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Discourse Markers of Sarcasm in the Marital Conflict Discourse of Nigerian Celebrities

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Abstract
Sarcasm is a communicative style with a complex interpretation. Thus, it presents a range of challenges in capturing its linguistic nuances, context dependencies and the latent meaning in marital disputes. The study examined the discourse markers of sarcasm in the marital conflict discourse of Nigerian celebrities. Since sarcasm conveys indirect meaning, this study helped language learners to infer and correctly interpret the meanings of sarcastic expressions in the context of marital conflicts. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What discourse features indicate sarcasm in marital conflicts of Nigerian celebrities? (2) How do these discourse features function to express sarcasm within a marital conflict context? (3) What is the relationship between sarcasm and conflict escalation in Nigerian celebrity marital disputes? Using virtual observation, the

researcher deliberately selected representative samples of texts or narratives in which sarcasm was communicated in different ways from online platforms of five (5) Nigerian celebrities who had marital crises. Such platforms include Facebook, blogs, Instagram, Twitter and so on. Moreover, newspaper headlines that feature celebrity news (direct interviews with such celebrities), such as Vanguard, Daily Post, Daily Trust, Premium Times and so on, were consulted. The collated data was given a qualitative and descriptive analysis using J.R. Searle's Speech Act Theory. The findings revealed that Nigerian celebrities use various discourse features, such as tone-meaning incongruity, quotation marks, footing shift, exaggerated virtue, religious irony, capitalisation for emphasis, hyperbole, vagueness, undermining clichés, false empathy/flattery, understatement, moralising deflection, child framing, detached tone, mock rhetorical questions, audience inference, religious register, indirect reference, mismatch between tone and content etc, to indicate sarcasm during marital conflicts. It is recommended that the study be replicated in similar contexts to validate the findings.

Keywords: Discourse, Discourse Markers, Sarcasm, Marital Conflicts, Nigerian Celebrities

Introduction

Language in action comprises a significant portion of our social lives. It can be used for persuasion, verbal bluffs, politeness, hedging, verbal threats, commands, establishing facts, legitimizing claims, consistency, monitoring, evidence, accounts, attributions, categorisation, identity, stories, narratives, social relationships, affinity-seeking and so on. Language is strategically used to either portray or resolve conflicts in marital relationships. Chiluwa (2024) argued that the failure of communication lies at the foundation of most interpersonal conflicts. "Sometimes, it is caused by offensive language or other forms of taken-for-granted banters, squibs, or anecdotes unwittingly used in inappropriate contexts.". In the same vein, the systematic negative constructions

and misrepresentations of individuals and groups when interpreted as language aggression or hate speech have also often resulted in violent conflicts in the long run. Thus, Language shapes the way conflict unfolds and escalates. The nature of conflict is tied to discourse structures and linguistic constructions. The systematic patterns of vocabulary and grammatical structures embody the propensities of language that can incite conflict or aggravate existing ones. This indicates that discourse is closely intertwined with how conflict may develop and intensify

Objective of the Study

(1) To investigate discourse features that indicate sarcasm in the marital conflicts of Nigerian celebrities
(2) To analyse how these discourse features function to express sarcasm within marital conflict contexts
(3) To identify the relationship between sarcasm and conflict escalation in Nigerian celebrity marital disputes.

Research Questions

(1) What discourse features indicate sarcasm in marital conflicts of Nigerian celebrities?
(2) How do these discourse features function to express sarcasm within marital conflict context? (3) What is the relationship between sarcasm and conflict escalation in Nigerian celebrity marital disputes?

Statement of the Research Problem

Sarcasm as a communicative style is used across various social contexts, yet its interpretation and impact remain subject to significant variability. This complexity presents a range of challenges in capturing linguistic nuances, context dependencies and the latent meaning of sarcasm in marital conflicts. Unfortunately, people often overlook the role of sociocultural influences on the use and interpretation of sarcasm in marital conflicts. Such factors as cultural background, gender dynamics,

social status, situational context and relationship satisfaction that deepen our understanding of how sarcasm operates as a communicative tool in the context of marital conflicts are neglected. A series of studies have been conducted on the use of sarcasm in communication, which includes Nelms, Jodi L. (2001), *A Descriptive Analysis of the Uses and Functions of Sarcasm in the Classroom Discourse of Higher Education*; Cahyani, Emma H. (2017), *A Study of Sarcasm in the American Sitcom, the Big Bang Theory*; Nagwanshi, Prateek and C. E. Veni Madhavan (2014), *Sarcasm Detection using Sentiment and Semantic Features*; Hussein, Abbas L., Majeed Nadia and Rusul A. K. Atu (2021), *Linguo-Stylistic Analysis of Sarcasm in American Granddaughter*; Camp, Elisabeth (2011), *Sarcasm, Pretence and The Semantics/ Pragmatics Distinction* and so on. However, little or no research has focused on the use of sarcasm in marital disputes, particularly among Nigerian celebrities, whose public conflicts provide rich linguistic data for discourse analysis.

Conceptual Framework

Discourse

Nordquist (2024) linguistically explains discourse as a language unit longer than a single sentence. Discourse study looks at the form and function of spoken or written language beyond its small grammatical pieces, such as phonemes and morphemes. Also, it analyses language in conversation in a social context. Thus, discourse is how language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is a language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions. The study of discourse entirely depends on the context because conversation involves situational knowledge beyond the spoken words. It is very difficult to extrapolate meaning from an exchange merely from verbal utterances because many semantic factors are involved in authentic communication. In context, discourse may consist of only one or two words, as in *stop talking* or j*oking*.

Nordquist further explains that the word *discourse* is derived from the Latin prefix *dis-* meaning "away" and the root word, *currere,* meaning "to run". Therefore, discourse translates to "run away" and refers to the way conversations flow. He adds that the Dutch linguist Teun van Dijk is largely responsible for developing discourse as a field of study, and it is interested in how larger units of language, including lexemes, syntax, and context, contribute meaning to conversations.

Moreover, Ezeifeka (2018) argues that discourse is simply defined as "language use in speech and writing beyond the level of a sentence, the use of language for communication in context". She adds that context in this sense is multi-faceted as it incorporates "what Mey (2001) regards as the universe of language use, the total of what people do with each other in interaction". Discourse can be viewed as both a mass noun (discourse) and a count noun (discourses). According to Ezeifeka, discourse is a mass noun that:

> denotes all of the meaningful communication that forms the knowledge base of social institutions, knowledge based on their memories of things they said, heard, seen or written before and which they utilize to do things in the world: exchange information, express feelings, make things happen, create beauty, entertain themselves and others.

Moreover, discourse as a count noun (credited to Foucault and his followers) refers to "conventional ways of seeing and talking about the world that characterize particular social settings. Different discourses are different ways of representing the world, which is associated with different positions assumed by the participants at various points in time and space," Ezeifeka (2018).

Conflict Discourse

Conflict discourse refers to the study of how language and communication are used to express, understand, and potentially

resolve conflicts, including verbal aggression, hate speech, and the language of peace-building. Verbal aggression in conflict discourse analyses how language is used in arguments, insults, and threats, while hate speech examines how language is used to dehumanise and demonise groups or individuals. Peace discourse, as an aspect of conflict discourse, studies the language used in peace negotiations, mediation, and reconciliation efforts, while media representation of conflict analyses how news and other media outlets frame conflicts and the language they use to describe different actors. Conflict discourse examines how language is used in everyday interactions and in broader social and political contexts to portray situations of disagreement, argument, and potential violence. It investigates how language shapes our understanding of conflicts, the roles of different parties involved, the framing of issues and how language is used to escalate as well as de-escalate conflicts, mediate, and build peace.

According to Kokkonen (2014),

> conflict discourse as it appears in media texts refers to the descriptions of situations and psychological states that play an important role in the formation of particular actions, and the tactics disputants use to criticize other parties' moves and position themselves for accountability.

She adds that "conflict discourse can be found in discourses of various spheres of communication: political, business, religious, ecological, cultural, sports and others…" Conflict discourse can be a research tool for studying marital disputes, which are filled with provocative or sarcastic speeches

Leung (2005) argues that conflict talk is a more appropriate term for conflict discourse than other terms because it encompasses the broadest range of conflict situations. Specifically, it "captures the central idea that participants take alternative positions on the same issue, but it does not imply a restriction to a single speech act nor a

single turn sequence nor a single topic of contention." In other words, the term "conflict talk" allows for the analysis of conflict across various interactions and levels of discussion. According to Cui (2020), conflict talk is commonly used in interactive verbal and non-verbal communications, and it can reflect potential patterns of social order and the relationship between interlocutors, individuals and institutions. Conflict talk is common in everyday life, courts, business negotiations, hospitals, marital relationships, etc. Its interactive pattern can embody trends or rules in the continuous construction or reconstruction of the social order.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm means using words that mean the opposite of what you want to say to insult someone, show irritation or just to be funny (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). StudySmarter views sarcasm as a literary device in which a speaker says one thing but means another to ridicule or mock. Nagwanshi and Madhavan (2014) add that "a sarcastic statement is a witty or bitter remark that seems to admire someone or something but is actually used to insult or taunt. Hussein, Majeed and Atu (2021) explain that sarcasm is the deliberate attempt to indicate, question or ridicule attitudes and beliefs by using words or gestures in ways that contradict their natural meanings. Moreover, Chongaiman (2016) explains that sarcasm is derived from the French word "sarcasmor" and also from the Greek word "sarkazein," which means "tear flesh" or "grind the teeth," respectively. Sarcasm simply means to speak bitterly. He further defines sarcasm as a literary and rhetorical device (often satirical or ironic remarks are meant to mock, amuse or hurt someone or some section of society. These definitions agree that sarcasm generally takes the form of an ironic remark that is intended to mock, hurt or satirise someone or something. Sarcasm as a form of contempt (meaning "I'm better than you, and you are lesser than me.") includes hostile humour, name-calling, mimicking and body language, such as eye-rolling and sneering. *Literarydevices.net* adds that there are no literary terms

that could replace sarcasm, but a few words, such as mockery, ridicule, satire, irony, scorn, sneering, scoffing, gibing, taunting, acerbity and mordacity come very close to it in meaning.

As a literary device, sarcasm can convey a writer and/or character's true feelings of frustration, anger and even derision, though veiled by the presence of humour and wording that is inconsistent with what is intended. However, since sarcastic statements contradict the speaker's intent and true meaning, it can be difficult for writers to effectively utilise this literary device without proper context or tone.

To know that a statement contains sarcasm, one has to depend on context. Hence, it is very difficult to detect sarcasm in a single sentence. According to Ducret *et al.* (2020), a pause, intonation or look can provide the cues necessary to determine whether there is sarcastic intent behind a comment in verbal communication. However, these social cues are inaccessible in writing. Thus, we must rely on our understanding of the world, the speaker and the context beyond the statement to discern between sarcasm and sincerity. Sarcasm often creates a gap between what is said and what conversation participants think is the meaning. Thus, the listener usually fills this gap due to several integrated factors, such as socio-cultural norms, contextual, pragmatic and linguistic knowledge (Hussein, Majeed and Atu, 2021). In social media communication, new slang words are introduced every day and emojis are often used to negate the sentiment of the text. In addition, stylistic devices and stylometric features are often employed to convey a meaning opposite to their literal interpretation.

Writers use sarcasm a lot in literature to provide insight into characters' perspectives, develop character relationships, and create humour. However, sarcasm can be used in non-literary texts, such as The Bible, to convey implicit criticism with a particular

victim as its target. It is typically inappropriate to use sarcasm when writing an academic essay. Sarcasm is informal and expresses personal opinions rather than evidence that could support an academic argument.

Functions of Sarcasm

Sarcasm can be used as a means of expressing underlying pain, anger or frustration. An instance in the Bible (Exodus 14:11) is when Moses took the Israelites out of Egypt and into the desert to save them. After a while, the people are upset and they ask Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" The people know this is not the reason Moses took them, but they are upset and are expressing their frustration.

1. It can be used in disputes as a defensive mechanism.
2. Sarcasm is used as a means of mocking or criticising someone.
3. It is used to mock people when they are to be shown how they should behave.
4. It is used to ridicule some person, some manner or habit to show that it should be corrected.
5. It is used to express contempt or hatred against some person or character trait that should be corrected.
6. In literary works, sarcasm is used to bring flavour to make the stories seem real to the readers.
7. Sarcasm is an effective literary device that can reveal a great deal about a speaker and/or writer and how they feel about other people, ideas, social conventions, and more.
8. For a reader, sarcasm can be a source of humour and provide memorable insight into both a speaker's thoughts and feelings, as well as the reader's thoughts and feelings.

Furthermore, Keraf (2010), in Nafisah (2023), identifies ten functions of sarcasm. Sarcasm is used to:

a. **Express rejection**: This is used to refuse something that is disliked or hated.
b. **Convey prohibition**: This is used to stop someone from doing something they do not like or hate. Example: During the Lent period, my church members do not eat meat. They like to close down places where meat is sold. They ensure that both the windows and doors are padlocked.
c. **Convey affirmation**: This emphasises anything that might be considered relevant to the objective of the utterance. Example: I mean, how come I did not hear your voice? So, I am deaf?
d. **Convey information**: This is used to provide information in a sarcastic form to someone. Example: Some professions give you the privilege to commit crimes freely: you are free to rob anyone and you won't be arrested, imprisoned or fired. In fact, people won't even know your identity.
e. **Convey order**: This is used to give commands to someone to do something according to the utterance.
f. **Convey equality**: This is used to express the similarity of a person or event to a thing referred to in the utterance.
g. **Convey comparison**: This is used to express the comparison or likeness of a person or event with something referred to in the utterance.
h. **Express an opinion**: This is intended to give an individual advice or an opinion on a subject. Example: When someone is at the top, it is usually difficult to listen to advice, because no one makes sense to them anymore.
i. **Submit a question:** This is used to ask someone a question about something that is under the intent of the utterance. Example: Is it true that women have wombs?
j. **Express greeting:** This aims to greet someone referred to in the utterance

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the 1975 Speech Acts (SA) theory by J.R. Searle. "A speech act is any utterance that serves a function in communication." (Kain 2023). Searle's theory classifies speech acts into three components:

Locutionary act – the actual utterance and its literal meaning.
Illocutionary act – the intended meaning or function behind the utterance (e.g., promising, ordering, questioning).
Perlocutionary act – the effect the utterance has on the listener (e.g., persuading, offending, amusing).
He also identified five basic types of illocutionary acts:
Assertives: They are statements that describe the world. They commit the speaker to something being the case, such as suggesting, putting forward, swearing or boasting. E.g., "She is sleeping."
Directives: They attempt to get the hearer to do something. Directives try to make the addressee perform an action, such as asking, ordering, requesting, inviting, advising or begging. E.g., "Pick up the broken bottle."
Commissives: They commit the speaker to a future act. They commit the speaker to do something in the future, such as promising, planning, vowing, betting, or opposing. E.g., I will teach you how to sew clothes.
Expressives: They express psychological states. They express how the speaker feels about the situation, such as thanking, apologising, welcoming, or deploring. E.g., I am very angry with you.
Declarations: They change reality via speech. They change the state of the world immediately. E.g., I now declare you free.

As a Speech Act, sarcasm usually works through a mismatch between the literal (locutionary) meaning and the intended (illocutionary) meaning. In a conflict discourse, sarcasm focuses on how language operates beyond literal meaning and how it helps speakers navigate emotionally or socially difficult interactions.

According to Searle's theory, sarcasm functions as a psychological and pragmatic tool in conflict discourse in the following ways:

a. Emotional distancing (Expressive Acts): Sarcasm allows a speaker to indirectly express negative emotions such as anger, annoyance, and contempt. In Searle's terms, it is an expressive act, but delivered with nonliteral intent. This can reduce vulnerability or emotional exposure. For example,

Expressive Speech act: Truly, complaining gets the work done quickly."

Literal: Agreement

Illocutionary: Expressing frustration

Perlocutionary: Evoking guilt, mocking

b. Face-saving (Indirect Speech Acts): Sarcasm can help preserve social face in confrontational settings. It offers a socially masked version of a blunt criticism instead of issuing the same directive. This avoids open aggression while still conveying disapproval.

For instance,

Indirect Speech Acts: "I really enjoy your insult."

Indirect directive: "Stop insulting me."

c. Power and control (Assertives/Indirect Directives): Sarcasm can be used to assert dominance or control the tone in a conflict discourse. The speaker asserts a version of reality (assertive) while prompting a reaction (perlocutionary aim). This signals cleverness or superiority without a confrontation.

d. Catharsis (Expressive/Perlocutionary Acts): Sarcasm can be cathartic by allowing the speaker to vent feelings indirectly. It achieves perlocutionary goals, possibly to amuse others, shame the target, or diffuse tension.

Methodology

Data for this research were collated from online media platforms that aid in bringing celebrities' experiences to the public or global spheres. Such platforms include Facebook, blogs, Instagram, Twitter and newspapers such as Vanguard, Daily Post, Daily Trust,

Premium Times and so on. Five sarcastic texts or narratives on Nigerian celebrities who had marital disputes were collated. Other sources, such as books, journal articles and the internet, were also used. The collated data were given a qualitative and descriptive analysis to identify and interpret the discourse features that indicate sarcasm in the narratives of Nigerian celebrities who experienced marital crises.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Text One- May Yul-Edochie (Daily Trust)

"The ability to accept or tolerate challenges and problems in life is a virtue, and should not be misconstrued. There is no point making an already bad situation worse, hence the need to remain calm is crucial. "I understand that we all have our weaknesses and limitations as humans, and I personally believe everyone deserves an opportunity to make things right when they stray… Forgiveness is divine. "Beyond all the unnecessary facades, Polygamy is a life choice and no one should be compelled to accept it. It is something I think all parties involved should embrace willingly, and it's okay for anyone who chooses it. Some religions and traditions allow polygamy and I have nothing against it. However, I am ABSOLUTELY certain that I will not be NUMBERED as a wife or be cajoled to accept a practice that does not align with my faith and family values. The movie star's wife further said, "God blessed me with a happy, peaceful, and lovely family in a beautiful and JOINTLY built "mansion" that started from little or nothing…humble beginnings. What more could I have been asking for? I had a stable and loving home prior to the unprecedented events regarding my marriage. "Life is made up of an infinite amount of choices. Most decisions might be tough to make, but whenever we confront our options with courage and confidence, we should equally be open to the paths of our own design. I believe that we are solely responsible for our choices, and we have to accept the consequences of every deed, word, and thought that comes with it in our lifetime. "We should understand that taking

life-changing decisions hastily is not the best. God in His infinite mercy fixes things in His own time, He will definitely answer all our prayers. Thank you all for your continuous prayers, love and support. May God bless you abundantly." she wrote, "May God judge you both."

Discourse Features	Example from the Text	Sarcasm Indicators/ Description
Tone-Meaning Incongruity	"Forgiveness is divine." → "May God judge you both."	Uses emotional animosity (bitter feeling) to undermine the moral tone.
Quotation Marks	"mansion"	Shows emotional detachment and mocks sincerity.
Footing Shift	"What more could I have been asking for?"	Shifts from appreciation to sarcastic blame.
Exaggerated Virtue	"Faith and family values… Forgiveness is divine."	Sarcastically elevates morality in contrast to real harm.
Religious Irony	"God bless you abundantly… God judge you both."	Harsh contradiction that undermines prior friendliness(goodwill).
Capitalisation for Emphasis	"ABSOLUTELY", "NUMBERED	Sarcastically intense, with a hint of emotion.

Text Two – Yul Edochie (Vanguard)

"His name is STAR DIKE MUNACHIMSO YUL-EDOCHIE. Born by my second wife, Judy Austin. And I love him so much, just as much as I love my other children." Yul Edochie subsequently hailed his first wife, May, via an Instagram post, where he shared her picture, saying she was his "undisputed number one." Yul Edochie said, " I don't blame them, it is the love that they have for me that made them react that way. They don't know the root for it, there is a reason for it. They don't live in my house. A man wouldn't come out to say everything in his home they can insult me but they wouldn't understand". He added, "I believe this is preparing me for "Aso Rock" because for one to sit on that seat one has to be prepared for things like this". "I thank you all for your concern towards my family. The love, concern, and support you all have shown me and my family this past few days is overwhelming. Truly appreciated. Thank you. I promise you all that all is well and any issues arising in my family I will sort out amicably as it is my personal problem. For now, let's focus on the

general problem that affects us all which is the situation of our country. We have no other country to call our own therefore we must make it work. WE PIN. WE DIE HERE.

Discourse) Features	Example from the Text	Sarcasm Indicators/ Description
Footing shifts	"Preparing me for Aso Rock"	Critics are challenged by the mock-serious tone.
Incongruity	"I love him... just as much"	Reads as detached and disregards emotional reality.
Quotation marks	"undisputed number one"	Suggests disbelief or flattering remarks.
Hyperbole	"WE DIE HERE"	Sincerity is undermined by exaggeration.
Vagueness	"There is a reason for it"	Avoids accountability (responsibility) and pretends to be truthful.
False empathy/flattery	"They insult me because they love me"	Satirically reinterprets criticism as affection.

Text Three- Damilola Adegbite (Premium Times)

Language (Discourse) Features	Example from the Text	Sarcasm Indicators/ Description
Undermining clichés	"Not every marriage is ordained by God."	Satirically questions accepted social norms or standards.
Understatement	"It didn't work."	Has little emotional impact (emotionally flat).
Moralising deflection	"Love is not enough."	Ironically, the focus moves from personal suffering to the universal truth.
Strategic vagueness	"It's hard to strike a balance..."	Avoids complete revelation (ironic concealment).
Child framing	"There are limits to what he can know."	Implies the concealment of a more profound emotional truth.
Detached tone	Throughout	Sarcasm by emotionally removing oneself from the subject matter

No regrets over my failed marriage – "Most people just have a general idea that once a marriage doesn't work, it is a bad thing. But not every marriage was ordained by God…"she replied, "It didn't work. I learned a massive lesson from that experience and it is that love is not enough. When you meet somebody and you want to spend the rest of your life with them, love is just one of the qualities that you need, but it's not everything." According to her, "a failed marriage is not the tragedy people make it out to be. Not every marriage is ordained by God.""I know how to maneuver my way through but it's hard to be able to strike a balance between the truth and what he needs to know." For her, Brian won't always be

a seven-year-old, but for now, "there are limits to what he can know"

Text Four- Ngozi Ezeonu (ghanacelebrities.com)

The actress wrote, "My Father My Maker, as I pray, anyone that will cause me pain may I not meet them. If they are already in my life, disconnect me from them in Jesus Name. Amen."

Language (Discourse) Features	**Example from the Text**	**Sarcasm Indicators/ Description**
Religious register	"My Father, My Maker… in Jesus Name, Amen"	Fabricates a moral superiority complex to cover up bitterness.
Indirect reference	"Anyone that will cause me pain"	Avoids direct identification by hiding the true target.
Irony of structure	Prayer format used for emotional distancing	Seems spiritual, but serves as a form of rejection.
Mismatch between tone and content	Blessing structure used to condemn	Conveys sarcasm by highlighting incongruity.
Audience inference	The implied listener knows who "anyone" is	Makes it easier to see past the appearance of things.

Text Five- Tonto Dikeh (Premium Times)

*"So a f**king man say(s) I'm on drugs and I can't use his sexual disease against him?? Ooo pls, honey, I said more. For me, I will drag your life from hell and back until I'm ok!! We all can't be the same you know." "At the beginning of the relationship, I never suspected him for cheating because he has a sexual problem, a disease, it's called premature ejaculation. He can't stay inside a woman for more than 40 seconds,"*

Language (Discourse) Features	**Example from the Text**	**Sarcasm Indicators/ Description**
Mock rhetorical questions	"So a f**king man say(s) I'm on drugs…??"	Feigned disbelief to mock the target
Sarcastic address terms	"Ooo pls, honey"	Ironic mock-politeness to assault
Hyperbole	"Drag your life from hell and back…"	Threatening the public with exaggeration (dramatic ridicule)
Over-disclosure	"Premature ejaculation… 40 seconds"	Violates norms (sarcastic humiliation).
Faux-objectivity	"It's called…" / "whose nature was…"	Feigns neutrality to insult.
Footing shift to maturity	"We all can't be the same…"	Sarcastic humility after displaying emotional hostility

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings showed that Nigerian celebrities frequently use sarcastic expressions during marital conflicts. The sarcastic expressions were indicated by the following discourse features: tone-meaning incongruity, quotation marks, footing shift, exaggerated virtue, religious irony, capitalisation for emphasis, hyperbole, vagueness, undermining clichés, false empathy/flattery, understatement, moralising deflection, child framing, detached tone, mock rhetorical questions, audience inference, religious register, indirect reference, mismatch between tone and content etc.

Tone-meaning incongruity used emotional animosity (bitter feeling) to undermine the moral tone, while quotation marks showed emotional detachment and mocked sincerity. Footing shift moved from appreciation to sarcastic blame, while exaggerated virtue sarcastically elevated morality in contrast to real harm. Religious irony employed harsh contradiction to undermine prior friendliness (goodwill), while capitalisation for emphasis conveyed sarcastic intensity with a hint of emotion. Vagueness was used to avoid accountability (responsibility) and pretend to be truthful, while false empathy/flattery satirically reinterpreted criticism as affection etc. The discourse features or markers of sarcasm identified in this study were not conclusive on their own. Context, history, and tone cues were the key to their accurate interpretations.

Based on Searle's Speech Act theory, sarcasm is a strategic speech act. It is not just a tone in conflict discourse, but a deliberate manipulation of the relationship between literal and intended meaning. It has to do with:

a. Locutionary versus illocutionary split: With sarcasm, the locutionary content (literal words) is often the opposite of the illocutionary force.
b. Indirectness and flouting of maxims: Sarcasm exploits indirect speech acts, where the illocutionary force is

inferred, ie. not explicitly stated. Searle argued that hearers can infer indirect meaning through shared background knowledge and recognition of violated conversational norms (here, Grice's Maxim of Quality — "do not say what you believe to be false")

Therefore, the contextual interpretations of the discourse markers or features in this finding were guided by Searle's locutionary versus illocutionary split.

Conclusion

Detecting sarcasm in written marital disputes, particularly in Nigerian celebrities' marital disputes, can be subtle because it often depends on context, tone (implied in text), and shared history between partners. Many discourse features, such as tone-meaning incongruity, quotation marks, footing shift, exaggerated virtue, religious irony, capitalisation for emphasis, hyperbole, vagueness, undermining clichés, false empathy/flattery etc., depicted sarcasm in the marital conflict of Nigerian celebrities. This helped them to express feelings of frustration, judgment, contempt etc. Gottman and Silver, as cited in Averbeck (2019), support this by saying that sarcasm is identified as a common form of contempt that communicates disgust to relational partners, wherein the goal of the sarcastic message is to demean the target. (Alan (2017) adds that "it allows us to take a camouflaged shot at someone or express our hostility without revealing our real motivations". Consequently, this type of communicative style escalates conflicts in a marital relationship.

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