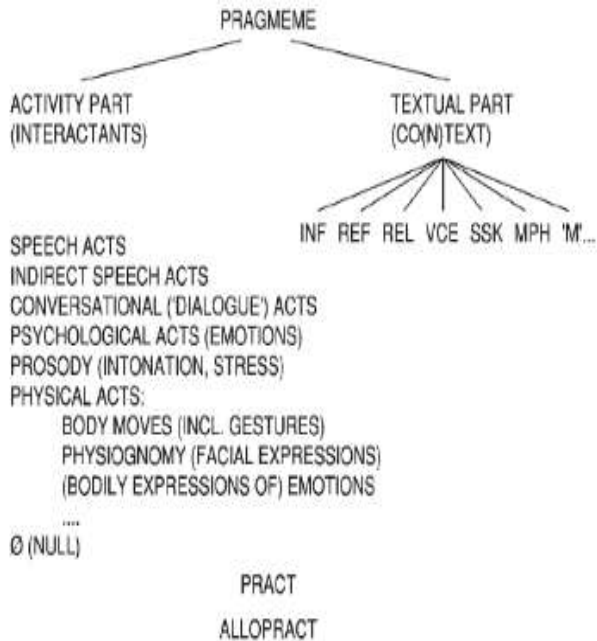


Figure 1: Pragmeme, adapted from Mey, (752)

Mey’s (2001) model of pragmeme has two parts: activity and textual. The activity part pertains to acts that can be performed by communication interactants and consists of a list of optional components. It is possible to have only one of these components and not the other(s). On the other hand, the textual part - Inference (INF), Reference (REF), Relevance (REL), Voice (VCE), Shared Situation Knowledge (SSK), Metaphor (MPH) and Metapragmatics (‘M’) comprises components that create the context or co-text of the communication. While the activity part covers speech acts, indirect speech acts, conversational (“dialogue”) acts, psychological acts, prosodic acts, and physical acts, the textual part pertains to contextual factors.

Mey’s Pragmatic Acts Theory is a valuable tool for analysing silence in Nollywood films. The theory emphasises the importance of contextual factors and the variety of communicative acts used. By examining different acts, such as indirect, conversational, psychological, prosodic, and physical acts, it is possible to reveal the context of silence in the films. Mey’s model of pragmatic acts also provides a visual representation of communication components, which helps in identifying

the elements that contribute to the meaning silence represents in the films. Thus, the application of pragmatic act to the study is to highlight the functions of silence beyond the understanding of absence of sound in a conversation process among marriage.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative design to analyse pragmatic silence in marital discourse in selected Nollywood films. The chosen films were Mercy Johnson's *The Plea* and Lancelot Imaseun's *A Private Storm*. They were selected for their rich reflection of life in Nigerian homes and society at large (Christine 194). The films were then watched and reviewed to identify scenes that depict diverse aspects of marital and familial interactions.

The storylines of these films feature many scenes in which spouses use silence in their conversations across different contexts. This highlights the emotional turmoil and communication breakdowns found in abusive relationships. Both *A Private Storm* and *The Plea* have been well-received in Nigeria for depicting the agony of women in abusive marriages, a theme that gained further prominence after the death of Nigerian gospel singer MrsOsinachi in 2022. Given these factors, it is important to examine the pragmatic silence of men and women in marriages, especially as discussions around violence and the rising divorce rate continue unresolved.

To achieve the study's aims, data were collected from YouTube channels streaming the films freely. Twenty instances of pragmatic silence in couples' communication and meaning negotiation during conversations were identified. These examples were systematically selected through purposive sampling, focusing on longer conversations. The data were then transcribed to capture both verbal and non-verbal acts in the films.

The analysis reveals that pragmatic acts of silence in the narratives portray submission, conflict avoidance, self-preservation, emotional withdrawal, resistance, concealment, intimidation, shared acknowledgement, and the erasure of agency. Specifically, silence is used to signal acquiescence in the face of violence, to avoid confrontation in marital disputes, to protect oneself emotionally, to withdraw from distressing situations, to resist expectations, to hide feelings or experiences, to exert psychological pressure, to indicate mutual understanding, and to illustrate the loss of individual agency.

These findings clarify how different functions of silence directly relate to marital violence and expectations.

Data Analysis and Findings

This study highlights six types of pragmatic silence in marital discourse across selected films, using components of pragmatic acts. These silences arise in clear, context-driven situations. For example, a bruised wife stays silent to avoid more violence. A frightened mother and her married daughter both avoid confiding in each other about abuse. A mentor notices her mentee's facade and intervenes. A husband stays silent to manipulate and control the marriage, ignoring his wife's feelings.

1. Pragmatic Silence of Submission and Compliance: In both films, silence is used to gain submission and compliance in marriage. The women, following patriarchal beliefs, choose silence over defending themselves when accused or assaulted. This silence is their way of coping with societal and marital pressure.

Excerpt1.

Context: Rotimi accuses his wife of prostitution and infidelity because someone paid her a compliment. The wife remains silent while he threatens her. In the previous scene, she had been beaten up by her husband when she tried to defend herself.

1. Wife: You called me.
2. Husband: Who is Princewill?
3. Wife: Oh, he's an old classmate. We reconnected on Facebook recently.
4. Husband: He's an old classmate you reconnected with on Facebook, and he's telling you you look good? Does he not know that you are a married woman?
5. Wife: He's also married. You trust, I won't...
6. Husband: (While moving to stand.) I DON'T TRUST ANY WOMAN. YOU ARE A PROSTITUTE.
7. Wife: Gasps silently.
8. Husband: YES.
9. Wife: Rotimi, you just called your wife a prostitute.
10. Husband: OH YES. AND I'LL SAY IT AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN. YOU WILL DO NOTHING. YOU ARE NOT

JUST A PROSTITUTE, BUT A VERY CHEAP ONE. VERY CHEAP ONE.

11. Wife: (Looks at him silently and turns to walk away).

12. Husband: (Pulls her back roughly). HOW DARE YOU? I'M TALKING AND YOU ARE WALKING AWAY. HOW DARE YOU?

13. Wife: (Screams in pain). I thought you were done.

14. Husband: This is the end of this phone.

15. Wife: (Silence).

16. Husband: You prostitute.

17. Wife: (Silence. Walks away, holding her hurt arm, after a considerably safe time lapse).

Source: *The Plea* (Time: 0.09:20–0.10:53)

In this scene, the husband uses verbal and physical aggression to assert dominance over his wife. His rising voice, here referred to as verbal cue escalation (VCE), on each turn asserts his masculinity. His words in turn four, though posed as a question, function as an accusation. Based on their shared situational knowledge (SSK) of abuse, a mutual understanding shaped by previous experiences, the wife answers defensively. As the situation escalates, she ultimately chooses silence as her method of self-defence against further violence. Here, silence manages fear and seeks survival. Talking has previously led to more beatings; so, silence remains the safest option.

2. Pragmatic Silence of Resistance and Protest: The females in both movies use silence to resist abuse and protest the ill treatment of their husbands. Protest in normal situations is loud, and resistance is usually communicated verbally. In the situations these women find themselves, their verbal offerings have earned them more violence consequently, they have learnt to use their silence to protest against abuse and to resist their husband's fake gestures of kindness and apology after yet another episode of physical assault.

Excerpt 2.

Context: Alex and Gina are returning from a party when Alex starts to accuse Gina of cheating and flirting with men. he won't let her defend herself and eventually parked the vehicle and tells her to get out in a lonely part of town and it was already late at night. She gets out and he

drives away. He eventually comes back and picks up a terrified Gina. When they get back, he tries to be kind, and he apologises.

1. Alex: I see you have not removed your makeup (proceeds to bring a facial wipe and tries to help Gina clean her makeup).
2. Gina: (Silence).
3. Alex: I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.
4. Gina: (Silence).
5. Alex: (Sighs deeply). I wish you did not have to make me so angry.
6. Gina: (Silence).
7. Alex: I love you. I love you so much.
8. Gina: (Silence).
9. Alex: I cannot bear the thought of losing you.
10. Gina: (Silence).
11. Alex: Please, Gina. (Tries to help her wipe her makeup).
12. Gina: (Flinches in pain and fear).
13. Alex: Gina, I promise, I promise, I promise to make you happy. I will check the anger. I will stop the jealousy.
14. Gina: (Silence).
15. Alex: I love you, Gina. I love you so much. I cannot bear the thought of losing you.
16. Gina: (Silence).
17. Alex: I cherish you more than anything in the world, Gina.
18. Gina: (Silence).
19. Alex: Anything! (Hugs her head).

Source: *A Private Plea* (Time: 0.022:23–0.24:46)

In the conversation, Alex repeatedly engages in physical aggression toward Gina, then offers gifts and apologies in a recurring cycle. He alternates between a raised voice and a softer, persuasive tone (VCE), using promises, threats, reassurances, and statements to convey apology and regret. Gina, aware of this pattern in their marriage (SSK), consciously remains silent to protect herself, using her silence as a pragmatic refusal of Alex's apologies and resistance to his psychological strategies. By withdrawing, Gina expresses dissent, maintains emotional distance, and rejects his control without direct confrontation.

3. Pragmatics Silence as a Manipulation tool: In these films, the three husbands are loud, rude, and opinionated with their wives. When they

fall silent, it is a calculated move to shift blame and keep control of the conversation. In clear contrast, the wives' silence does not aim at control or blame-shifting but instead signifies their powerlessness and oppression. Thus, while husbands use silence to manipulate and cast their wives as guilty, wives' silence is an expression of their lack of power.

Excerpt 3

Context: Alex and Gina agree to go to Uju, Gina's best friend's birthday party, together, but Alex fails to keep to the agreed time. Gina goes alone to the party after repeated calls from her friend. Alex was furious when he gets back home in her absence. When she returns, he locks her out all night and she ends up spending the night in her car. The dialogue ensues in the morning.

1. Gina: (Walks in angrily, shouting). What is this, Alex? What did I do that you locked me out all night?
2. Alex: (Silence).
3. Gina: What? After all, I waited for you until 12:30.
4. Alex: (Silence).
5. Gina: I sent you many messages. You did not reply. I called you and your phone was off.
6. Alex: (Silence).
7. Gina: What was I supposed to do? Leave that girl stranded when everything was going wrong?
8. Alex: (Silence).
9. Gina: What are friends for if not to be there for one another?
10. Alex: (Stands up angrily, shouting). ARE YOU NOT SUPPOSED TO BE THERE FOR ME?
11. Gina: You, you...
12. Alex: Instead, you ran to the party when I told you to wait for me.
13. Gina: Alex, Alex...
14. Alex: Who did you go to see at that party after I told you to wait for me?
15. Gina: ALEX! Just let me go (Tries to walk away).
16. Alex: (Drags her arm and points a finger at her face). I AM NOT PLAYING WITH YOU. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? I AM NOT PLAYING WITH YOU. WHO DID YOU GO TO SEE? DO NOT LIE, OR YOU WILL MAKE THIS WORSE.

17. Gina: Alex, what is this about? Are you trying to turn this on me?
 18. Alex: (Slaps Gina hard).
 19. Gina: (Screams in pain, holds her face, and looks at him quietly).
 20. Alex: YOU BETTER START TALKING. NO WOMAN WILL MAKE MY LIFE MISERABLE OR MAKE A FOOL OF ME. I SWEAR I WILL BREAK YOUR NECK. TALK TO ME. WHO DID YOU GO TO MEET?
 21. Gina: (Silence)
 22. Alex: (Picks a bottle and breaks it on the floor).
 23. Gina: (Screams and runs away).
 24. Alex: Gina, come back here
- Source: *A Private Plea* (Time: 0.55:22–0.56:48)

The pragmatic force of silence in these excerpts operates at two levels. First, Alex weaponises silence to dismiss Gina's fury at his ill treatment and to assume conversational control. In contrast, Gina's silence after getting slapped stems from shock and fear. With his silence, Alex performs a pragmatic act of dominance display, using both psychological and physical tactics to shift the conversation in his favour and make Gina the guilty party. In addition, his raised voice (VCE) and references (REF) to their earlier communication foreground his dominance. In response, Gina's stunned silence becomes a form of self-protection.

4. Pragmatic Silence of Emotional Withdrawal and Psychological Detachment: In these scenes, women in abusive marriages use silence as a deliberate strategy to avoid emotional connections with their abusers. They intentionally suppress their feelings and distance themselves emotionally and psychologically. Rather than confront their partners or demand fair treatment and respect, they withdraw emotionally by numbing their feelings, avoiding intimacy, and minimising emotional exchanges. To keep the peace, they may lie, hide the truth, and eventually come to believe their own lies.

Excerpt 5:

Context: Rachel has been beaten up by her husband. She was visited by Miss Gloria, her mentor, who was able to rightly guess that Rachel was going through abuse even though Rachel denied it. Miss Gloria goes to Rachel's mom to express her concerns. Rachel's mom has endured more

than twenty years of abuse and has always lied about her bruises and swollen face, attributing them to having fallen.

1. Rachel's mom: You are sure you do not want anything?
 2. Miss Glory: No, no, I am fine. Thank you.
 3. Rachel's mom: You are welcome, Glory.
 4. Miss Glory: I am here because of Rachel. Have you heard from her today?
 5. Rachel's mom: No, but I am supposed to go and see her today. Why?
 6. Miss Glory: I called her yesterday. She sounded down. I asked what was wrong, and when she did not speak, I went to her house.
 7. Rachel's mom: Okay...
 8. Miss Glory: I did not like the way she looked. I think she is being abused.
 9. Rachel's mom: (Shifts uncomfortably in her seat while looking at Miss Glory in silence).
 10. Miss Glory: Yes.
 11. Rachel's mom: (Silence).
 12. Miss Glory: I did not like what I saw. I asked her over and over what was wrong. She refused to give me any direct answer.
 13. Rachel's mom: (Silence).
 14. Miss Glory: After much pressure, she said she fell.
 15. Rachel's mom: (Sighs heavily). Well, accidents do happen.
 16. Miss Glory: It was no accident. Rachel did not fall. She is being abused.
 17. Rachel's mom: (Silence).
 18. Miss Glory: Yes.
 19. Rachel's mom: (Breathes heavily, pauses for a long while). Hmm, Miss Glory, this is a family matter. I will handle it.
 20. Miss Glory: Okay.
 21. Rachel's mom: But thank you for telling me.
- Source: *The Plea* (Time: 1.06:11–1.7:50)

Miss Glory speaks directly to show the abuse Rachel suffers in her marriage, asserting that Rachel is being abused, not that she fails. Meanwhile, as Miss Glory tries to persuade her, Rachel's mother stays silent. Noticing this, Miss Glory, aware of Rachel's mom's situation, makes a reference (REF), but doesn't get her attention. Hence, drawing

on her knowledge (SSK) of the family's history of abuse, Miss Glory speaks emphatically to challenge Rachel's mom's denial and detachment. In response, Rachel's mom uses silence to show embarrassment and defensiveness; here, her silence serves to avoid accountability. Ultimately, Rachel's mom realises that her own tolerance of abuse affects her daughter's situation.

5. Pragmatic Silence of Trauma-Induced Fear: Fear of physical violence and memories of past trauma compel many women in abusive marriages to remain silent, instead of asserting themselves in situations where objection or resistance would otherwise be expected. This direct link between trauma and silence is evident in the movies, where women consistently endure belittling and dehumanising treatment. Their silence is depicted not as inadvertent but as an intentional, deliberate strategy rooted in the ongoing impact of trauma and the need to protect themselves from further harm.

Excerpt 6:

Context: Gina is sleeping when Alex returns home with a woman after they have disagreed, and she consequently refuses his advances. Their noise wakes her up, and she walks into the sitting room. She is shocked and sits on the staircase watching Alex silently.

1. Alex: You are welcome to my home.
2. Alex's guest: Let's play a game of cat and mouse.
3. Alex: (Laughs out loud).
4. Alex's guest: (Laughs out loud).
5. Gina: (Walks in and looks at them silently).
6. Alex's guest: (Notices Gina). Oh, we have company.
7. Alex: (Looks at Gina and laughs.) Yes, we have company.
8. Gina: (Looks at them silently).
9. Alex's guest: Naughty boy, you did not tell me you like dinner for three.
10. Alex: We can make an inclusion, right? (Looks at Gina mockingly).
11. Gina: (Silence).
12. Alex's guest: Uh-huh.
13. Alex: So she is invited.
14. Alex's guest: She is not bad.
15. Gina: (Silence).

16. Alex: (Laughs out loud while looking at Gina.) It is okay, baby.
 17. Gina: (Silence).
 18. Alex: You are sore all over, but she is not. She is relieving you.
 19. Gina: (Silence).
 20. Alex: You are invited if you want to join. (Laughs out loud).
 21. Gina: (Silence).
 22. Alex: (Speaks to his guest). Do you like it? Where do you like it, here or in the room? You do not mind the spectator, do you?
 23. Gina: (Cries silently).
- Source: *A Private Storm* (Time: 1.08:00–1.10:50)

Gina observes silently as Alex and his guest demean her, taunting her directly and citing their initial encounter (REF) as justification for bringing another woman. Together, Alex and his guest use coercive invitations to persuade Gina to join them, making their punitive intent to degrade and dominate her explicit. Gina's silence highlights her humiliation and emotional distress, enacting the pragmatic posture of powerless witnessing. Given the turbulent nature of their relationship (SSK), silence was her only response.

6. Pragmatic Silence as Concealment and Denial: Women deliberately conceal abuse, isolating it from family, friends, and local authorities. This concealment typically entails withholding disclosure when abuse arises in conversation, whereas denial manifests as an outright refusal to acknowledge one's circumstances. These intertwined behaviours, as shown in the films analysed, result in dire consequences, including loss of life.

Excerpt 8:

Context: Rachel grew up seeing her mom being abused several times over the years. Her mother had always endured and covered up the abuse by lying to anyone who asked after her bruises. She always said that she fell. Here she had been told by Mrs. Glory about the possible abuse her daughter was going through, and also covering like she had been doing.

1. Rachel's mom: Rachel, are you sure it was a fall?
2. Rachel: Yes, mom. Why would I lie to you?
3. Rachel's mom: Shakes her head, reaches out to hold Rachel's hand. Are you sure? Are you sure Kenny is not laying his hands on you?

4. Rachel: Hesitates. No, of course not.
5. Rachel's mom: Sighs deeply. I do not want you to go through what I went through. I do not want you to see it, feel it, or be in it. That is why I am asking. If he is laying his hands on you, you have to tell me.
6. Rachel: No, he is not, mom.
7. Rachel's mom: Silent consideration. You fell?
8. Rachel: I fell.
9. Rachel's mom: Sighs deeply, hesitates. I was scared and worried. You have to be more careful.
10. Rachel: Mom, come on. I fell.
11. Rachel's mom: Sighs again. You fell?
12. Rachel: I fell.
13. Rachel's mom: Hesitates, sighs. You know I love you, right? You have to be more careful. Do not be clumsy, falling around. If you did fall.
14. Rachel: Silence.
15. Rachel's mom: You fell?
16. Rachel: Yes, mom.
17. Rachel's mom: Leans in to hug Rachel. Come here. You can tell me anything, right?
18. Rachel: Silently hugs her mother.
19. Rachel's mom: Do not lie to me, Rachel.
20. Rachel: Silence.
21. Rachel's mom: Do not lie to me, okay?
22. Rachel: Silence.
23. Rachel's mom: You fell? Rubs Rachel's back gently.
24. Rachel: Yes, mom.
25. Rachel: Cries softly. Yes, mom.

Source: The Plea (Time: 1.04:02–1.05:30) 1:12:00

In this scene, there is mutual silence between mother and daughter over shared experience of abuse (SSK). They make reference (REF) to falling several times because it is a learned behaviour from mother to child as the operative word they use to conceal the actual cause of their physical injuries. The mother cajoles the daughter to tell her truth using her voice (VCE) in a persuasive tone but Rachel has already learned from her mom that abuse is to be hidden. Both women silently acknowledge the abuse yet maintain the social script of silence.

Discussion of Findings

This study demonstrates the pragmatic roles of silence in marital discourse in Nollywood films. Six types of pragmatic silence emerge: submission and compliance; resistance and protest; manipulation and control; emotional withdrawal and psychological detachment; fear and trauma-based silence; and concealment and desire. Contexts for these silences include: a wife avoiding violence, de-escalating hostility, and enduring humiliation in front of guests; a husband repeatedly offering false apologies; occurrences of repeated violence; abandonment on a dark road; and shock from assault.

These situations establish that silence is typically intentional, not simply the absence of speech, as Kurzon (15) suggests. Each silence type represents a distinct act: submission and compliance reflect yielding to authority; resistance and protest counter abuse or norms; manipulation and control direct outcomes or responses; emotional withdrawal and psychological detachment signal inner distance; fear and trauma-based silence indicate self-preservation under threat; and concealment and desire involve hiding pain or intentions. Men and women employ silence differently: men use it for intimidation, manipulation, and evasion of responsibility, while women generally use it for survival. The significance of silence is interpreted in conjunction with verbal communication, with its conversational, psychological, and physical effects highlighted by context, inference, relevance, and shared situational knowledge.

Conclusion

The utilisation of pragmatic silence in marital interactions in this study reinforces the notion that silence is a vital aspect of interpersonal communication. Consequently, this finding contributes to the growing body of research on the types, uses, and nature of silence in various interpersonal domains. Specifically, it supports the assertions by Jaworski (1993) and Saville-Troike (1985), as well as Tannen's (1990) contention regarding the universality of silence as a communicative phenomenon. In line with Jaworski's (1993) findings, this research demonstrates that silence is not confined to broader societal or cultural contexts, but also permeates marital discourse. Significantly, this investigation shows that silence in marital discourse relies on shared situational knowledge. This finding supports Mey's (2001) view on the role of context in pragmatic interpretation and aligns with Saville-Troike's (1985) emphasis on the cultural grounding of silence. The study

also finds that silence in films clarifies real-life marital experiences by highlighting its social functions and critiquing the social system, confirming Jaworski's (1993) view that silence communicates beyond the mere absence of speech.

This study makes three key contributions. First, it offers a focused account of silence in marital discourse, an area less studied than speech, politeness, or impoliteness. It distinguishes between the types and functions of silence in marital interactions, expanding our understanding of nonverbal pragmatic acts. Second, applying Pragmatic Acts Theory shows silence as a pragmatic act with clear illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects, not merely an absence of speech. This creates a more inclusive model of meaning-making. Third, it contributes to African and Nigerian discourse studies by grounding the analysis in Nollywood films, situating silence in its sociocultural context, and showing how local realities shape communication.

The pragmatic functions of silence help women in abusive marriages avoid violence, diffuse tension, resist and protest abuse, conceal and deny reality, and cope. This study highlights the importance of silence in discourse and suggests further inquiry. Additional pragmatic studies could examine silence in family, religious, and medical settings, where it may serve context-specific communicative functions. Comparative studies across cultures would clarify how sociocultural norms shape silence. Multimodal analysis combining silence with gesture, gaze, and prosody could offer a fuller account of meaning in interaction.

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