A Critical Analysis of Linguistic Features in the Comments of Child Abuse Victims in Select Nigerian Online Media Outlets

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Abstract: Many children in Africa are usually abused in one way or the other. This abuse may involve rape, marrying them off and denying them right to quality education. Some parents force their children to do their wish (es) thereby marrying them off below the age of 18 which by extension denies many of the children the opportunity to further their education. This study, therefore, identifies analyses and discusses linguistic features in the select comments of child abuse victims in Nigeria. The comments were selected from a Nigerian national newspaper, *The Punch*. The newspaper selected covered the period of January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2015. The reason for this time frame is based on the fact that the period resurrected the child abuse discourse in Nigeria. The study employs both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary source includes eight comments selected from *The Punch*. Secondary source includes books and journal articles. It adopted Lesley Jefferies' Critical Stylistics as a theoretical framework. The study identifies poverty, poor education and insecurity as major causes for child abuse in Nigeria particularly early child marriage and child sexual abuse. It also considers insecurity as one of the causes. It recommends that school fees should be abolished for female children in Nigeria. It further recommends strict punishment for rapists in order to put an end to this ugly menace.

Keywords: Child; Marriage, Newspaper, Critical stylistics, Nigeria

1. Introduction

A child, under international standard, is every human being below the age of 18 years. A child who is under seven years is not criminally responsible for an act committed. A child is quite different from a young person in that the former is below 14 years while the latter must not go beyond 17 years. Also, a child does not have the right to vote and be voted for, the voting age is 18 years (Okogbule, *et al.*

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2020). This simply means that children are not allowed to participate in any form of election in Nigeria. Though a lot of conversations have been going on whether 18 years is appropriate to determine who is a child or an adult. The Nigerian constitution favours 18 years as an adult age. Unfortunately, the Nigerian society and some other African societies violate this age benchmark thereby engaging in child abuse or under age marriage. This is common in the northern part of Nigeria.one of the violations of children's rights is early marriage, which refers to marriage under the age of 18. This violation is often seen as a form of gender discrimination because of its harmful effect on the girl child (avad *et al*, 2023).

Child abuse according to World Health Organisation is any form of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, development or dignity. Most children in African countries are forced to hard labour or make decisions that are against their wish due to poverty. Poverty has remained a setback to children's all round development in Africa. Badoe (2017) defines child abuse as "forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, including prostitution, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening". This act may include defiling a child through rape or other sexual abuses. Child sexual abuse seems common among female children than male children. It usually occurs in settings where the child is familiar with. Sexual abuse of children is the involvement of children in sexual activity that he or she does not understand or for which the child is not developmentally prepared, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society (David *et al…*2018,). It also includes marrying a child off below the age of 18 as well as denying a child the right to quality education. Also, child abuse physically, emotionally, sexually abusing and neglecting the girl child by depriving her of universally accepted child rights (Taniya and Khagi, 2018)

There is no denying of the fact that unpleasant economic atmosphere, unemployment which result in poverty have made so many parents most especially in Nigeria to give their children below the page of 18 out in marriage. Child marriage is common among poor families because there is little motivation or resource to invest in future (Asma *et al*., 2023). This is as a result of poor standard of living of these parents. When parents are experiencing financial difficulties, inability to provide basic

necessities of life for their children such as food, clothes, and sound education, they give out their female children cheaply for marriage most especially to rich suitors.

Another important factor that is responsible for child marriage is illiteracy. In many countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive, illiteracy has contributed to why parents give their female underage children out for marriage. Parents in Nigeria reproduce children unnecessarily without proper planning for their education. When this becomes unbearable, they give them out for marriage. A study was carried out by UNICEF on why parents marry off their children. The study discovered that they do so in order to have a close nexus with the perceived rich family with the belief that new prospective in-law would take care of them. UNICEF (2001) also observes that early marriage can be as a result of the fear of their female children engaging in pre-marital sex which will automatically bring shame to the family.

This study, therefore, analyses comments about child abuse victims through the use of critical stylistics framework which focuses on how language is basically used to tell the story of a society in form of social meaning. The study also demonstrates how two critical stylistic analytical tools such as representing actions/events and assuming and implying tools reveal how female children were forced to marry against their wish due to poverty and illiteracy. Also, assuming and implying helps to generate meanings beyond what they mean at the surface level.

1.1 Girl child Education

Girl child education remains a strong and powerful weapon in developing a nation. Any society that undermines this fact would retrogress or remain stagnant if the girl child is not given quality education. This is because education promotes individual freedom, empowerment and yields important development benefits (Okorie, 2017). However, Okorie (2017) examines factors militating against girl-child education in Nigeria. The study found out that poor family` background, religious isolation, disability, early marriage, pregnancy, gender-driven violence, cultural discrimination and attitudes against women's status and role. The study recommended legislative and legal provisions in order to alleviate the obstacles and enhance the girl-child's right to gain dividends of education. In addition to some of the factors identified by Okorie is religion. Rhlich (1975) cited in Okorie (2017)

considers religion as a strong factor why there is low participation of girls in schools. According to Rhlich "pudah" which symbolises the "veil" does not allow Muslim women to be seen in publicly and further reduces them as subordinates. Islam has been one of the major stumbling blocks for women's participation in schools. This is due to the fear that western education is a tool for converting people to Christianity.

This means that education allows a person to exercise his or her fundamental human rights. Asiegbu, *et al.* (2014) also add that education increases an individual's knowledge, skills, character and values that will help him or her in achieving certain things in the society. Education helps a person to have good habits and principles that will help/her to live above economic challenges in the society.

The focus of this study is on child abuse, particularly, girl child education, child sexual abuse and early child marriage. Girl-child education empowers the girl-child to be self-sufficient and have the ability to make decisions independently (Okorie, 2017). When women are deprived education, they are rendered powerless and voiceless in the society. Ahmad and Njeemah (2013) in their own perspective also opine that women without formal education are denied the opportunity to develop their full potentials and the ability to participate in certain roles in their families, societies, countries and the world at large. With this, women tend to suffer rejection and are considered objects of poverty and sex machines at home. By extension, they are considered as subordinates, inferiors to their male counterparts whose place is right in the kitchen (Ahmad &Njeemah, 2013).

In some parts of Nigeria, girls are seen as money making objects, hence, they are not allowed to further their education. They are basically used to generate money for the family through hawking of food items. Parents most especially fathers deliberately do not allow their daughters go to school; they considered investment in women education as unwise since they will end up in another man's home (Abubakar, 2003). When a girl child is denied formal education, she is likely to be sexually abused which may result to an unwanted pregnancy. This is why most parents in Nigeria give their children off for marriage.

1.2 **Social Media Discourse**

Social media is a platform where someone can be the news, make the news, and report the news all at the same time to different people in different locations. Social media can be seen as emerging and new forms of social relations developed for all forms of social interactions. Hays, Page and Buhalis (2013) define it as "internet-based sites and services that promote social interaction between participants" (5). According to them, one of the social media is YouTube. Others include: discussion forums, blogs, wikis, podcasting, and social network sites, content sharing sites (like the video-sharing site.).The major goal of social media is information dissemination. Other uses may include social protests, entertainment and education. According to Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter and Mei-Chen (2007), there are five motives of using social media. They are entertainment, maintaining relationships, meeting new people, social events and media creation

Social media has contributed greatly to how information is widely disseminated to people or individuals and various interest groups across the world. Non-governmental organisations and unions have used it and are still using every communicative means and strategies at their disposal to make their demands known to the government. They also share intelligence, enlighten and mobilise citizens and also awaken the interest and consciousness of media organisations in different countries of the world.

2.   Studies on Child Abuse Particularly Sexual Abuse and Child Marriage

Badoe (2017) reviews and outlines the present management of child abuse most especially sexual abuse in Africa. He explains that child abuse in Africa is one of the major threats to the achievement of the sustainable development goals on the entire continent and has affected huge number of the continent's population.

Istifanus and Williams (2017) study the threat posed by Boko Haram insurgency on girl-child access to education in the north east of Nigeria. The study identifies different challenges that serve as impediment to the realisation of the girl's right to education. These impediments include: poverty, gender inequality, poor infrastructures and insecurity. The sample size was 180 teachers who were randomly selected from public primary and secondary schools in the three senatorial zones in Adamawa state. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and Chi Square test.

The result of the study show that damage to school facilities, emotional disorders, fear, insecurity, poverty, unwanted pregnancy and forced marriages are girl-child barriers to access to education and inclusion. The study then recommends the use of flexible learning, abolition of school fees for girls, rehabilitation programmes for victims of insurgency and guidance and counselling services for girls and women to ensure access and inclusion in education.

Taniya and Khagi (2018) carefully investigate awareness on girl child abuse among mothers in Sundarbazar municipality of Lamjung district. The study adopted a face to face structured interview questionnaire. The data collected were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results showed that majority of mothers, about 77.8% had average level of awareness on girl child abuse.

Oluwaleye (2021) investigates sexual abuse of the girl-child in Nigeria, including the nature, scope, causes and consequences of the act in Nigeria. The study identified poverty, hawking, lack of values or parental control, pornographic pictures and the abuse of social media as part of the causes of girl-child abuse in Nigeria. The study further shows that backwardness, cheating, rape, abortion, unwanted pregnancy, broken homes, single parent are some of the socio-economic effects of girl-child abuse. The study recommends that effective and proactive measures should be taken to curb the act. Community, religious leaders should be consulted and offenders should be punished as well.

Javad *et al*., (2023) explore the effects o early marriage among Kurdish women in western Iran who got married under the age of 18. Data for the study were collected through interviews structured with 30 women picked through a purposeful sampling technique method. The following are effects of early marriage that this study revealed: dissatisfaction with married life, experience of having lots of responsibility, lack of independence in family life, social isolation, lack of access to a job, depression and emotional distress, high risk pregnancy, child birth and physical illness.

Theoretical Framework:

3. Critical Stylistics

Critical stylistic is a linguistic tool associated with Lesly Jefferies. It is a tool that bridges stylistics which focuses on textual choices and critical discourse analysis that focuses on ideology respectively.

Critical stylistics is basically concerned with the general functions of representing realities based on the existing facts and how our experiences in the world are organised in a certain way through texts and words (Jefferies, 2010|). Talbert (2013, p.77) further adds that critical stylistics allows for a more developed and extensive set of analytical tools which CDA has not developed. The tools according to Jefferies (2007, p.17) which critical stylistics uses to discuss ideologies embedded in a text are: (1) Naming and Describing (2) Representing Actions/ Events/States (3) Equating and Contrasting (4) Exemplifying and Enumerating (5) Prioritizing (6) Implying and Assuming (7) Negating (8) Hypothesizing (9) Representing the Speech and Thoughts of other Participants and (10) Representing Time, Space and Society. For the purpose of this study, two tools (Representing Actions/Events/States and Implying and Assuming) are evident to the experiences constructed by the abused victims and have been selected for the analysis of the comments below

4. Methodology

This paper made use of sampling technique method. This method is mainly used to select useful comments for analysis from the vast array of data available. The main source of data for this study is the Internet. Data were retrieved from *Punch.com*. The criterion used for the selection is based on the fact that the Punch newspaper is one of the newspapers in Nigeria with a wider coverage. A total of eight (8) comments were selected for analysis. The reason for this restriction is to ensure detail and indepth analysis of language features used by the victims. The data selected are analysed using Jefferies Critical Stylistics with focus on two analytical tools: Representing Action/Events and Assuming and Implying

5. Data Presentations and Analysis

When I was 13, one of my father's friends came to the house and asked for a bride. My father chose me because I was the oldest out of my three sibling. I did not want to go with him. I wanted to go to school and be an air hostess but I could not disobey my father so I accepted (Ibrahim Maimuna)===== *Forbesafrica.com, 2021, 27/5/2021*

I wanted to continue my education but he said no. one day he came home and I was reading a story book and he got really angry and **beat me**. He said a wife's place is in the house not at school. He was abusive and demanded sex every evening. It was **painful** (Ibrahim Maimuna)

"I had my first **sexual intercourse** when I was 8… she **hold it and put it inside**, me what did I know and still I was threatened not to tell my guardian" ------ David *(retrieved from Punchng.com, 2021)*

"'when I was 4 or 5, our neighbour's daughter who was already more than 30 at that time would bring me inside her room and strip me. She would carry me on top of herself and be pushing me up and down, I didn't know much about what she was doing to me. It continued for years, eventually told my mum and she beat me up so much. I kept quiet henceforth and she continued **abusing me** till we relocated. Those past events affected my **emotions, sexual life and relationships** generally"---------- Nelson *(retrieved from Punchng.com, 2021)*

"I passed through this type of **trauma** at the age of 5, having **intercourse** with 3 different girls that are way older than me, thinking is normal till I grew up, unable to love someone even when they love me, the thought of they're all the same always play in my head… Zeal Koncept @ Macomitel *(retrieved from Punchng.com, 2021)*.

"I was **exposed to sex** at eight" ------------ Brume Orume

"Mine was crazy. At 8, I was having 3 rounds of **sex** a day and this went on till I was 12. And then I was so bold that I slept with the next house help while she was sleeping. She woke up, smiled and **pushed me** in deeper" ------------------- Anonymous (retrieved from Punchng.com, 2021).

"when I was 8, the house girl would ask me to lie down on the bed and ask me to bring out my tongue. She would then put **her private** part on my mouth and ask me to **lick it.** She would then **threaten to kill me** if I tell anyone. Till today, my parents don't know" ----------Favour *(retrieved from Punchng.com, 202)*.

"my younger brother and I **were abused** by my mum's cousin. She was the one taking care of us while my mom was busy with her business. She would ask us to **suck her breast** and hump on her and **threaten to flog us** if we told anyone -------- Hollamedey of Awka *(retrieved from Punchng.com, 202)*.

6.   Data Analysis

Critical stylistics is basically concerned with the general functions of representing reality based on the fact and how our experiences in the world are organised in a certain way through texts and words (Jefferies, 2010). For the purpose of this study, two tools are evident to the ideological constructions in the text selected for analysis, namely, representing actions/events/states and implying and assuming.

6.1 Representing Actions/Events/States

Transitivity is a crucial concept that is highly used in representing actions most especially in this present study. This present study focuses on how material and relational processes were deployed to depict the experiences of the abused victims.

EXAMPLES 1

"When I was 13, one of my father's friends came to the house and asked for a

bride. My father **chose** me… I **did not want to go** with him".

The example above shows, clearly, early child marriage which is one of the forms of child abuse. Most parents forcefully give out their young female children for marriage as indicated by the lexical verb "chose". The expression "my father chose me" is an active construction with "my father" as the agent/doer of the action who forcefully gave his daughter out for marriage without his daughter's consent. The expression "I did not want to go with him" further shows that the girl was forced to marry her father's friend against her wish.

EXAMPLE 2

"… One day he came home and I was reading a story book and he got really angry   and **beat** me"

Example 2 is another material process which shows domestic violence and deprivation of girl child education. The verb 'beat' which is followed by the goal 'me' reveals domestic violence experienced

by this victim. This is typical and suggestive of an African husband who believes that women do not need formal education; rather their place is in the house not at school

EXAMPLE 3

"When I was 8, the house girl would ask me to lie down on the bed and ask me to bring   out my tongue. She **would put** her private part on my mouth and ask me to lick it. She would **threaten to kill** me if I tell anyone".

The experience of the victim being described here is that of a young boy who was abused by a house help. 'would threaten to kill' is a verbal group which shows intimidation. 'she' is the doer of the action of threatening while 'me' is the receiver or the goal.

EXAMPLE 4

"My younger brother and I were abused by my mum's cousin. She would ask us to **suck her breast** and threaten **to flog** us if we told anyone".

Example 4 is another teenager's sexual experience. "my younger brother and I" are the goal of the action being described in example 4 while "my mum's cousin" is the agent/doer of the action. The verbal group "to suck" is a non-finite verb that shows sexual abuse while "threaten to flog which contains a lexical verb "threaten" and a non-finite verb "to flog" shows intimidation. These linguistic features clearly reveal that these young boys were sexually abused at tender age and were mentally molested through the act of threatening.

6.2 Assuming and Implying

This focuses on how knowledge is seen as background information or implied in a given text. Presupposition and implicature are crucial concepts in generating meanings embedded in a text.

EXAMPLE 5

"At 8, I was having 3 rounds of sex a day and this went on till I was 12. I was so   bold that I slept with the next house help while she was sleeping. **She woke up,   smiled and pushed me in   deeper"**

The focus in this example is the last sentence. The sentence is a compound sentence which has implied meanings. The underlined expression could mean that the house help enjoyed the sexual intercourse. This is evident with the lexical verb "smiled". The last clause in the sentence "pushed me

in deeper" also implies that the house help wants more of the sexual intercourse and enjoys every bit
of it.

EXAMPLE 6

"When I was 4 or 5, our neighbour's daughter who was already more than 30 at that time would
bring me inside her room and strip me, she would carry me on top of herself and be pushing me up
and down"

In the example above, the expression "she would carry me on top of herself and be pushing me up
and down" presupposes the following: (a) she forces the young boy to touch her body (b) she forces
the young boy to have sex with her (c) she uses the young boy to satisfy her sexual urge/desire. These
presuppositions show child abuse

EXAMPLE 7

I had my first sexual intercourse when i was 8… **She hold it and put it inside**….

Considering the fact that implicature demands a reader/listener reads in between lines, it is quite
obvious in example 3 above that deep sexual exercise is being described here by the victim of this
sexual abuse. The expression 'she holds it and puts it inside' contains two clauses while pronoun 'it'
is used to refer to the victim's "penis". The two clauses "she holds it" and "puts it inside"
respectively show deep sexual intercourse between a perceived innocent boy of 8 years old and a
grown up adult as can be deduced from example 7.

EXAMPLE 8

When I was 8, the house girl would ask me to lie down on the bed and ask me to bring out my
tongue. She would then put **her private** part on my mouth and ask me to lick it.

The focus of this extract is on the implicature in the phrase "her private part". The victim mildfully
used "her private part" to connote sensitive organs/parts of the female body that usually arouse a
man's sexual urge when touched. It is a form of euphemism in African context use in reducing harsh
statements. The expression describes sensitive organs such as vagina, breast, buttocks etc. As used by
the victim in the extract above, the expression implies that the victim was constantly forced to have
an oral sex with the house girl thereby exposing him to early sex at the age of 8.

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that language is deep and can be used to create different meanings. The comments analysed in this study show the true feelings and state of minds of the rape victims through their language use. The tools of critical stylistics used in this study help readers to locate the deeper meanings of the selected comments. For instance, representing actions/events/states shows how female children were forced to marry against their wish by their parents due to Poverty and illiteracy. Assuming and implying helps readers to generate meanings embedded in comments beyond their surface presentation.

The study, therefore, recommends that the Nigerian government should embark on a sensitization programme to enlighten the Nigerian public on child abuse. Also, it recommends that school fees should be abolished for female children in Nigeria. It further recommends strict punishment for rapists in order to put an end to this ugly menace.

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