# A Systemic Functional Linguistic Analysis of Spousal Conflictual Language in a Nigerian Play

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paperx-rayed language use drawn from excerpt of utterances by the spouses (characters) in the play, Clark's The Wives' Revolt anchoring on the Hallidayan Systemic functional linguisticas the theoretical framework known for analysing language structure and function. The purpose of this study is to reveal the experiential representation of conflictual language of the spouses in J.P. Clark's Wives' Revoltsthrough its transitivity processes. Twenty – nine (29) excerpts that depict the spousal conflictual lexico-grammatical forms are purposively selected from these plays after thorough readings and they are represented accordingly for easier referencing during analysis in order to determine the frequencies of the transitivity features, their roles, functions, and meanings. A qualitative method is used for data analysis. Results from descriptive analysis showed that spouses applied four (material, mental relational and verbal processes) out of six Hallidayan's transitivity process types to express their experiences/actions feelings for each other, negative image of themselves, and their central point of argument during their conflictual interactivity. The result showed that experiential is construed through dominance of material process, followed by mental, relational, and verbal. The prevalence of the material is found to be as a result of spouses' more of physical actions in their relations. Again, transitive verb which transfers action to an object is also found more prevalent and is used more by the male spouse. This reveals male dominance of power over his female counterpart. The occurrence of the transitive processes will help the reader to agree with the kernel structure of the conflicting issues.*
**KEY WORDS**: transitive system, systemic functional linguistic, lexico-grammar, processes, experiential meaning, conflict

## INTRODUCTION

Language is an important tool in the society and thus, in its multifunctional ways, plays crucial roles in human life. It is fundamentally a communicative tool characterised by taking systematically into account the speaker's and hearer's side, and the communicative needs of the

speaker and of the given language community. That is, it involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding. It enables us to participate in communicative acts with other people; to take on roles, to express and understand feelings, attitudes and judgments; to relate what is said (or written) to the real world and to other linguistic events. In other words, language is a way of expressing ideas, emotions, happenings, and information. These expressions are implicated in the grammar of the clause regarded as Transitive system. The grammatical system helps the participants, the spouses in question, to imagine in language their mental picture of reality and to account for their experience of the world around them during interactivity.

As language describes human, so are conflicts part of married life despite that spousal relations are characterized as relations of an intimate nature dominated by constant interaction or strong interdependence and mutual influence of feelings with heightened degree of love between spouses. It is important to note that disagreements during marital conjugation, cooperation, interaction and everyday communication may spur up marital conflicts among spouses in their relations. This presupposes that in marriages, where there is conflict, there are bound to be some kinds of interaction, which result in high proportion of negative communicative acts perceived or intersection of interests in a certain situation, that affect the quality of marital relationships manifesting in the form of loss of trust, the emergence of frustration, crisis, strain and stress, feelings of anxiety, discomfort - all contributing to escalation of spousal conflictual situation, and are concretized by language. This study, therefore, sought to find out experiential meaning of the language employed by the spouses while responding to some contextual conflicting issue.

**Ideational Meaning:** Ideational as the name implies is concerned with ideation, which is the grammatical resource for construing our experience of the world around us and inside us (Matthiessen and Halliday (2004). The type characterises the meanings about how we represent experience in language. In other words, it is concerned with the potential of a language to express content or subject matter of discourse in terms of the speaker's experiences of the world and that of the speech community. In Halliday's view, it represents the speaker's meaning potential as an observer (Halliday 1973 in Ezeifeka, 2013).

It involves two components: that of experiential meaning in the clause, and that of the logical meaning between clauses in clause complexes. Experiential meaning is expressed through the system of transitivity or process type, with the choice of process implicating associated participant roles and configurations which represent the real life experiences who is doing what, to whom, .when, where, why and how.. (Eggins, 2004). The ideational function is described as the "informative function"; language in its representational aspect, a means of reflecting on things (Halliday &Matthiessen, 2004).

**Experiential Meaning/Metafunction**
Experiential meaning is an aspect of the ideational meaning of a text. The experiential metafunction relates to the interpretation of the whole of our experience, reducing the infinitely varied phenomena of the world around us, and also of the world inside us, the processes of our own consciousness, to a manageable number of classes of phenomena: types of processes, events and actions, classes of objects, people and institutions and the like. On the other hand, the logical metafunction expresses elementary logical relations, like "and", "or", "if", as well as those created by language itself such as "namely", "says" and "means". Experiential meaning is realized in the grammar of the clause by the lexicogrammatical system of Transitivity (Halliday &Matthiessen, 2004).

Transitivity refers to a system for describing the whole clause, rather than just the Verb and its Object in traditional grammar (Thompson, 1996, 2000). It is defined as "the grammar of the clause in its ideational aspect" as a representation of experience (Halliday 1973 in Ezeifeka 2013). It shows how speakers imagine in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world around them. Transitivity focuses on the transmission of ideas, so it has everything to do with the experiential function of language.

The main argument of the Transitivity system is that the experiences we go through in life consist of „goings-on" –doing, happening, sensing, being, saying, which are shared by people. These goings-on in the world of experience are called processes. Based on Systemic Functional Grammar, transitivity is made up of three components, namely: (i) the process itself; (ii) participants in the process; (iii) circumstances associated with the process (Bloor, & Bloor, 2001). The people and entities that share these experiences are called ''participants". These participants carry out these processes under "circumstances" which may be constrained by time, place, manner, cause, purpose, reason and so on (Halliday &Matthiessen 2004). The participants' roles are realized by the nominal group, the process types by the verbal group and the circumstantial elements by adverbial group and prepositional phrases. Thus, Opara (2021) in describing ideational function, reveals that language represents the knowledge and experience about and of the world of the language user through text (both spoken and written) or the ideational function. She points out that the meaning generated from this function is called ideational meaning.

**Transitivity System as a Framework of Experiential Meaning**
This work focuses on the theoretical insight provided in transitivity analysis, an aspect of Halliday's (2004) ideational Systemic Functional Grammar. Ideational meaning reflects the product of the interaction of human intellectual (cognitive) system and language system. Yang (2012) contends that human recognises the phenomena in the real world through the cognitive system, categorises and conceives the pieces of experience in the brain through the language system''. He identifies six processes, and they include: material, mental, relational, behavioural,

verbal and existential processes. The distinguishing difference between the six processes is between experience outside of us and that inside of us.

Halliday (1994) defines material processes as processes of doing that express the notion that some entity does something which may be done to some other entity. In his observation, there are two inherent participants involved in material processes. He identifies the Actor as an obligatory element that identifies the doer of the process. The second is the Goal, which he explains, is an optional element and expresses the person or entity whether animate or inanimate affected by the process. According to Fontaine (2013), two other types of partcipants have the same function of goal of being acted upon by the process, and these include: Beneficiary and Scope. Beneficiary referred to as the participant benefits from the process and Scope describes the domain of the process.

Mental process as a process of sensing which deals with the sense of thoughts, observations, sentiments, and desideration by Halliday and Mathiessen (2014) is considered as mental processof representation of the internal experience. To them, it is actually a reflection of people's awareness of states of being. This process has two participants functioning in it: senserand phenomenon. Sense performs the function of sensing and phenomenon, the thing being sensed. Mental process are of four types and they include: perceptive, cognitive, desiderative and emotive (Halliday &Mathiessen, 2014). Their classification of the mental types with examples is shown below: Perceptive - perceive, sense, notice, hear; Cognitive - think, believe, suppose, consider, expect, Desiderative - want, wish, like, hope, and Emotive - fancy, love, hate, adore, dislike

Relational process involves states of being, and or having. It is of two types which include Attributive and Identifying. The Relational attributive process has dealings with a description of situation and does not identify it. This means that it ascribes an attribute to some entity (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). In their further explication, attributive relational process has two participants, namely, Carrier and Attribute. The Attributive process, in some cases denotes possessive process when the process functions to reflect possession or ownership. When it happens, the participants become the possessor and the possessed (Bloor & Bloor, 2014). Examples of Relational process and participants given by Bloor and Bloor (2013):

1. She           was                in a ward on the third floor
2. The other beds    were           empty

Here, Eggins (2004) exemplifies Relational possessive process and participants

| Carrier/possessor | Pr:Rel-possesive | Attribute: possessed |
|---|---|---|
| 1. I | had | a daughter |

2.  You                         've got                         less blood than me

The second function of Relational process which is to identify is realized through the Identifying Relational process. It functions in identifying something else. It has two participants namely, Token and Value, and either of the two can be used to identify the other. Examples include:

| Token | Pr; Relational- Ide | Value |
|---|---|---|
| 1.  My husband | is | the  JUPEB Director |
| 2.  Your father | is | my neighbour |

Gerot and Wignell (1994) point out Halliday's behavioral processes as processes of physiological and psychological behaviour, like breathing, dreaming, smiling, looking, listening, and pondering. The contention is that Behavioral processes have concerns with the outer reflection of our inward thoughts. A verbal process is the process of saying. "Saying" conveys any kind of symbolic exchange of meaning.  They posit also that the verbal process exists on the marginal between mental and relational processes. It exposes the consciousness of human in the form of language, like saying and meaning. Existential process represents processes of existing and happening. It expresses existence of an entity without predicting anything else of it. It is on the borderline between the relational process and the material process. The existential process is easy to recognize because the sentence pattern usually begins with "there" or with the verb "exist" (Halliday, 1994).

**Analysis of Transitivity Process Types and Participant Roles**
As demonstrated by J.P Clark, in *Wives' Revolt*, it is found that family conflict ensued when the women led by Koko disagreed with constraint placed on them by their men, whom Okoro represents. Such instances are grammatically encoded in the following ***Material*** clauses:

1.  Koko: *Have*      you          *come*          home          after passing obnoxious law
    Pr.Mat          Actor          Pr. Mat          Circum          Goal
2.  Okoro: You    *cannot even speak*    with one voice    on any one matter   at any time.
    Actor          Pr. Matt                    scope
3.  Koko: you              *wait and see*
    Actor              Pr. Mat
4.  Koko: you              *beat*                    a child
    Actor          Pr. Mat                    Goal
5.  Koko:      and          say                    he should not cry
                Pr. Verbal              Verbiage

In examples 1-5, the ***processes***, have +come, cannot speak, wait + see, beat, indicate the conflicting situation which is precipitated by the obnoxious actions of the male folk, led by Okoro against their women folk, led by Koko, and the actions of Koko to show the unacceptability of the act

meted against their wish. Okoro's contemptuous remark about the actor 'you' referring to his spouse, is premised on the verb process and the circumstance surrounding it: ''cannot speak with one voice, to reflect the inability of the actor, 'you' Koko in carrying out their goal, represented by the Scope "on any matter" at any time'. Through the negation, 'cannot' as a material process, the male spouse meant to create awareness to his female spouse, Koko, that their revolts will yield no result, and the goal, 'on any matter' seems to lend credence to the aspersion cast on women, or rather say, it expresses more the nature of women and their flippancy and lack of strength in what they say. At the same time, Mr. Okoro deployed the language choice, probably, to enable him flaunt the superiority of his gender in words to his wife, Koko.

Koko largely makes assertive clauses that challenge her husband's authority, whereas her male spouse.in expressing his astonishment over his wife's ego, deployed interrogative material process to question her guts, thus he asked:

6.  Okoro: *Are*    you    *going to fight*    us    with food?
           Pr.Mat  Actor  Pr.Mat  Beneficiary    Scope
7.  Koko: nobody        *is going to fight*  you    with food
          Actor       Pr.Mat    Beneficiary    Scope
8.  Okoro: But        what other thing    *can* you    *do?*
                  Actor         Pr. Mat    Actor    Pr.Mat
9.  Okoro:        *Ban*        us    from your beds?
                Pr.Mat       Beneficiary  Circum
10. Okoro: For we *'ll* only *invite* the women  on the road  into town  by popular demand
        Actor   Pr.Mat    Goal       Scope    Beneficiary  Cir: Mann

The auxiliary verb "are" is applied to ask the participant "you", suspected to carrying out the action of "fighting' the participant of beneficiary "us", with the Scope of the material process "fighting" which reflects the action of starving. 'you' represents Okoro, and the Beneficiary 'us' is inclusive and reflects other men whom Okoro represents in the field. Koko using the negative Actor "nobody" with process "is going to fight" expresses her stance on the Scope 'with food' of the Material used. But because Okoro wishes to know why the spouse challenges his take about the law that he deploys the Material Process 'ban' to act on the participant of Beneficially 'us' representing Okoro and other men in the different homes on the Scope 'from beds' of the material "ban". Okoro's askance expresses usual expectations of the negative impact on spouses' conjugation when conflict exist. To showcase his sexual egoist. Okoro brags about inviting women, a picture which the playwright, Clark used to expose African men's sexual promiscuity nature. However, when Okoro employs the material process to query his wife, he only does so to let her know that any negative actions she carries out will not hold any water; that he has the authority and power to do whatever thing he likes. The processes use in the interaction: come,

cannot speak, wait, beat, should not cry, going to fight, is going, can, ban, ll invite, have, are all physical material process.

The analysis holds that both *transitive* and *intransitive verbs* are encoded in conflictual language choices. By the application of the transitive verbs in the spousal discourse, the actions portrayed by the participants are clearly simplified, and ideas are completely expressed by linking the meaning to its object. These transitive verbs "beat, fight, ban us, will invite" can + do, should not, in the context construed conflicts that are capable of inflicting pains or affecting the other's emotions negatively. Through these physical actions, the playwright showed the reader the usual happenings that are conflict personified - It's normal that food are often denied or experience of loss of appetite, denial of conjugal relationship, and female spouses experiencing husband's infidelity. But in order not to allow escalation of the conflict, the female spouse swiftly debunked the suspicions by deploying the material process, 'is going to fight'. Koko's reaction indicates that though she disapproves the actions of her spouse, Okoro, still she does not want the conflict to escalate. Her protest is merely to right the wrongs done to her and fellow women by their husband.

By Koko's shrewd disagreeing to the conflicting actions posed by her male spouse, the study tends to show the need to use language choice that can give room for peace amidst conflicting situation. In its simplification, the study reveals that no average woman likes to share her man with another woman, therefore would not want to deny her spouse food if that would help to discourage him from checking on another free woman on the street.

The intransitive verb language choices do not have objects, and by implication, the action performed by the actors revolve around the actors, that is, it stops with them. This means that not all actions of the spouses in their conflictual situation in the plays, have an inflicting impact on their partners. Some actions are not extended to either of the spouses. Examples of intransitive verbs clauses are:

11. Koko: Have you *come* home after passing obnoxious law?
12. Okoro: You *cannot even speak* with one voice on any one matter at any time.
13. Koko: You have your free women from the street.

As we can see, the intransitive processes "come", cannot speak, constitute no actions that would be pass to another participant. The experiential meaning about coming home, cannot speak with one voice, revolves around processes, with the sense they make. Also, clause three, "You have…" will be more described as stative in that it does not denote any action, rather it describes the situation of things mostly when there is conflict between spouses. It describes man's course of infidelity.

The second in frequency of occurrence is ***mental process*** with the percentages of 15.7. In the text, four mental processes of desideration, perceptive, cognitive and emotive, are found within the conflictual language of the spouses. These are displayed in the following clauses:

| Senser | Process | Phenomenon |
|---|---|---|
| 14. We (Koko) | will not accept | it (that obnoxious law) |
| 15. I (Okoro) | don't see | what you women can do |
| 16. We (Okoro) | 'll see | nothing |
| 17. I (Okoro) | should have known | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 18. I (Okoro) | *would have* | nothing but hostility and criticism from my own wife |
| Senser | Pr.Mental | Phenomenon |
| 19. For which I | *have had* | nothing but praise from everybody outside |
| Senser | Pr.Mental | Phenomenon |

Here, the Senser 'I' with the mental process 'would have' expresses a negative emotions emanating from the wife's antagonism which is displayed in the Phenomenon. Of course, the writer's intent might be to bring into limelight how much men dislike exchanging words with their wives, and how distasteful nagging can be. No right thinking spouse, be it male or female feels good while conflict in the home. This study, therefore, through these variants of mental processes showcases the state of mind of either of the spouses in their dealings to each other. Through the desiderative, the study revealed denial of the male folk, represented by Okoro, not yet having passed the law against the women folk, represented by Koko. It equally revealed the decision taken by the women folk on not yielding to these laws of their male counterpart. By perception, it shows that these men have no iota of regards about their women' opinion, and on the same view, shows that their protest would have no effect on them. By cognitive, the study conveys the need for Okoro to have had a mental collaboration (cognitive awareness) of the type of woman he is marrying to avert exchange of words with her from the onset. By emotive, the study exposes emotional torment Okoro suffer, for having giving time arguing fruitlessly with Koko, who stood firm challenging his guts. Through these mental processes therefore, deployed to the spouses, the study describes how unhappy mood spousal conflictual situation could create on the spouses involved.

***Verbal*** process are process of saying, telling, informing, asking, stating, demanding, offering, commanding, and suggesting. A verbal process will most often project what is said in separate ranked clause. The participant roles in verbal process are Sayer, Target, and Verbiage.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 20. Koko: So | mind | what you say |
| | Pr. Verbal | Verbiage |
| 21. Koko: I | meant | exactly what I said |

|  | Sayer | Pr.Verbal | Verbiage |
|---|---|---|---|
| 22. Koko: | and you | say | he should not cry |
|  | Sayer | Pr. Verbal | Verbiage |
| 23. Okolo: | I | said | shame on you |
|  | Sayer | Pr. Verbal | Verbiage |
| 24. Koko:s: | I | said | shame on you, too |
|  | Sayer | Pr.Verbal | Verbiage |

In clause 1, Koko is seen warning, through the process 'mind' against what Okoro, her male spouse had previously said. By accompanying the verbal process with the verbiage, 'what you say', the reader would agree to the terms that a conflicting statement was earlier mentioned. The deployment of the process, 'meant', in "I meant exactly what I said" confirms the consolidation of the act of warning her spouse, Mr. Koko to mind his choice of words against her. In the same clause, the Sayer acted verbally on the process "mean +ed to show the degree of confidence she has in what she has said. Clause 3 is a part of excerpt in the text that says: "you wait and see, you beat a child and you say he should not cry". This is a metaphorical statement deployed by the playwright to agree with the fact that pains must be felt by whomsoever it is inflicted upon. Mrs. Koko's emphasis is that their male counterpart should not prevent them from letting out their cries about the law against their wishes. The verbiage ''shame on you" and "shame on you, too" have implied sayers and processes. The 'shame on you', too, shows that the interaction is dialogically set up.

Analysis of Text 1 Relational Process and Participant Roles

| 25. Koko: The law you have made is | | bad, unfair and discriminating. | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Identified** | **relational** | **identifier** | |
| 26. Okoro: Is | that | a threat? | |
| **Relational** | **identifier** | **identified** | |
| 27. Koko: It | is | not. | |
| **Carrier** | **P. relational** | **attribute** | |
| 28. Koko: You | have | your free women | from the streets all the time, anyway |
| **Carrier** | **relational** | **attribute** | **circum. Place circum Time** |
| 29. Okoro: Or | are | all the other women | as pig-headed as you |
| **Relational** | | **identifier** | **identifier** |

The relational process is the third most used in this study. The processes tells a lot about the attributive nature of the spouses, and their contextual issues. Examples include: 'the law you' in the clause "The law you have passed is bad, unfair and discriminating" is the carrier and represents that obnoxious law earlier mentioned. The choice of these words: bad, unfair, discriminating is to show the attributive role that makes the law unacceptable to the community women, ably represented by Koko. The antagonism that follows the unacceptability by Koko becomes so glaring

that it becomes a threat to Okoro, hence, the relational identifiable interrogation 'Is that a threat? As an identifiable relational clause, 'that' is regarded as 'token' probably, the provocative language she said to him, and threat, is taken to be the 'value' that is, how Okoro conceived the language his spouse used on him. Okoro wishes to know if actually his spouse meant a threat to him, thus, the essence of the dialogic partner's interrogation. On the contrary, Koko refuted Okoro's construing her utterances as a threat by negating the value, thus her response "it is not". The proposition however, suggests that she (Koko) does not mean a threat, wholly, as per se, but is trying to express their grievances. Clause 4 is an attribute relational process: you have free women…. Clark used this process 'have' in "You have your free women from the streets all the time, anyway" to describe promiscuous nature or life style of most African men. The 'have' is a possessive attributive relational process. Here, it indicates ownership, or possession of something. Here, the ownership quality is attributed to 'Okoro, representing other men, who own the free women, representing prostitutes. The process 'have' has served here to show possession or ownership. The circumstantial adverb of place and the clause are employed to create a correlation between the adjective 'free, and the 'women' it qualifies. Clause 5 is relational attributive process because the quality 'as-headed as you are' is used to describe women as we can see in the clause: "Or are all the other women as pig-headed as you". Here, judging from the context, the playwright deployed the quality to describe the self-opinionated women fighting for their right. By describing them as being pig headed, the playwright may invariably wishes to bring to the knowledge of the reader that women are expected to be level –headed, which is an akin to the saying that ''women are seen and not heard''.

**FINDINGS**

Analysis of the transitivity process in the conflictual language of the spouses in the text as shown in the analysis revealed that four processes, - material, mental, relational, and verbal are used to realise the experiential meaning in conflictual language of the spouses in the Nigerian play. These processes are all used differently and for different functions, but all emphasized conflict between the spouses in the texts under study.

The domineering frequency of the material processes is expected becausemost of the physical actions of the spouses are concretized in the material process. Through the processes, the physical actions reveals gender inequality as such social situation that precipitated the conflict between the spouses as found in text. This, of course, is shown in the actions of the leader of the male spouses, Okoro manifesting his dominance over his spouse, Koko. The study discovers the domineering attitude to be more prominent in Transitive action process usage, and these transitive processes are found among the actions of the male spouse. The transitive processes are embodiment of painful actions meted on the women, while intransitive employed by the women functioned as their defensive language tool.

Findings shows that relational process is represented through the attributive and identifiable processes. Its functions are mainly to describe some social contextual situation that establish conflict in the relationship between the spouses. The process describes the female spouse' reason for revolting the law passed against them through attributing quality to the law, and aftermath effect of the male's decision against their women folk. Conflict ensues because the attribute carries a negative description. Relational possessive attribute is used to describe how the male spouse relate to his partner when there is loggerhead and the wife's obstinate reaction in response.

The study found the use of four major mental processes within the conflictual language of the spouses in the text. This study, therefore, through these variants mental processes showcased the state of mind of either of the spouses in their dealings to each other. The researcher found the Desiderative sense of the spouses in showing disapproval or dislikes of a proposition, like in disapproval of the law. It equally revealed the decision taken by the women folk, led by Koko, on not yielding to that laws of their male counterparts. By perception, it showed that these men, led by Okoro, has no iota of regards about their women' opinion, and on the same view, shows that their protest would have no effect. By cognitive, the study conveyed the need for Okoro to have had a mental collaboration (cognitive awareness) of the type of woman he is marrying to avert exchange of words with her from the onset. By emotive, the study exposes emotional torment Okoro suffered, for having given time arguing fruitlessly with Koko, who stood firm challenging his guts. Through these mental processes deployed to the spouses, the study describes unhappy mood of the spouses involved in the conflictual situations.

The verbal processes exemplified above are deployed to the spouses by the playwright to develop accounts of dialogic conflictual sayings. The various verbal processes employed, and used by the spouses indicate the spouses' different temperament which materialize in the form of warning, cautioning, stressing an argument, calling the other's attention to believe in their superior argument. The study showed that the verbal processes are employed because of actions emanating from the situation which warrants the speaker to say something at the moment.

**CONCLUSION**

The research carried out on transitive analysis of spousal conflictual language revealed how experientialmeaning is construed through the actions of the spouses upon one another, using various language choices. Through transitivity analysis, material process among the rest processes including mental, relational, verbal, is found predominant, in the spouse's interactivity. The prevalent status is as a result that marriage involves more of physical actions, that is, spouses performing an act, and Material concerns 'doing' processes. Mental process ranked second in position and its functional role revealed the spouse's perception, desideration, thought and feelings about their controversial issues. Relational ranked third and functioned as identifying and

attributing process, deployed by the playwrights to describe the true nature of the interlocutors, be it the male spouse, and or the female one. Verbal, the process of saying, ranked fourth, behavioural and existential are not found in the study.

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